Theological Foundations

Concepts and Methods for Understanding Christian Faith


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- Library Research

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- Judaism
- Islam
- Library Research

MISSION
- Morality
- Social Justice
- Library Research

World Christianity
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Introduction

From the Editor

J.J. Mueller, SJ, PhD

What Is Theology?

When we ask the question, “What is theology?” the word’s etymology offers us helpful insight. The word theology comes from the Greek and means “God-talk” (theos = “God”; logos = “word”). Hence, theology describes what we do: We talk about God. Better yet, we have conversations about God. Theology is communal; it belongs to the life of faith in the ongoing Christian community, stemming from the revelation of Jesus two-thousand years ago. Theology also describes the methods we use when we talk about God. Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) defined theology as “faith seeking understanding,” and we would add, “so that understanding deepens our faith, which means understanding and acting in pursuit of our goal, which is loving God and neighbor as Jesus did.” We do not find the word theology in other religious traditions (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam); it is, however, the word used in the Christian tradition. Besides the generic sense of “talk about God,” it has developed a specific sense as an academic discipline with a body of writing, methods, interpretations, subdisciplines, and so on. (This same specificity occurs in academic disciplines with generic names, such as English, history, philosophy, and medicine.)

Purpose of This Book

This book is about how to successfully study theology. Nothing is foreign to this pursuit of theology and, because theology pursues the deepest questions of being authentically human in God, why should there be any limit? Absolutely everything is grist for the theological mill. As an academic discipline, theology is not insular, exclusive, or a foreigner in the academy; it is in conversation with the best results, discoveries, and methods of every academic discipline’s pursuit of truth. Theology takes up the most important questions for every human being, such as what is the meaning and purpose of life, death, suffering, family, person, society, structures, governance, poverty, and wealth? It takes up cosmic ques-
tions as well: Why am I here? Why is this planet spinning in this galaxy among billions of other galaxies? What if there is intelligent life elsewhere? Why is there a universe at all? What is it all about?

Theology above all recognizes that we live in God’s Mystery and that we cannot answer all these questions adequately but that there is purpose to being here in this universe. The Christian believes what Jesus said and did and in what he asked of his followers: to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves. God is love.

**Audience**

This book is intended primarily for college students; however, it is also for people of the Catholic faith and other Christian denominations; people of other religious traditions; and people who are of no particular tradition but who are seekers. All are welcome to sit at the theological table.

The book provides a solid foundation. The text is designed for both people with little or no background in theology and those with quite a bit who seek a solid explanation of the subdisciplines involved. It is designed as a “first book,” to be read all at once or by individual chapters chosen to introduce theological material pertinent to a particular course. In reading each chapter, students will receive an overview of the subdisciplines of theology. They will come to understand terms, concepts, vocabulary, and the development of the tradition through the ages and across cultures. Students will build a basic understanding of the whole of theology through its parts. They will be capable of building upon this base immediately, as well as be able to relate new material to this foundation.

**Organization of the Book**

This book is broken into ten chapters or subdisciplines of theology. These chapters are then grouped into five parts based upon similarities between the methods used for study in the subdisciplines. Read chronologically, the book moves from the revelation found in scripture to a discussion of global Christianity. However, the book is flexible in that each chapter is able to stand alone as a self-contained lesson on a particular theological discipline or topic. The chapters can be read in any order, grouped together, or read from front to back, according to the desires of the instructor.
Unique to this introductory theology text is the incorporation of a significant library research component. Later in this introduction, a section titled “From the Reference Librarian” will introduce the basic library skills students need for academic study. Each chapter then ends with an additional “From the Reference Librarian” section that focuses on the subject matter of that chapter and builds upon the basic skills from the introduction. Each section concludes with a list of the library skills introduced to that point. In that sense, the library sections are cumulative. However, each of these library research discussions is essentially an elaboration of the basic skills dealt with in the introduction, which allows students to read the chapters out of sequence.

We have deliberately included library research as an important component of studying theology because the skills of library research are not simply a matter of locating information (important as that is) but also a matter of evaluating the quality of the information found. Theological inquiry should be truly informed and not merely a matter of opinion (although theology by its nature involves having opinions); that is, the student of theology should be well equipped to determine the authoritativeness of theological statements and to pursue theological truth in an educated manner.

**Arrangement of Each Chapter**

Each chapter within the text begins with an introduction from the editor, and then the area specialty or subdiscipline of theology is presented by an expert in that area, followed first by questions about the text to make sure the subject matter is understood and then by questions for discussion that require reflection on the subject matter. The chapters conclude with the integrated research component, “From the Reference Librarian.” The student will learn electronic research skills for use in libraries and on the Internet. Most importantly, this research component will provide an understanding of what the skills are, why they work, and how to adjust them to get the desired results. The skills learned are useful not only in the study of theology but also in the study of every academic discipline.

**Learning for Living**

Chapter 4 of John’s gospel tells a story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well. Samaritans and Jews did not generally mingle; hostility seemed the social norm. By Jewish law, Jesus should never have been alone with the woman, let alone
talked to her, but he did. They engaged in dialogue, and the topic was the water in the well and drinking from it. As they conversed, the woman found that Jesus gradually opened her innermost soul. She finally ran to her fellow Samaritans and excitedly proclaimed, “He told me everything I have ever done.” The Samaritans believed her and went off to see this “Jesus” person, inviting him to stay with them, which Jesus did for two days. The extended stay resulted in many more Samaritans coming to believe, and they then said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (Jn 4:42).

To put it in today’s context, they said thanks to their “teacher” (the Samaritan woman), and these students (the Samaritans from the village) said: “We have now found out for ourselves. Thank you for helping us, directing us, giving your experience . . . but we know now for ourselves that God encountered us, and we know God through Jesus. We will live in this relationship and know it will change how we live.”

To be a college student is to come to see for yourself, experience and decide for yourself the truths of life, and open your heart to this Mystery.

A Student’s Perspective about Theology in College

There was only one barrier between my desire to continue studying theology and actually officially declaring it as my major: what seemed to be all of society. One common theme I heard over and over was that to major in theology was not practical. It seemed that for most, a college education simply meant a good job on graduation. “Practical” meant financially secure, and theology was not the way to get there. Yet, as I sat with the children at Missionaries of Charity and eventually spent time with those at the Juvenile Detention Center just blocks from campus, nothing could have seemed more practical than what I was doing. I was learning about the world, about how people lived on a daily basis. I learned about racism, sexism, and economic disparity. These were lessons on the world, and I wanted more of them despite the excruciating questions these lessons brought up. On top of this, I began to have a true admiration for great thinkers. The theology faculty members at my university were gifted people and devoted theologians. These were people with thought processes and ways of life that somehow made a difference in the lives of the people around them.

Just as I grew to respect and admire the theology faculty, I found myself having similar feelings about my fellow students. These were great people who have
since gone on to do amazing things. I quickly realized the high caliber of students choosing theology. These were not people floating through school. They wanted to learn, and they taught me a lot. I am forever grateful for that group and the many other students I met.

While clearly I am thankful for having chosen a theology major, I would be remiss if I suggested everyone should become a theology major. I do believe a basic understanding of some fundamental theological issues would serve every person along the journey of life. Theology is a means to an end, and that is how to live. I hold these words as mine: “Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively. They should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose, and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed.”1

Whatever you choose to study, I suggest you take this concept to heart. Go beyond your books and get to know the world, really get to know it. Travel. Volunteer. Immerse yourself in the world and especially with the poor who know the reality better than anyone. Most importantly, realize that the world is in desperate need of people who are willing to think and who are able to think well. I firmly believe a background in theology can create such people.

You are now the budding theologian, and I welcome you to join me on this journey. Walk with me. Argue with me. Live with me. Experience with me. Reflect with me. Let us do all of these things together, falling in love with the questions themselves. Maybe someday, a long time from now, we will realize that while we never discovered all the answers, we did nurture ourselves to journey with God in and through this world (Thomas Gill, BA, 2005, Saint Louis University).
From the Reference Librarian
A Practical Guide to Doing Research
Ronald Crown, DPhil, MSLS

The purpose of this introduction is to acquaint you with some basic library research skills you will need for the study of theology. Call it “Using the Library 101.” The editor and authors of this text believe that learning how to use a library is an important part of studying theology—or any other subject for that matter (and the library skills you will learn can be applied to any subject, not just theology). The reason library skills are important is that part of becoming an educated person is not just learning things but learning how to learn things. Truly educated people are not just those who know more than they did before they received an education but those who also know how to continue learning after they have left school. Questions about the Christian faith—theological questions—do not necessarily disappear just because you have taken a course in theology or graduated from college, so learning how to learn (or how to study) a subject is just as important as learning the subject itself. Knowing how to use the resources of a good library is an important part of your ability to learn and study on your own.

So how does the library fit into learning how to learn? And, more importantly, how does the library fit into learning after you have learned how to learn? While you are in college, the library functions somewhat as a supplement to the expert knowledge communicated by your professors and gleaned from textbooks. After you leave college, a library can, in effect, replace professors and textbooks as your main, regular source of specialized knowledge on almost any subject. You will be fortunate indeed if, after leaving college or university, you live in the vicinity of a good library—assuming that you know how to use it.

So how do you learn how to learn theology? Or rather, where does the library (and the librarian) come into learning how to learn? All that we say about library skills and research techniques in this book boils down to two key elements:

**Skill Key #1**

*Use the library’s reference collection to begin your research.*
Perhaps these statements strike you as too obvious to mention (especially Skill Key #2—how else are you going to find something in the library?), but everything you will learn in this book about using the library is an elaboration of one of these two key elements. Moreover, these two elements relate closely because, as we shall see, knowing how to make proper use of the reference collection can make using your library’s catalog a whole lot easier.

A third skill should also receive mention:

**Skill Key #3**
**Use the library’s collection of online databases and printed periodical indexes to identify articles in magazines and scholarly journals.**

This is indeed an important library skill, but we will not be spending much time with it in this textbook for the following reasons:

1. The philosophy of library instruction (or “information literacy”) underlying this book is that of a “curriculum-integrated” approach. Instead of trying to present all of the library skills you might possibly need or use, we are assuming your library skills will continue to develop as you proceed through the course of your studies. In particular, as your knowledge and expertise in a subject area increase, the library skills you will need will become more sophisticated as well. Learning the library skills presented in this book will provide you with a solid basis for the more advanced library skills you will need later on—much as an introductory course in a subject area provides a foundation for further study.

2. Because this text is an introduction to studying theology, the focus of the research discussions will be on the initial stages of research, which usually involve the use of the library’s reference collection (Skill Key #1). By way of contrast,
periodical indexes and databases often include material beyond the level and scope of an introductory course.

3. The main principle behind Skill Key #2, the distinction between a “keyword” search and a search using subject headings, is one that also applies to searches in article databases. Instructors and librarians who wish to include Skill Key #3 as part of a course should be able to do so based on the foundations presented in this book.

Starting with the Reference Collection—Skill Key #1

So, let’s begin at the beginning of the research process. You have a topic in which you are interested, and you want to begin to learn more about it. Why should you start with the reference collection?

Answering that question requires a short digression. At the most basic level, the library provides a collection of various types of resources to use in learning about any subject (we usually think of books and journals, but the collection can also include material in other formats, such as microfilm or microfiche; special collections, such as private papers, diaries, and letters; art objects; music scores or sound recordings; video and film collections; and, more recently, digital formats). The problem in any library is how to find what you want or need (not always the same thing), and the larger the library and the greater variety of information sources offered, the more important is the ability to locate it. The library has to be more than a mere collection of “stuff” (unlike most of our personal “libraries”). A good library constitutes an organized system of knowledge, the purpose of which is to make it easier for you to study any subject. This is true of all academic libraries, large or small (even small academic libraries can seem intimidating). There is a “method in the madness,” and learning what that method is and how to make it work for you is what this section and the research sections of subsequent chapters are all about.

Student: How is the library organized?

The organization of an academic library involves several principles, but at this point, we will concern ourselves with one that is often overlooked but is fundamental—the division of the collection into two main parts: a reference collection and a circulating collection (this is oversimplified because there may be other divi-
sions of the library, such as special collections, that we are ignoring for the time being). For many, perhaps most, people, the distinction between the two parts of the collection is simply the books you cannot check out and those you can, but there is more to it than that.

A reference collection, of course, contains reference books. As the word reference suggests, a reference book is a book that you “refer” to; that is, you use it to look up something. We have all used dictionaries to look up the meaning (or spelling or etymology) of a word; dictionaries are one excellent example of a reference work. (And remember that word dictionary—you are going to see it a lot, and its meaning will not always be what you would think.) No one sits down to read a dictionary from cover to cover; one refers to it. Another obvious example of a reference work is an encyclopedia. Most people do not (normally) read an encyclopedia from cover to cover but refer to a particular article or section that pertains to the topic of interest. You may be familiar with encyclopedias such as World Book, Encyclopedia Britannica, Collier’s, and so forth. These are general-knowledge encyclopedias intended to cover the broad scope of human knowledge. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, fourth ed., defines an encyclopedia as “a comprehensive reference work containing articles on a wide range of subjects . . . usually arranged alphabetically.” Different general-knowledge encyclopedias cover “a wide range of subjects” with varying degrees of comprehensiveness, but they are alike in that the aim of such an encyclopedia is to provide basic knowledge about the subjects covered. That gives us the first reason for starting research in the reference collection: Use reference works to get a basic orientation—get your feet wet, so to speak—with regard to your topic.

But there is another, equally important reason for starting with the reference collection. This second reason is that the vast majority of the encyclopedias, especially in academic libraries, are subject-specific encyclopedias. You may have noticed that I omitted (indicated by the ellipses “. . .”) part of the dictionary definition of an encyclopedia. Here is the complete definition as given by the dictionary, with the omitted phrase in italics: “A comprehensive reference work containing articles on a wide range of subjects or on numerous aspects of a particular subject, usually arranged alphabetically.”

Note the following encyclopedia titles:

The Encyclopedia of Ethics, three vols.
The Encyclopedia of Bioethics, five vols.
THE SACRED SCRIPTURES AND
CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
From the Editor

Have you ever seen movies, read books, or heard stories about people who lost their memory and, as a result, also lost their identity? Who we are is unveiled in time by our earliest environment of family, then by what we do, experiences we have, choices we make, and their consequences. Each of us is born in the middle of the human story, not the beginning. Before people wrote, they told stories about themselves and the meaning of life as they experienced it. At some point, they began to record their memories and what they believed about how to live and what was important in writing. Those memories were largely based on their religious experiences. First orally transmitted and then in writing, the record provided an identity for those people. In the major religious traditions of the world, we refer to the most significant oral traditions and written records as Sacred Texts. They are handed down to help shape the people of current and future generations, called humanity. Sacred Texts therefore hold a special place in a community because they talk about the God–Human relationship and who we are, why we are here, and what we are about.

Theology (lit., “talk about God”) is faith seeking understanding, or we can say now it is the “memory” of a faith community seeking God, finding God, and handing down that knowledge and wisdom, so others can know the truth of this encounter with God and its essential role in being human. We do not simply repeat a text; it is alive in the community as a resource to find God, point to God, live in God, and be formed by God.

We begin this book at the beginning with the sacred memory, the Sacred Texts of Christianity, in order to understand who, what, and why this community of believers has come to be. We will find out why Christianity has incorporated the Jewish Sacred Text as part of the Christian Sacred Texts—an important part of the tradition not only for Christians but, as we shall see later, also for Muslims in their Sacred Texts, called “the Qur’an.” And remember, while we are investigating what theology is and does, we do not want to
lose sight of the great theme of theology: you, me, humanity, creation, and God together. No one and nothing is left behind.

At the end of this chapter, we will begin our librarian’s component, which will help you find more information, knowledge, and understanding of many topics that arise in this chapter, other chapters, and in the future. It is a skill needed to free us up to pursue knowledge in the many sources in and outside of the discipline of theology.
The Old Testament

Bernhard A. Aten, PhD

The Hebrew Bible, Called by Christians the “Old Testament”

My maternal grandfather was a great storyteller. Over the years, I have told and retold many of his stories to family and friends. He was fond of talking about his youth and his life on the farm. He sang songs and recited poetry, told riddles, and recited limericks. I have also found out from my mother and other family members that many of Grandpa's stories were precisely that—stories. “Some of them had a kernel of truth,” my mother once told me, “but most of them were greatly embellished!”

Sometime in the second century BC, a man named Jesus, son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, wrote an introduction to a book he says was written by his grandfather, Jesus Ben Sira.

Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the other [books] that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom. . . . So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law.

You are invited therefore to read it with goodwill and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labor in translating, we may seem to have rendered some phrases imperfectly. For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original. [emphasis added]

This introduction to the book of Sirach (also known as the Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach, and Ecclesiasticus) gives us some valuable information about the collection of books that circulated among the Jewish community some two-hundred
years before the beginning of the Christian era. Three times, Ben Sira’s grandson tells us his grandfather was devoted to reading the “Law and the Prophets and the other books.” Here, we may have the earliest reference to the division of the Hebrew Bible into three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. When referring to these three parts of their Bible, the Jewish people, who are often referred to as the “People of the Book,” use the Hebrew words for Law (Torah), Prophets (Nebiim), and Writings (Kethubim). By adding the vowel “a” between the first and second letters of these words (TNK) they form an acronym—TaNaK. Even today, Jews still refer to their Bible by this acronym. The Tanak is also known as the Jewish Testament, the First Testament, and, by most Christians, the Old Testament (OT). The word Old is to be understood in the sense of prior, first, or venerable, not outdated or superseded by the New or Christian Testament.

Ben Sira’s grandson tells us further that he translated his grandfather’s book from Hebrew into Greek and that when you translate from one language into another, the “books differ not a little when read in the original.” The Tanak was originally written in Hebrew, although some small portions (e.g., Dan 2:4b–7:28) are written in Aramaic.

Also beginning around the second century BC, the Tanak was translated into Greek. This translation is known as the Septuagint and is frequently abbreviated by the Roman numerals LXX. (According to an ancient tradition, seventy-two scholars translated the Tanak in seventy-two days. The number was rounded off to seventy.)

It is important to note that while Sirach’s grandson refers to the “Law, Prophets and other books,” the Jewish people do not consider the Book of Sirach to be part of the Tanak. The book was included, however, in the LXX. By the time Sirach was translated, Greek had replaced Hebrew as the dominant language of the ancient world. The leaders of the Jewish community at that time did not consider books written in Greek to be inspired by God. Consequently, some books that were part of the LXX were not included in the Tanak. Jews and Protestants refer to the following books, or parts of books, as apocryphal (their meaning is “hidden” or obscure), but Roman Catholics refer to them as deuterocanonical (added later to the collection or canon of inspired writings):

1 and 2 Esdras
The Wisdom of Solomon (follows Song of Songs)
1 and 2 Maccabees
The Letter of Jeremiah (chapter 6 of Baruch)
As stated, the Jews did not include these writings in the Tanak, not only because they were written in Greek but also because they were not widely read or used. But why do Protestants refer to these books as apocryphal, while Roman Catholics refer to them as deuterocanonical? In order to answer this question, we need to move forward in history to the fourth century AD, when Latin became the dominant language of the Roman Empire. From approximately 390–405 AD, Jerome (342–420), who was a great scholar, saint, and linguist, moved to the Holy Land to translate the Christian scriptures from their original languages into the growingly popular Latin, the language of the people of the fourth-century Roman Empire, which he did; it is called the Vulgate. He relied on both the Hebrew and Greek texts for his translation but placed a higher value on the Hebrew language and decided to follow the order of books in the Tanak rather than in the LXX. The books not included in the Tanak were considered apocryphal.

Centuries later, when Martin Luther (1483–1546) translated the Bible into German, he also followed the order of books in the Tanak and placed these writings in a separate section still known today as the Apocrypha. Luther, following the lead of Jerome, considered these books important for history and spiritual edification but not canonical, inspired, or useful for establishing Church doctrine. In response to Luther and the Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545) officially declared for the Roman Catholic Church that these books were not apocryphal but deuterocanonical.

You may have noticed that the division of Law, Prophets, and Writings referred to in the introduction to Sirach places the prophetic books in the middle of the collection. However, if you look at your English translation of the Bible, you will no doubt find that the prophets are not in the middle but at the end of the
The last book of the Tanak is Second Chronicles, but the last book of most English translations of the Bible is the book of the prophet Malachi, which ends with the words, “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse” (4:5–6).

In order to understand this positioning, we once again need to jump ahead hundreds of years into the Christian era. Whereas the Jewish people saw the prophets as the prime interpreters of the Torah, Christians saw the prophets as foreshadowing or hoping for the future coming of Jesus. In the New Testament (NT) gospels, John the Baptist is referred to as “Elijah who is to come” (Mt 11:14; 17:9–13; Mk 6:14–15; Lk 1:17), mentioned by the prophet Malachi. According to the gospel writers, John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, whom Christians confess as the Christ. Christ is not Jesus’ last name but a Greek translation of a Hebrew word messiah (“messiah”), which means “anointed one.” In 1 Samuel 10:1, we read that “Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on [Saul's] head, and kissed him; he said, ‘The Lord has anointed you ruler over his people Israel.’” From that time on, when kings ascended to the throne, they were considered “anointed ones” (messiahs). As we will see later, it was with Saul's successor, David, that the word messiah took on special, even technical, meaning.

The Jews believed that through David's descendants, his kingship would last forever, and from David's day to this day, the Jewish people expect the coming of the new and final David, the Messiah. Christians, however, believe that Jesus is the “Messiah, the Son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt 1:1).

Though the Jewish people have great respect for the NT, they do not need it to live out their faith. Christians, however, need the Tanak to properly understand Jesus because the word messiah (Christos in Greek) is thoroughly grounded in the history and tradition of the Tanak. Christians must never lose sight of the fact that without “the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither” (The Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2002, p. 211).

An influential Jewish scholar named Martin Buber (1878–1965) once addressed a group of priests and said, “What is the difference between Jews and Christians? We all await the Messiah. You believe He has already come and gone, while we do not. I therefore propose that we await Him together. And when He appears, we can ask him: were You here before?” Then he paused and added: “And
I hope that at that moment I will be close enough to whisper in his ear, ‘For the love of heaven, don’t answer” (Wiesel, 1995, 354–355).

As we proceed now to look at the various divisions of the Tanak, we need to keep in mind that, like my grandfather’s stories, the stories contained in the Law, Prophets, and Writings are diverse kinds of literature. Many of the stories record actual events that can be corroborated by extrabiblical history and literature, but many of them are based on legends, remnants of ancient myths, songs, and hymns that may never have actually happened but that contain important and enduring “kernels of truth.”

**Tanak Division 1—Torah: Words of Instruction**

The first division of the Tanak is the Torah. *Torah* is often translated into English as “law” but more properly means “teaching” or “instruction.” In the broadest sense, the entire Tanak is teaching and instruction. More narrowly defined, the Torah refers to the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books are known as the Pentateuch (“five scrolls”). The Jewish tradition also calls them the “Five Books of Moses” because, according to Jewish tradition, Moses was the author of these books.

However, through many centuries, it has become clear to Jewish and Christian scholars that the Pentateuch was not the work of Moses or of any one particular author but is rather a compilation of a variety of authors and literary sources.

Already in the seventeenth century, Jewish scholar Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) and Christian scholar Richard Simon (1638–1712) began to question the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that a formal hypothesis developed concerning the formation of the Pentateuch. A German scholar, Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), developed what has come to be known variously as the “Documentary,” “Source,” or “JEDP Hypothesis,” which argues that the Pentateuch is a compilation of four primary anonymous sources. Though the hypothesis has been and continues to be questioned and refined, it is still accepted by contemporary scholarship as a valuable analytical method for studying the Pentateuch. The anonymous sources are as follows:

**J** This author prefers to refer to Israel’s God by the name *Yahweh* (“Lord”). The Yahwist’s literary style is down-to-earth, picturesque, and fond of what are known as anthropomorphisms (placing human qualities on God). For example, the Lord walks “in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” (Gen 3:8).
and “made garments of skins for the man [Adam] and for his wife, and clothed them” (3:21).

E Known as the Elohist source, this author prefers to use the name Elohim ("God"). In the Hebrew language, Elohim is plural in form but singular in meaning. The Elohist sees God as more transcendent than does the Yahwist and emphasizes God's communication through dreams (Gen 28:10–22).

D The Deuteronomist ("second law") is concerned with issues relating to Israel's law code and the importance of Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh. Most scholars today consider the book of Deuteronomy to be the heart of the Pentateuch.

P The Priestly source emphasizes God's holiness, the importance of worship, the sacrificial system, times, seasons, and genealogies. (cf. Gen 1:1—2:4; or Gen 5:1–32)

Precisely when these sources were written is still the subject of considerable debate. Many of the stories were first passed on orally from generation to generation. Various redactors (editors) along the way provided additional information and commentary until finally, sometime after the Babylonian exile (586 BC), the sources came together into the form we have today.

**Genesis: Origins and Ancestry**

The first book of the Torah (Pentateuch) is Genesis. It can be divided into two major sections: Chapters 1–11 are known as the Primeval History (the word primeval refers to “origins,” “beginnings”) because they deal with the creation of the cosmos and human beings, the alienation of human beings from God, and the destruction of the world through the great flood, followed by a new beginning and the start of civilization. Chapters 12–50 were once referred to as the Patriarchal History (a patriarch is a man who is head of a family or group). However, more recently—and more accurately—these chapters have been called the Ancestral History because men and women played equally crucial roles in Israel's history and tradition.

The Tanak contains two accounts of the creation of “the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). The first (Gen 1:1—2:4) is assigned to the Priestly (P) writer of the Pentateuch. As you read it, you will discover that it is progressive and repetitious and that the transcendent God “speaks” the world and humanity out of chaos into existence. It is as though the author wanted to provide people with a creation creed or a confession that could be used in worship or in teaching.
When God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen 1:26, emphasis added), God is addressing all the heavenly beings, inviting them to become involved in the creative process. Christians believe that the fullness of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) was involved in creation. However, the Trinity was not on the mind of the Priestly writer.

Other nations around Israel also had creation stories filled with gods, goddesses, and heavenly beings. One of these stories, the Enuma Elish, or Babylonian creation story, dates as far back as 2300 BC and has some interesting parallels to the P creation story. For example, both stories speak about chaos, and both follow a similar pattern of the creative process. The major and decisive difference between the two stories is that the Enuma Elish involves many gods (polytheism), while Israel’s God is “most high over all the earth” and “exalted far above all gods” (Ps 97:9).

This transcendent God also created male and female human beings simultaneously. When you read Genesis 1:26 carefully, you will observe that one gender is not created before the other. God first creates human beings and then differentiates them according to gender. The Hebrew word used here for “human being” is 'adam and includes both male and female.

In the second creation story (Gen 2:4b—3:24) the J writer of the Pentateuch sees the Lord God (Yahweh Elohim) as very down-to-earth. In fact, the man (ha-'adam) is formed from “the dust of the ground” ('adamah) (Gen 2:7). There is a Hebrew play-on-words here (‘adam, ‘adamah), where God is imaged as a potter who shapes clay. Later (2:21–22), the woman is “built” or “constructed” from the man’s rib. Though the man was created first, the woman, we are told, was to be a “helper,” a “partner” (2:18), not a subordinate. They were created in relation, not in competition, to one another.

The man and the woman lived in a primeval garden where they had access to all the fruit of the trees except the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of “good and evil” (Gen 3:5) that was in middle of the garden (3:3). Created in relationship but also with the freedom to choose, the man and the woman both decided to eat from the forbidden tree. In so doing, they overstepped the bounds of being creatures. They wanted, rather, to become “know-it-alls”—gods themselves. Theologians refer to this as the “Fall” and to the couple’s decision as the “originating” or “original sin,” which led to their expulsion from the garden and God’s decision to keep the first couple from eating “from the tree of life . . . and liv[ing] forever” (3:22).

Like the P creation story, another ancient text sheds some interesting light on J’s Fall narrative. In one version of a document known as the Mesopotamian
(Babylonian) *Gilgamesh Epic* (720–612 BC), the hero, Gilgamesh, searches for a plant that will give him everlasting life. However, on his return home after he finds the plant, a snake steals it and then the snake sheds its skin. The ancients saw this as a sign of immortality.

From here on, the primeval history of humanity becomes increasingly estranged from the creator God. Brotherly rivalry (Cain and Abel) leads to violence and finally to murder (Gen 4:1–15). The world’s violence and corruption increase to the point where God decides to send a great flood to destroy the earth (Gen 6—8:19). Just as there were other accounts of creation in the ancient world, so also there were other flood stories. The Babylonian *Gilgamesh* and *Atrahasis* epics share a number of similarities with the biblical flood account. The primary difference in the biblical account is that the “Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever” (Ps 29:10). God then makes a covenant with Noah promising that the world will never again be destroyed by the mighty waters (Gen 8:20—9:17) and places the rainbow in the sky as the sign of that promise. Civilization begins anew, but human corruption and alienation from God continue (Gen 9:18–28). The primeval history ends with the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9), where human beings once again attempt to become like God by building a tower that reaches to heaven. God confuses their speech into babbling, however, which means that they cannot understand one another and have to stop the construction of their tower. Thus, Genesis explains the beginning of many languages and nations. This biblical word for confusing speech (*Babel*) has entered the English language as the word *babble*, often referring to the nonsense speech of babies.

**The Ancestral History**

Genesis 12–50 recounts the stories of the founders of God’s people, especially Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and their wives and families. The three major themes in the ancestral history all revolve around the word *promise*:

*Promise* of land

*Promise* of many descendants

*Promise* of a continuing relationship with God (covenant)

However, the ancestors repeatedly face what seem to be insurmountable obstacles to the fulfillment of these promises.

In Genesis 12:1–3, Abram (“mighty father”) is told by the Lord, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show
you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name
great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who
curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

The obstacle, however, is that we are told in Genesis 11:30 that Abram’s wife,
Sarai, “was barren; she had no child.” Fearing that the promise of many descen-
dants (Gen 15:5) will not be fulfilled, Sarai decides to help the promise along, so
she gives Abram her slave-girl, Hagar, so as to produce an heir. Hagar gives birth
to Ishmael (which means “God has heard”), but Ishmael will not be the heir. God
tells Abraham (Abram) that Sarah (Sarai) will bear a son and his name will be Isaac
(Gen 17:19). With names changed from Abram and Sarai to Abraham (“father
of a multitude”) and Sarah (“princess”) (Gen 17:5, 15), the birth of Isaac is an-
nounced in Genesis 18. Sarah laughs at the prospect of bearing a child at age 90,
but God has the last laugh when Isaac (“laughter”) is born (Gen 21:1–7).

While Genesis 16 and 21 are the only accounts in the Tanak concerning
Hagar and Ishmael, it is important to point out that God also promises Hagar
(Gen 21:18) and Abraham that Ishmael will be blessed, fruitful, exceedingly nu-
ermerous, and the father of twelve princes and a “great nation” (Gen 17:20). Accord-
ing to the Islamic tradition, which traces its religious heritage back to Abraham,
Abraham and Hagar are buried near the Ka’aba in the Grand Mosque in Mecca,
and Ishmael, not Isaac, is Abraham’s number-one son. Furthermore, when Abra-
ham dies at age 175, we are told that both his sons, “Isaac and Ishmael buried him
in the cave of Machpelah” (Gen 25:9).

After Abraham passes the supreme test of faith through his willingness to of-
fer his “only son” (Gen 22:2), the Lord once again reaffirms the promise to Abra-
ham to make his offspring “as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that
is on the seashore” (Gen 22:17). Abraham obeyed the Lord’s command because he
submitted himself to God (the word Islam, by the way, means “submission”) and
trusted that the Lord would “provide” (Gen 22:8, 14).

The realization of this promise of many descendants, however, requires now
that Isaac and his beautiful wife, Rebekah, also have children. However, the same
obstacle that confronted Sarah now confronts Rebekah; she is unable to bear chil-
dren. Isaac prays to the Lord, who responds by allowing Rebekah to conceive not
one but two children, Esau and Jacob, who represent two nations: Israel (Jacob)
and Edom (Esau) (Gen 25:23).

Esau is the firstborn and, according to ancient custom, should receive his fa-
ther’s blessing, as well as the lion’s share of the family inheritance. During their
birth, however, Jacob (which means “the one who supplants”) grabs his brother
Esau by the heel and tries to pull him back into the womb so that Jacob will be the firstborn (Gen 25:26). Jacob is unsuccessful, but it will not be his last attempt to gain the right of the firstborn. Rivals from the beginning, Jacob manages to swindle Esau out of his birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew (Gen 25:29–34) and later, with his mother Rebekah’s help, tricks Esau out of father Isaac’s blessing (Gen 27).

At odds with Esau, Jacob then embarks on a series of journeys that include several encounters with the Lord. The first encounter comes through a dream at Bethel (“house of God”), where the Lord introduces himself to Jacob as the “God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac” (Gen 28:13) and then reiterates the ancestral promise to Jacob that “the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth . . . and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring” (Gen 28:13–14).

Jacob meets and falls in love with Rachel, daughter of his uncle Laban, and works seven years for her hand in marriage (Gen 29:20) but is tricked into marrying Leah instead and then has to work another seven years before marrying Rachel (Gen 29:27–28).

Rachel, like Rebekah and Sarah before her, was barren, but “God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son . . . and she named him Joseph” (Gen 30:22–24).

Jacob’s next decisive encounter with the Lord occurs at a place called Peniel (“face of God”), where a “man” (perhaps an angel, perhaps the Lord) wrestled with Jacob until daybreak (Gen 32:24). Refusing to let the “man” go, Jacob says, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me” (Gen 32:26). Jacob is asked his name, responds, and is then told, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (Gen 32:27–28). And so Jacob becomes Israel (“the one who strives with God”), the father of the twelve tribes that will make up the nation known as Israel.

Jacob next meets his estranged twin, Esau, and upon seeing him is so moved that he says, “[F]or truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Gen 33:10). At the end of the Jacob story, the rival brothers are reconciled and, like Ishmael and Isaac before them, together bury their father, Jacob (Gen 35:29).

The final chapters of the ancestral history (Gen 37–50) recount the story of Joseph and his rivalry with his brothers. Not only do the brothers resent that Joseph is their father Jacob’s favorite, but also they are put off by Joseph’s dreams and,
on first reading, his superior attitude. The brothers initially plot to kill Joseph but instead decide to sell him into servitude in Egypt, where, ironically, through his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph will rise to power, be reconciled with his brothers, and eventually save his entire family from famine. In the end, Jacob journeys to Egypt and settles in the land of Goshen. The book of Genesis ends with Joseph’s words to his brothers, restating the promise to Abraham that “God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (Gen 50:24). Joseph dies and is “placed in a coffin in Egypt.” The very last word of Genesis, “Egypt,” prepares the way for the remaining books of the Torah.
Acknowledgments

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