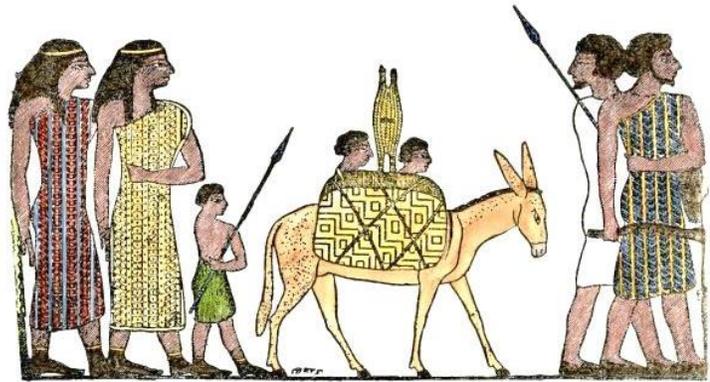


THE ANCIENT HEBREWS

Among the varied peoples of the ancient Middle East, there lived an often-overlooked group called the Hebrews or Israelites. This humble people was at first nothing more than families of wandering shepherds, whom the surrounding civilizations considered coarse and barbarous. Their closely-knit families tended their large flocks of animals in the wilderness areas outside of civilized cities. Their clans, made up of extended family, were led by a patriarch (a typically-older, responsible, male leader). The Hebrew family-clans usually lived in tents—moving their encampments around to find better grazing areas for their livestock. Because of their nomadic lifestyle, they seemed like small players next to the powerful kingdoms of Egypt and Babylonia, yet these Hebrews ultimately went on to influence Western Civilization more than any other Middle-Eastern people. After surviving slavery in Egypt, they conquered the land of Canaan, built their own kingdom named Israel, and thrived under famous kings like David and Solomon. Later their kingdom divided and was conquered by outside forces, yet even exile in the Babylonian Empire did not destroy their culture. The Hebrews went on to become the modern day Jews, and their religious traditions, which form the Jewish Torah and the Old Testament of the Bible, have greatly influenced Western Civilization.



Unlike the other groups around them, who were polytheists, the Hebrews were monotheists, for they believed in a single God. The Hebrews proclaimed Yahweh as the one and only God. Yahweh had power over all peoples, everywhere. He was all-knowing and all-powerful. Unlike the gods of other nearby cultures, the Hebrew God did not have a physical being, and no physical images were made of him. The Hebrews taught that God had made a special agreement, called a covenant, with a Hebrew named Abraham.

Stories from the Old Testament are some of the most famous in the world, and allusions to them can be found throughout Western Civilization in art, literature, and pop culture. They are also important to three of the world's largest religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In spite of humble beginnings, the Hebrews have had a mighty impact on the world as we know it.

STUDYING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Simply put, the Bible is the most influential book ever written. It is also the best-selling book of all-time, and every year it surpasses all other books on the annual bestseller list. Its influence on other literature is vast. Biblical allusions appear in nearly every book taught in high schools. In fact, the College Board recommends that students be familiar with the Bible

to help prepare them for college-preparatory tests and the study of literature at the college level.

For millions of people the Bible is seen as sacred scripture. It is believed by many Jews and Christians to contain God’s revelation—an inspired communication from the divine to the human. This scripture has been influencing people for thousands of years. That influence extends not only to the synagogue or to the church. The English language is filled with references to the Bible. A person who helps another is called a *Good Samaritan*. A mass movement of travelers is called an *exodus*. A particularly tough job requires the patience of Job. Names like Joshua, David, Ruth, and many others find their source in the Bible. Place names like Lebanon, New Canaan, and Corpus Christi (literally “the body of Christ”) show links to the Bible. References to the story of Moses abound in the speeches of the American Abolitionist and Civil Rights movements. No other book has had an impact on the English language like the Bible has.

For these reasons it is important for the religious and non-religious alike to be familiar with the Bible. Academic study of the Bible in a public secondary school can take place in literature courses. Students may study the Bible *as* literature, meaning they examine the Bible as they would other literature—exploring its language, symbolism, and motifs—and analyzing its literary impact. With this type of study students also study the Bible *in* literature, the ways in which later writers have used Bible literature, language, and symbols. Much drama, poetry, and fiction contains material from the Bible. (It is theorized that Shakespeare referenced the Bible 3,500 times in his various works.)

Within this type of study, no religious agenda is presented, and all elements are taught objectively. No one will be asked to defend or conform to a specific religious belief. The goal is to build suitable background knowledge of the Bible in order to benefit education. Why? The Bible is the most influential book ever written.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

It is important to understand that the Bible is two different books to two different religions. The Hebrew Bible is made up of many books that contain narratives, poems, historical records, prophecies, and laws. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible are called the Torah (Hebrew for “teaching” or “law”). They are also known as the Five Books of Moses or Pentateuch (Greek for “five books”). Most Christian Bibles contain 66 individual books. The word “Bible” comes from the Greek *biblios*, which means “little books.” These are divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The early Christians were Jews, and so they considered the Hebrew Bible their sacred text, but they did not believe that it contained the complete story of God’s relationship with His people. Thus, the Hebrew Bible became the first part of the Christian Bible. The second part, the New Testament, includes four Gospels, which are accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus. The Gospels are followed by historical accounts of the early days of the Christian Church and the Book of Revelation (a vision of the end of time). The Gospels were first written down between A.D. 50 and 150 in Greek, the everyday “international” language of the Roman Empire at the time. *Gospel* is an Anglo-Saxon word that translates the Greek word *evangelion*—literally “good tidings” or “good news.” There are four different gospels in the New Testament—

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All the gospels have common material. Each gospel is a presentation of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus for a specific audience.

NOTE: When studying the Bible it is important to treat other's opinions of the Bible with respect. Studying the Bible as literature is not the place to try to attack or defend a particular faith. It *is* a time for you to read ancient accounts and discuss their impact on the modern world. In the end the goal is that you will develop an appreciation for the work that has had the greatest impact on human history.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What would you say are some of the most famous stories from the Bible?
2. The Hebrews were monotheists while the cultures around them were polytheists. How would this make them view the world differently?
3. More references to the Bible are present in the English language than to any other written work. This is followed by references to Greek mythology and thirdly references to the works of William Shakespeare. Why do you think there are so many references to the Bible in the English language?
4. Why is it important for any American, regardless of religious background, to be familiar with the Bible?