THIS BOOK was written for students and scholars alike. It is intended to be a new kind of guide for anyone interested in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament). Let me begin by saying why I think that such a guide is needed.

The Hebrew Bible contains the history, prayers, songs, laws, and prophecies of ancient Israel. These texts were written down over a long period of time, more than a thousand years. Recently, thanks in part to advances in archaeology, linguistics, and ancient history, scholars have been able to learn much about how the Bible came to be. We now know a great deal of the historical background of various biblical stories, as well as about how different parts of the Bible first came together.

When people study the Bible nowadays in schools and universities, it is often this “new knowledge” that is highlighted. Most standard guides and introductions to the Hebrew Bible discuss little else. Thus, people learn about the various stages in which the Bible was written, and about the work of different editors or redactors. They are told about the background history of Israel, and about other texts from the ancient Near East that shed light on biblical events. All this is extremely interesting information.

But it is really only half the story of the Hebrew Bible.

The other half has to do with what happened to these texts once they were written down. For, even before the Bible had attained its final form, its stories, songs, and prophecies had begun to be interpreted. From very early times, sages and scholars in ancient Israel had made a practice of looking deeply into the meaning of these sacred writings, and, with each new generation, their insights and interpretations were passed on alongside the texts themselves. As a result, as each new age inherited what were to become the Bible’s various books from the previous age, it also inherited a body of traditions about what those texts meant.

The traditional interpretations were of all kinds. Some simply aimed at explaining the meaning of a difficult word or resolving an apparent contradiction. But others were more wide-ranging and imaginative. Interpreters sometimes felt obliged to explain why a particular person in a biblical story should have behaved the way that he or she did, or to find some connection between what a particular prophet had predicted and some later event in history. Often, interpreters ended up actually adding to what the biblical text said, “deducing” whole incidents or facts that, the interpreters felt, were implied if not stated outright in the Bible’s words.
More than anything, though, these interpretations tried to bring out the universal and enduring messages of biblical texts, for the interpreters considered Scripture to be a sacred guidebook for human existence. Interpreters therefore tried to look beyond the obvious content of what was being said to find some relevant, usable lesson, even if it was less than obvious at first glance. And so, whatever their particular form or purpose, these interpretive traditions all tended to transform the apparent meaning of biblical texts.

Such transformations were immensely important. As any reader of this book will see, chapter after chapter of the Bible took on a new, sometimes radically different, significance when its words were scrutinized in the characteristic manner of early interpreters.

The story of Adam and Eve, for example, only became the story of the Fall of Man thanks to a certain ancient interpretation of one of the verses in the story. The snake in the story came to be identified as the devil—but only by later interpreters, not by the story itself! And it was only because of another interpretation that the Garden of Eden (also known as paradise) came to be thought of as a heavenly garden, one in which the righteous would live eternally after their death.

Similar transformations occurred with other biblical narratives. Interpreters came to the conclusion that Abraham was the son of an idol-maker, that he was the first person to believe in one God, and that among his many virtues was an extraordinary generosity toward strangers. None of these things is stated outright in the Bible, though each of them is based on some slight peculiarity in the biblical text. Other creative interpretations helped to change the “images” of Sarah, Jacob, Rachel, and Joseph—what each of these biblical figures did and stood for took on an entirely different aspect when their stories were read and interpreted in the special fashion of these early interpreters. The shape and significance of the entire Bible came to be modified because of their work.

Then, gradually, as the centuries passed, these traditional understandings came to be the meaning. The historical circumstances in which a particular biblical passage might have originally been uttered were eventually forgotten or, in any case, considered irrelevant. What was important by, say, the third or second century B.C.E. (and, quite possibly, even somewhat earlier) was what was thought to be the text’s deeper significance, that is, how it was explained by the traditional interpretations that now accompanied it. And this traditional, interpreted Bible—the Bible itself plus the traditions about what it really meant—was what was taught to successive generations of students, expounded in public assemblies and, ultimately, canonized by Judaism and Christianity as their sacred book.

The way in which these traditions of interpretation came to cling to the biblical text may be difficult for people today to comprehend. We like to think that the Bible, or any other text, means “just what it says.” And we act on that assumption: we simply open up a book—including the Bible—and try to make sense of it on our own. In ancient Israel and for centuries afterward, on the contrary, people looked to special interpreters to explain the meaning of a biblical text. For that reason, the explanations passed along by such interpreters quickly acquired an authority of their own. In studying this or that biblical law or prophecy or story, students would
do more than simply learn the words; they would be told what the text meant—not only the peculiar way in which this or that term was to be interpreted, but how one biblical text related to another far removed from it, or the particular moral lesson that a text embodied, or how a certain passage was to be applied in everyday life. And the people who learned these things about the Bible from their teachers in turn passed on the same information to the next generation of students.

And so, it was this interpreted Bible—not just the stories, prophecies, and laws themselves, but these texts as they had, by now, been interpreted and explained for centuries—that came to stand at the very center of Judaism and Christianity. This was what people in both religions meant by “the Bible.” Of course, Judaism and Christianity themselves differed on a great many questions, including the interpretation of some crucial scriptural passages, as well as on just what books were to be included in the Bible. Nevertheless, both religions had begun with basically the same interpreted Bible. For both inherited an earlier, common set of traditions, general principles regarding how one ought to go about reading and interpreting the Bible as well as specific traditions concerning the meaning of individual passages, verses, and words. As a result, even when later Jews or Christians added on new interpretations—sometimes directed against each other or against other groups or ideologies within the world in which they lived—the new interpretations frequently built on, and only modified, what had been the accepted wisdom until then.

This book is essentially an attempt to reconstruct this traditional Bible, the Bible as it was understood in the closing centuries B.C.E. and at the very start of the common era. I have tried to assemble evidence of the things that scholars and ordinary people believed about the most important parts of the Torah or Pentateuch (that is, the first five books of the Bible). But how does one go about reconstructing this Bible-as-it-was? Unfortunately, there is no single text that contains, chapter by chapter, the commonly accepted interpretations of the Bible in the closing centuries B.C.E. Instead there is a mass of literature of various sorts—sermons, apocalypses, retellings of biblical stories, and other writings—in which these interpretations are mostly only hinted at or else taken for granted, assumed to be known to every reader. Trying to reconstruct the Bible as it was has thus been largely a matter of reading between the lines, figuring out interpretations that are rarely presented as such, from this mass of different sources.

Of course there is more to the Bible as it was than I have been able to include here. But I hope that the present volume2 will give readers the essential, a view of

1. While, for the period covered, the precise contents of the Bible—which books were to be part of the canon and which not—were still a subject of debate, all agreed that these first five books were Scripture par excellence, the very heart of the Bible and the essence of God’s sacred teaching for the people of Israel.

2. A shorter version of this volume, consisting only of the main part of each chapter without the “Other Readings” sections, was published in 1997 as The Bible As It Was. The present volume represents the original complete manuscript. I have not attempted a systematic updating of references to secondary literature that has appeared since the manuscript was completed, although I have tried to include all relevant new primary texts, including much recently published Dead Sea Scrolls material.
the most important interpretive traditions that circulated during the crucial period of the Bible’s emergence as such, when it was becoming the defined corpus of texts that would lie at the very heart of Judaism and Christianity.

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A final note: Despite all the time spent assembling and checking the material presented herein, no doubt errors of commission and omission remain; moreover, texts now being published for the first time or yet to be discovered will likely provide further insights that might have enriched this study. And so I cannot but make a request of my learned readers: I will be most grateful for any corrections or additions that you might be kind enough to pass along, either via the publisher or to me by means of my Web page, http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~jlkugel/, where I intend to maintain a regularly updated information sheet about this book and related matters. I can also be reached directly by e-mail, at jlkugel@fas.harvard.edu or kugelj@mail.cc.biu.ac.il. It is my hope that the age of electronic publishing may yet provide a release from the dire sentence of Eccles. 1:15.
TRADITIONS
OF THE
BIBLE
Note on Transcriptions

In transcribing Hebrew words and names, I have chosen not to confuse nonspecialists with the use of unnecessary diacritical marks and the like. Thus, biblical figures and places are generally rendered by their standard English equivalents (Joshua, Bethlehem); the same is true of the names of texts cited in this book (the Mishnah, Yalqut Shimoni) and certain other, fairly common, transcriptions (halakhah, the Shema). When a particular point has required more exact transcription, I have relied on that in current use in most scholarly journals.