intentions of those who created it, a new initiative along the lines indicated by Jerome is urgently needed, but one that will, this time, restore to the church its ancient Israelite scriptures both listed *and arranged* in their more original format. Although this list and arrangement are still the subject of debate, I believe what the rabbis taught in this regard, as cited in the Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Bathra* 14b, has much to commend it. This text comes to us from the Jewish community whose scriptures these are. It is introduced as what "the Rabbis taught," a "Talmudic formula for introducing traditional teaching from . . . an ancient tradition, similar in date to those in the Mishnah, though quoted from a different compilation."[52] In this case it might be a tradition handed down from those who finalized the collection (see the discussion of these matters at the end of chapter 1). With minor variations, it is the list and arrangement of books in Hebrew Bibles today. It appears to be the form in which these scriptures were preserved and understood among Jews when Christianity began.[53] Differences in the list and the order of books in the surviving uncial codices can best be explained as incidental variations from this older, more original list that resulted from Gentile Christians' lack of awareness about these matters.

It was thus this older scriptural corpus to which the church had every intention of adding its apostolic scriptures when creating the first Christian Bibles, and it is therefore understandable that when a moment arose when the matter needed to be considered afresh (as it did when Jerome began work on his Latin translation of the Old Testament), it was felt that this is what should now be done. Perhaps the time has come to complete this project, and in a manner harmonious with the canonical intentions of the time—that is, not as "New Testament" scriptures added to (and set over against) "*Old* Testament" scriptures, but, as Tertullian put it (*Prescription against Heretics* 36), "evangelists and apostles" *united with* "the law and prophets" (see chapter 11, no. 13)—and with the newer books listed and arranged as they are in the oldest uncials and the Festal Letter of Athanasius: that is, the four Gospels, Acts and General Epistles, Paul's Epistles and Hebrews, followed by the Pastorals, and Revelation (see hapter 8 for further discussion of the rationale for this arrangement).

8

First Steps toward Understanding the Bible as a Theological Unity

IN ITS STRUGGLE WITH MARCIONISM (and Gnosticism) the church fashioned a Bible of spacious, complex proportions, one that preserved the church's story as a continuation of Israel's story. But, while successful in combating Marcion, this Bible was soon read with other needs and perspectives in mind. All too quickly its original purposes were forgotten. All too quickly its scriptures were reclassified and reshaped in a way that reflected and fostered a supersessionism not unlike the kind it was created to oppose. As Christianity became dominant in Western civilization, its story came to be read in a Marcion-like manner—not, to be sure, as the story of a discredited *God* (as in the case of Marcion) but as the story of a discredited *people* (as in Paul's allegory of Abraham's two sons and Augustine's *The City of God*).[1] An alternative way of viewing this story is urgently needed and has become visible through the prior investigation of the Bible's canon history. I have already commented on the broader outlines of that alternative so far as the Tanak is concerned (see chapter 5). I now want to take some first steps toward understanding the content of the Bible as a whole as this has emerged from our study of its canon history.

STEP ONE: RECONNECTING WITH THE "CLASSIC" FINAL STAGE OF CANON HISTORY

It is urgent that we first consider why it was that a Bible created to combat the supersessionism of Marcion came to be read and interpreted in a similarly supersessionist and triumphalist manner, and why this is still the case

today. Prior to Marcion, the Gentile churches had taken for granted that Israel's scriptures were as much theirs as the Jews', in that Christianity was still understood as having originated within Judaism as a people formed by Israel's God (through Jesus Christ). This was precisely the point made against Marcion by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*, when, on the basis of his analysis of the church's earliest confessions, Gospels, and apostolic letters, he systematically demonstrated that the God whom Jesus called Father and the God spoken of in Israel's scriptures (contrary to what Marcion was teaching) were the same. However, in resorting to these newer scriptures in this manner, Irenaeus implicitly agreed with Marcion to this extent at least, that the time had come when Christians needed to recognize a body of their own writings as "scriptures" and make use of them in consolidating their identity against the kind of errors Marcion and others were propagating.

The Original Arrangement

Thus it happened (as we have seen in chapter 6) that the churches opposing Marcion did produce just such a collection of writings, one that was in fact quite similar to the list of Christian books to which Irenaeus had appealed in his defense against Marcion. These were then transcribed into codices as an addendum to the scriptures of Israel—but at first (as also noted) in an arrangement that underscored the continuity of the newer writings and the story they told with the older scriptures and the story told there: that is, one in which the Gospels came first, then Acts, as in our Bibles today, but next are the seven General Epistles (James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude), and then the letters of Paul to seven churches (also in Marcion's canon), followed by Hebrews, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and the book of Revelation. The key point here is the sequence Acts, General Epistles, Paul's epistles—this is the sequence in all but one of the oldest uncial manuscripts in which both Paul's epistles and the General Epistles are present.[2] This is also the arrangement cited by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in his Festal Letter of 367, where the twenty-seven New Testament books of our present Bible are listed for the first time.

The significance of this arrangement (Acts, General Epistles, Paul's letters) is that, after being introduced in Acts to the church of the circumcision in Jerusalem, and after being informed of the cohesive leadership role that this church in particular was playing in world Christianity, we are then immediately introduced to the teachings of its pillar apostles, James, Peter, John and Jude, before being introduced to the teachings of the apostle

Paul, leader of the Gentile mission. These scriptures are thus portrayed as the writings of a church united through the leadership of the Jerusalem church of the circumcised as portrayed in Acts. This feature appears to be a consequence of the intentionality of Luke-Acts itself, whose author, writes William R. Farmer, "was not prepared to allow his church to be dependent on Paul's letters for its understanding of the apostolic contribution to salvation history," and also wanted to correct "any tendency to exaggerate the conflict between Peter and Paul or Paul and the apostles in Jerusalem. . . ." Rather, his goal was to show "how the gospel was carried first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles" and to clarify for Gentile readers "how the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which began with Jesus and his disciples in Judaea and Galilee, was connected with the gospel that had been preached to them by the apostles."[3]

CHART 15. CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES ADDED TO THE SCRIPTURES OF ISRAEL AS CITED IN THE FESTAL LETTER OF ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA TO HIS COMMUNITY IN 368 C.E.

Gospels and Acts	*General Epistles*	*Paul's Letters to Seven Churches*	*Additional Letters and Revelation*
Matthew	James	Romans	Hebrews
Mark	Peter (1, 2)	Corinthians (1, 2)	Timothy (1, 2)
Luke	John (1, 2, 3)	Galatians	Titus
John	Jude	Ephesians	Philemon
Acts		Philippians	
		Colossians	Revelation
		Thessalonians (1, 2)	

Farmer further shows how important Luke-Acts was to the church in Rome in particular, in that it showed how the apostle Paul reached Rome and also explained Paul's relationship to those who were apostles before him. Indeed, it is in Rome, Farmer conjectures, that Luke-Acts was first received and acknowledged, and there that a first core collection of Christian writings was formed (Matthew, Mark, Luke-Acts, and Paul's Epistle to the Romans) that would develop into the list of books Irenaeus resorted to in his defense of the faith against Marcion.[4] Farmer also thinks it was Luke-Acts that Marcion was chiefly focused on (and troubled about) when making his proposals for an alternative canon of Christian Scriptures that would get rid of and totally replace the scriptures of Israel. This is why, writes Farmer, "in place of Luke, Marcion substituted his 'improved' version of that same Gospel. In place of the Acts of the Apostles, Marcion substituted his edited version of a collection of Paul's letters."[5] In putting in

place a set of scriptures that would include Paul's letters but would refute Marcion, it was thus utterly essential to keep both Luke (in its unedited version) *and* Acts and to make sure that its view of Christianity as a church united and growing from its foundations in the scriptures of Israel and the Jerusalem church of the circumcised would be heard and heeded.

Reading *Against Heresies* in this light, it is soon evident that this is precisely what Irenaeus was seeking to do, and, in fact, did do, and that it was thus *this* (the refutation of Marcionism) that was central to the formation of the earliest canonical lists. Farmer highlights the theological significance of this particular stage in the development of the canon when he identifies it as "the classical phase" and proceeds to distinguish it from a later "Constantinian" phase. What characterizes this "classical phase," he writes, is that the concern for unity was "spiritually, theologically, and ecclesiastically motivated." No Christian emperor was there "to use the power of the state to encourage doctrinal or ecclesiastical unity within the ranks of Christians," as happened under Constantine. On the contrary, the state was still at this time not infrequently using its power "to persecute the church and force individuals and churches to apostasy, which in turn created division among Christians."[6]

The Original Arrangement Bifurcated and Rearranged

Recognition of this is extremely important. The body of Christian Scriptures, which are now known as the New Testament, were first identified and assembled by Christian leaders at a point when the church was still persecuted and vulnerable, not later on when the church was secure and triumphant.[7] Indeed, it was during the ascendancy of this triumphant state-aligned church that the original collection was reshaped in ways that would severely reduce its effectiveness in the cause for which it was originally devised and resorted to (that is, as a defense against Marcionite supersessionism). For one thing, it was then that the tradition was entrenched of naming the scriptures of its first part, "Old Testament," to differentiate them from the "New Testament" scriptures of its second part. According to Hans von Campenhausen, the Latin word *testamentum*, regularly used now to translate *diathēkē* (the Greek word for "covenant"), is "translator's jargon" with "hard juristic overtones"—and this usage "made it virtually impossible to prevent what was now a technical term from becoming rigid and lifeless."[8] By contrast, he notes, Irenaeus "had no name by which to distinguish the New Testament books from the ancient Scripture," but, as occasion required, wrote "of the fourfold Gospel, of the Acts of the Apostles, or the letters of the Apostle," or sometimes "groups these books together with the Old Testament, and refers to the whole without differentiation by the long-hallowed names of 'scriptures of the Lord', 'the scriptures', or 'the scripture.'"[9] For Irenaeus, these newer Christian writings were in no way to be thought of as a new canon independent of the scriptures of Israel, but just the opposite: it was precisely to reject such a notion (as put forward by Marcion) that they had been resorted to by him.[10]

Another change that would have a similarly subversive impact on the role this collection was originally designed to play was the alterations that occurred in the way the books were arranged. The strongly attested tradition, which we have already noted, of General Epistles preceding Paul's letters was mysteriously reversed in manuscripts from the late fourth and fifth centuries onward, so that now Paul's epistles came first, as is predominantly the case today (the outstanding exception being the Slavic Bible of the Eastern Orthodox Church). Farmer's proposal as to when and why this change occurred is compelling. He believes that it was Eusebius who did this when preparing the fifty copies of the churches' scriptures, which Constantine had requested—and for reasons related to the role Constantine was now playing as head of the Gentile church. With Constantine, the Gentile wing of the church had triumphed and Eusebius saw him, like Paul, as its appointed leader through a direct intervention of God.[11]

Farmer also believes that it was at this time and under these circumstances that "the closing of the New Testament canon" took place. "We conjecture," Farmer writes, "that Constantine was himself, along with others, concerned to resolve the question of the New Testament canon, and that his request of Eusebius provided the occasion for a *fait accompli* unparalleled in the history of the canon." This is why, he states, "no one knows when or whether the New Testament canon was closed. . . . In principle it was closed when Constantine and his associates decided it was important that it should be. In fact, however, it was closed whenever and wherever bishops standing in the tradition of the Constantinian settlement decided that the church had no stake in keeping it open."[12] However, it should not be forgotten that when this happened the older collection, as first formulated in the fight against Marcion, was significantly modified. By putting Paul's letters in a position of primacy over the letters of those who led the church of the circumcision (James, Peter, John, Jude), the church's increasingly acrimonious break with its Jewish community of origins, instead of being blunted or halted, was abetted.

The outcome was and still is utterly tragic. "Judaism, though it retained a certain legal status, was henceforth to be treated as a religion of lower value," writes Farmer. "Constantine made it a law that no Christian should serve Jews. For it was, he said, 'A thing not to be permitted, that those who had been redeemed by our Saviour, should be reduced under the yoke of slavery to those who were the murderers of the prophets of the Lord.'"[13] "Thus," Farmer adds, "was created an anti-Jewish bias in the state which inevitably was to draw out, exaggerate, and institutionalize certain anti-Jewish features of the New Testament."[14]

Writing of these developments from the perspective of Judaism, talmudic scholar Ephraim Urbach has observed:

> The struggle of the Christians against idolatry [in their widening missionary movement] did not make them partners of the Jews, since this struggle was waged . . . while cleaving to the postulate that the election of Israel had been completely annulled and with it the age of the Torah and precepts had likewise passed away, and that the Church "which had been gathered from many Gentile peoples" had replaced the Congregation of Israel. In their endeavor to condition the minds of the pagans to accept their Gospel, the Christians were at the same time fanning the flames of hatred towards "Israel in the flesh," and preparing the background for the anti-Jewish legislation and persecutions of the Jews in the fourth century, after "the entire Kingdom [i.e. Roman Empire] had gone over to the Christian heresy."

"From that time on," writes Urbach, "the [Jewish] Sages regarded it [the Christian church] as 'The wicked kingdom, which seduces the world and leads it astray with its falsehoods.'"[15]

Theologian George Lindbeck seems to agree with this assessment when he acknowledges (in a wide-ranging essay on these issues) that "[i]t has taken the disasters of Christian apostasy, often disguised as orthodoxy, in combination with historical-critical work, to unmask the problems."[16] Unfortunately, the problems remain, nor is it true that "we can now see," as Lindbeck puts it, "that the early Christian errors resulted from self-serving gentile Christian misappropriations of intra-Jewish polemics over Jesus' messiahship, and that these errors are blatantly opposed to much of the New Testament witness. . . ." Rather, much of Christianity is still ignorant of these insights and in need of what Lindbeck now thinks he can show, namely, "that none of the major Christian traditions is dogmatically opposed to an Israel-like view of the church, but acceptance of it, involves a break with nearly 2,000 years of both modern and premodern Christian self-understandings."[17] These words suggest that a pedagogical undertaking of massive proportions lies ahead of us. It is on just such an adventurous journey as this that we are embarked in our search for a way of reading the Bible in a manner consistent with the thoughts and intentions of those who created it.

Step Two: Recognizing the Importance of Chronology for Grasping the Nature and Meaning of the Biblical Canon

As noted, the General Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude introduce rather than follow the letters of Paul in the order of these books in the earliest manuscripts of the Bible. The order of its books reflects a respect for chronological relationships. When perusing these scriptures in their intended earliest arrangement, we are involved with shorter stories woven into a longer narrative that is structured in a certain way. James was the brother of Jesus and an early leader of the Jerusalem church. It follows that his letter should come first; next the letters of Peter, John, and Jude, first disciples and pillar apostles in Jerusalem, and then the letters of Paul, a later convert and leader of the Gentile mission. By the same logic, the Gospels with their accounts of John the Baptist's mission, followed by the story of Jesus, come before everything else; and these are then followed by the account in Acts of the movement born of Jesus' mission. Acts itself is a chronologically structured narrative describing the expansion of the church from Jerusalem to Paul's journey to Rome, each chapter relating a next step on that journey.

The Longer Narrative

This narrative ("the New Testament") was not meant to exist by itself. In fact, it makes no sense by itself; it was designed for reading as a sequel to another narrative—Israel's story as related in Israel's scriptures (Law, Prophets, Writings). That this is so is made evident on almost every page of these added New Testament scriptures through repeated references to the older scriptures, as well as with words like those of Jesus in Matthew 5:17, "Do not imagine that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets." This too is the point of the genealogical splice with which Matthew opens his story of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–17), which serves as a link between this and the prior story of Israel as this is related in Israel's scriptures. Indeed, this particular splice is quite revealing of how Matthew (or his community)

viewed those older scriptures. They were seen as relating a story in three parts: the period from Abraham to David (fourteen generations), then from David to the Babylonian exile (fourteen generations), and, finally, from the Babylonian exile to Jesus (fourteen generations).

The storylike quality of these older writings is evident also from one of the oldest surveys of their contents, that of the second-century B.C.E. Jesus ben Sira, in chapters 44-49 of his book (Sirach). There he takes us on a chronological journey through "the Law, the Prophets, and the others" (or "other books," or "other books of the Fathers," as the collection is named in the Translator's Foreword to his book written by his grandson), highlighting key individuals and events. What specific books in what arrangement were finally included in this collection is, as we have seen (chapter 1), the subject of an important text in the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 14b), where we are told what "the Rabbis" taught regarding "the order of the prophets" and "the order of the Hagiographa [or Writings]." The text does not specify what they taught "the order of the [books of the] law" is, for this was common knowledge (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). The "order of the prophets," according to this text, "is Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Twelve minor prophets," and "the order of the Hagiographa [Writings] is Ruth, the Book of Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, and the Scroll of Esther, Ezra[-Nehemiah] and Chronicles."[18]

The Longer Narrative Skewed

When scanning these books in this arrangement, we are faced with a very long story that moves sequentially down through history, from when the world began and the nations arose (Gen. 1-11), through the origins, rise, and near destruction of Israel (Gen. 12–2 Kgs.), followed by the prophets and an account of Israel's restoration to its homeland (Prophets–Ezra-Nehemiah). In 1 and 2 Chronicles, the end volumes, the story is recapitulated (with addenda); in Ezra-Nehemiah (the penultimate volumes) the story reaches its chronological apex with an account of Israel's restoration to its homeland, the rebuilding of its temple and the climactic reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah—at which time, we are told, this long story was liturgically recited as the basis for a renewal of this people's covenant with its God (Neh. 8–10). The "other books" added to this library in its third section are also (according to *Baba Bathra* 14b) chronologically arranged (Ruth [period of Judges], Psalms [David], Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs [Solomon], Lamentations, Daniel [Captivity], Esther [Persian period]) and are located between the prophetic books and the account of Israel's restoration and renewal in Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles, as if to say these too (these added Writings) must be read in the light of the story within which they are enclosed.

This careful chronological arrangement of books would suggest that the collection as a whole (and not just individual books) was thoughtfully conceived and merits being looked at from the point of view of its overall content, structure, and meaning. However, surprisingly little interest has been shown in such a project in modern times, at least—one reason being the degree to which the original arrangement was skewed when Christians combined their scriptures with the scriptures of Israel (in Greek translation) and began publishing them in the large codices to which reference has already been made. At this time (as previously noted) church and synagogue had so little to do with each other that Christians had lost touch with the collection's original list and order. As a consequence its books were not only inadvertently rearranged, but writings were added that had not been part of the original collection (the so-called apocryphal books); and the scrolls of the prophets, which are in the middle of these scriptures after Kings (in their original arrangement), were transposed to the collection's end, with Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles (which were at the end in the older corpus) now located where the prophets had been.[19] In this way, the chronological connections of the prophets with the events related in Kings were weakened and, even more so, their relevance for a proper understanding of the accounts that follow of Israel's restoration and reform as these are related in Ezra-Nehemiah.

Instead now—because the prophets were at the end of the collection, right in front of the newly added New Testament books—the impression created was that the events related in the New Testament narratives were solely what the prophetic books had in mind with their visions of Israel's (and the world's) future. This, of course, is why the books were eventually rearranged in this manner, for this is how Christians of the late fourth and fifth centuries (in whose codices these changes were codified) were now thinking of themselves. They alone (not Israel) were heirs of the promises of the prophets. God's plan for the world was unfolding through them (not Israel). This rearrangement of Israel's scriptures may thus be seen as a reflection of the same supersessionist trends that led to the rearrangement of New Testament books and the bifurcation of the Bible into Old and New Testaments noted above.

Unfortunately, this defective form is the way in which these scriptures are still being published.[20] Its negative effect has been incalculable for scholars and laity alike. It goes a long way (for example) to explain why so little interest has been shown until recently in postexilic studies, and also why issues pertaining to the canon history of Israel's scriptures have been so neglected or inadequately addressed, for this was the era when they were assembled in their final form.[21] The notion of some, that the collection and canonization of these scriptures happened haphazardly as books appeared and were accepted or rejected in this or that group before being accepted by the community as a whole, is hardly a hypothesis.[22] Unanswered are basic questions about why books needed to be accepted or rejected in the first place, or who determined when a book was "accepted" and added to an existent library in a certain arrangement, or where and how this growing collection was housed, monitored, cared for, and made accessible to the wider community.

Another picture of canonization emerges (as we have seen) from a more careful look at the biblical sources themselves, beginning with 2 Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. In both biblical and extrabiblical sources, certain leaders and guilds are named as having played a leading role in the pivotal scripture-based reforms alluded to; they are, on the one hand, Hezekiah and Josiah, Ezra and Nehemiah, and, on the other, certain Levites who assisted them in their reforming work (see 2 Chr. 29; Ezra 8:15-20; Neh. 8:7; 9:4f.). The Levites might well be "the men of the great congregation" referred to in the Talmud as the custodians of Israel's scriptures and traditions from the time of the prophets until the days of Simeon the Righteous (Mishnah *Aboth* 1:1f.), a contemporary of Jesus ben Sira (see Sir. 50:1). For them to function in this role, they had to regain a place in the temple that they had lost centuries earlier when Solomon dismissed them from their duties there and replaced them with an exclusively Zadokite priesthood (1 Kgs. 2:26f., 35).

This required that these rival groups (Zadokites and Levites) be reconciled to each other and that the Levites be given a defined and established place in the temple like the one they had had under David (2 Sam. 8:17; Neh. 12:44–47; 1 Chr. 23–26). That this eventually happened and that these two guilds (Zadokite priests and Levites) did in fact function together at the temple in a more or less ongoing way was a momentous unifying achievement that is attributed in our sources to the initiatives of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 8:24; Neh. 13:30) in the wake of the prophetic mission of Malachi, who had called for this (see Mal. 2–3). 2 Maccabees 2:13f. refers to a document called the Memoirs of Nehemiah in which was recorded how Nehemiah (in addition to the actions he took in restoring the Levites to their duties at the temple) "founded a library and made a collection [of certain books]." It was here in this temple library that Israel's scriptures were housed, arranged, and cared for and where copies were made for those who requested them (see 2 Macc. 2:15).[23]

When the possibility dawns that the scriptures of Israel were thoughtfully and purposefully assembled and cared for in this manner, at a certain time and place and by certain guilds dedicated to that end (and as the basis of reforms which are described in its climactic chapters), then inevitably one will see this collection in a new light. We will want to know what the thoughts and intentions were of those who did this. In this way a new approach to biblical theology comes into view. Biblical theology can now shift from being a search for an elusive center among the diffuse fragments and older traditions of the Israelite scriptures, to being a recovery of the worldview of the collection itself, as this emerges from a reading of the biblical narrative as a whole in its intended arrangement and form.[24]

Step Three: Following in the Footsteps of Others As We Read the Biblical Story

What, more specifically, *is* the longer biblical narrative as this emerges from the form the Bible had when it was first created? The preceding analysis suggests that it is the narrative that results when the Christian apostolic scriptures (preferably in the order specified in the oldest manuscripts) are added to the scriptures of Israel (preferably in the form and order specified by the talmudic rabbis in *Baba Bathra* 14b).[25] Surveying this long story (laid out in this way), what are its major components and overall message? How do we read and interpret it? These are the questions I now wish to begin addressing in the following pages.

In doing so, I am conscious, first of all, of following in the footsteps of others, beginning with those teachers and scholars in the church who first assembled this larger scriptural collection and were thus among the first to read it in this form. For example, reading and interpreting this larger story is exactly what Irenaeus was doing in *Against Heresies* (ca. 185), when he began commenting on the way the stories told in the Christian Scriptures he (and others) had begun to assemble were related to the stories told in the scriptures of Israel. This too is more or less what Eusebius did a century and a half later when writing his *Ecclesiastical History* (ca. 325), when

he took the story told in the Jewish Scriptures (as now assembled in the church's Bible), plus the Gospels and Acts, as a point of reference for his narration and interpretation of the Christian story as this had unfolded to his point in time (and as this was now known to him through various additional sources). Then again, Augustine did something similar a century after that, in his magnum opus, *The City of God* (ca. 426). Here, with the help of reason (as he puts it) and "the Old and New Testaments accepted as canonical" (19.18), he tried to explain the faith of the church by systematically surveying the long scriptural story spread out before him and accessible now in large codices. Christians ever since have gotten their bearings and located themselves spiritually and existentially in the human and cosmic universe through some such process as this.

But the scriptural "World-Story" (as Amos Wilder has termed it),[26] which is the focus of such meditations, is an extremely long one—and open, it seems, to diverse interpretations. Each of the three "readings" just mentioned (those of Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Augustine), while similar at points, is also different at others. Moreover, for various reasons, some "readings" turned out to be more compelling than others and became dominant over time, as was the case with Augustine's *City of God*, whereas others are forgotten. Surveying works of similar scope in our own time reveals a similar diversity. Differing readings appear and appeal to differing communities, which wax and wane in the course of their histories. So, for example, Protestant Evangelicals are energized by one reading of this scriptural story; Roman Catholics by another; Reformed, Lutherans, and Anglicans by another; and Mennonites by another. **Is there anything like a commonly understood, widely shared reading of this story emerging in our time, one that might have the potential of drawing peoples of various traditions together (as did, to some extent, Augustine's *City of God*)? I believe there is, but with this question we come to the frontier on which we are now poised.**

Two Scenarios

A starting point for such an exploration, I suggest, might be the account of the call of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12:1–3 and the promises made there that through them a people would be born that would be blessed and would become a blessing for the world's nations. My impression is that this text is a focal one for most studies or "readings" (today and in the past) in which an attempt is made to interpret the canonical story as a whole in the

manner I am alluding to. There is thus a degree of unity in most studies of this kind in this sense, that the story recounted in Israel's and the church's scriptures has to do with a plan of God to bless or save or improve the world in some sense. In other words, the story related in these scriptures truly is a World-Story and one having to do with the betterment in some sense of all the world's peoples.[27]

But what, more specifically, is it that Genesis 12:1–3 is referring to? What is the nature or content of the hope-filled promises made to Abraham and Sarah? What is meant by being "blessed," or by "blessing"? And how are these promises related to the wider biblical story, both the one prior to them (in Gen. 1–11) and the one following this account (in Law, Prophets, and Writings, and in the New Testament)? More specifically, how are these promises to Abraham related to the prior creation story, with its awesome picture of human beings within the created order? What relation does it have to the story of rebellion, anarchy, and violence recited there, and to the story of the flood and of the new world order of promises, decrees, and proliferating nations that follows the flood? Furthermore, how does the story that *follows* the call and the promises to Abraham and Sarah (in Gen. 12:1–3) amplify or interpret or illuminate these promises? What new clarification does the story of Moses bring? What, in this light, is the significance of the long, detailed narrative of Israel's entry into the land, its settlement and rise to nationhood, its apostasy and near destruction? What, in the light of the Abrahamic promises, is the significance of the reforms we read of in these narratives (especially those of Hezekiah and Josiah)? And what of the critical but hope-filled messages of the prophets? How do they relate to the promises made to Abraham, to the traumatic events of their time, and most especially to Israel's restoration to its homeland and Second Temple experience (as described in Ezra and Nehemiah)? And what does the New Testament story of Jesus and the church as related in the Gospels and Acts add to this ongoing saga of promises, hopes, and fulfillments? Finally, how is all this relevant to the problems and crises afflicting the world as we know it today?

It is in fleshing out the answers to these questions that significant differences appear from reading to reading; and, indeed, the number and nature of these differences can be daunting. **In a first attempt at classifying studies that try to make sense of the biblical story as a whole (as I have encountered them in my reading so far), I have begun to distinguish two basic scenarios: (1) those that portray the Christian church as a replacement for an Israel viewed as tragically rebellious and flawed in its assigned role in God's plan for blessing the nations; and (2) those in**

which the Christian church is viewed as an extension or manifestation of an Israel that had already begun in some sense to function in that role.

Replacement Scenarios

Following Irenaeus (who is the outstanding exception to this)—notably in the works of Eusebius (325) and Augustine (426)—we can trace the emergent outlines of the first of these two scenarios. In their reading of these scriptures, Israel is faulted not only for having rejected Jesus as Messiah but also for being persistently and stubbornly off track and disobedient throughout its history. Only with the coming of Jesus Christ did God's announced plan to Abraham for "blessing" the nations become truly effective. I find Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, not totally consistent regarding these matters. On the one hand, he writes exuberantly of the role of the Jews in preparing the world for the advent of Christ as "their Law became famous and like a fragrant breeze penetrated to every corner of the world," so that "soon the characters of most heathen races began to grow gentler, thanks to the lawgivers and thinkers in every land" (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.2.23). In other passages, however, he writes that at the present time it is Christians alone who "can be seen throughout the world practicing religion in the very form in which Abraham practiced it" (1.4.11), the Jews having missed the way by adhering to the Law of Moses, and again when they rejected Christ. The disasters befalling them following their crucifixion of Jesus are thus seen by him as a just reward for their "iniquitous and wicked treatment of God's Christ" (3.7.3).

Augustine's wide-ranging thoughts along these lines in his magnum opus, *The City of God*, proved to be especially seminal. His approach was that of a theologian who believed that the Old and New Testaments are to be "accepted as canonical" (19.18) but also that Christian believers should trust their intelligence (fallible though it be).[28] Accordingly, he begins with Genesis and goes, step by step, right through the whole biblical story down to the last book, Revelation. He is especially attentive to what happened to the human race through the sin of Adam and Eve. From that point onward, he writes, "a propensity to sin and a necessity to die" overshadow human history. "Moreover, the kingdom of death so dominated men that all would have been hurled, by a just punishment, into a second and endless death had not some been saved from this by the gratuitous grace of God." This will explain, he continues, why "there exists no more than the two kinds of society, which according to our Scriptures, we have rightly called the two cities. One city is that of men who live according to the flesh. The other is of men who live according to the spirit" (14.1).

In tracing the destiny of these two cities, Augustine moves quickly to the story of Abraham. For Augustine, this marks a "new period in the history of the City of God . . . . From now on," he writes, "we have fuller evidence of this City, and those divine promises stand out more clearly, which we now see were fulfilled in Christ" (16.12). There were two "divine promises," as he saw it. The one had to do with "the Jewish race according to the flesh"; the other with a "faith" that would be embraced by "all nations" (17.1). The first of these promises concerned inheriting the land of Canaan and becoming a great nation. "The other, which is vastly more important than the first," also had two aspects: "whereas in his fleshly seed Abraham was to sire the Jewish race alone, in his spiritual seed he was to be the father of every people that would follow in the footsteps of his faith" (17.2). Augustine believed the first aspect of this promise to Abraham was fulfilled in the kingdom of David and his son Solomon, a kingdom that would have continued "in unshakeable, worldly well-being until the end of time" had it not been for its disobedience (17.2).

It is right at this point that Augustine inserts an observation that will determine how he will read the rest of the biblical story.

> [Since] God knew that they [Israelites of the kingdom period] would not obey [he writes], He made use of temporal chastisements to test the handful of loyal believers he had among them, and to render alert those followers He was to have later on among all those peoples for whose sake he was planning to make good His second promise, in the revelation of His New Testament, in the Incarnation of Christ. (17. 2)

In other words, from this point on Israel's story in the pre-Christian period (as Augustine reads it) is one in which Israel is a disobedient "materially minded" people (18.45) suffering temporal chastisements to prepare them for the fulfillment of the promise of a spiritual people that was fulfilled only in the coming of Christ. To "alert" his future followers to the "New Testament" revelation in Christ is the primary significance of "the prophecies of his coming, which now begin to multiply, beginning with the testimonies of David in the Psalter" (17.2). Even since Christ's coming, this alone is why God has preserved the Jews.

> Although they [the Jews] were conquered and oppressed by the Romans [because of their refusal to believe in Christ], God did not "slay" them, that is, He did not destroy them as Jews. For, if the Jews had remained bottled up in their own land with the evidence of their Scriptures and if they were not

> to be found everywhere, as the Church is, the Church would not then have them as ubiquitous witnesses of the ancient prophecies concerning Christ. (18.46)

Extension Scenarios

It is my impression that the outstanding exceptions to this supersessionist reading of Israel's scriptures among the teachers and theologians of the early church were Clement, bishop of Rome (90–110), and Irenaeus. We know the former primarily through his letter, *First Clement* ("to the colony of the Church of God at Corinth"). What is so impressive about this letter is the uninhibited manner in which Israel's scriptures are used in establishing the identity and mission of the church. Here it is taken for granted that Christians are a manifestation of the ancient people of Israel whom God took to himself when "the most High divided up the peoples, and scattered the sons of Adam." Moses, David, Abraham, and Enoch are thus as naturally resorted to by him for teaching and example, as is Paul and "the Lord Jesus Christ whom God raised from the dead." The God of whom he writes is the creator of heaven and earth, with Christ and his followers being viewed as those who have been chosen to bear witness to a faith and hope that have already blossomed through Israel and elsewhere among all peoples on earth.

Just as naturally does Irenaeus comment in *Against Heresies* that "both the Mosaic law and the grace of the new covenant [each in its time]. . . were bestowed by one and the same God for the benefit of the human race" (3.12.11). In both he sees the same values being espoused; in both the same command to love God and others; and, in his view, Jews were not unfaithful to their calling. "Inasmuch, then as all natural precepts are common to us and to them [the Jews]," he writes, "they had in them indeed the beginning and origin, but in us they have received growth and completion" (6.12.1). Writing against those who were denigrating the apostles who led the Jewish Christian sector of God's people with their proposals that Paul (leader of the Gentile wing of the church) alone knew the truth, he states: "Let Paul himself convict them, when he says, that one and the same God wrought in Peter for the apostolate of the circumcision, and in himself for the Gentiles" (3.13.1). Nor was Jerusalem's destruction (either in 70 or 135 C.E.) to be interpreted as a sign of God's displeasure with his people Israel. It is rather, he notes, as we read in Isaiah 27:6, which states that "the children of Jacob shall strike root, and Israel shall flourish and the whole world shall be filled with his fruit." That prophecy was amply fulfilled,

> The fruit, therefore, having been sown throughout all the world [by the Jewish people in pre-Christian times], she [Jerusalem] was deservedly forsaken, and those things which had formerly brought forth fruit abundantly were taken away; for from these, according to the flesh, were Christ and the apostles enabled to bring forth fruit. But now these are no longer useful for bringing forth fruit. For all things which have a beginning in time must of course have an end in time also. (4.4.1)

This too is a "replacement" theology of sorts, but not one in which Jerusalem's destruction signifies a transition from something failed or evil (old Israel) to something successful and good (the church), but from something fruitful and good (old Israel) to something better (Israel renewed). In brief, for Irenaeus, "him whom the law proclaimed as God, the same did Christ point out as the Father, whom also it behooves the disciples of Christ alone to serve." Since this is the case, he adds, "we must not seek for another Father besides Him, or above Him, since there is one God who justifies the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith" (5.22.1). Both wings of the church, the church of the circumcision and the church of the uncircumcision, are recognized, honored, and respected, and the message and mission of Jesus and his church are viewed as a natural and integral outgrowth of the calling and mission of Israel as described in Israel's scriptures.[29] The church's scriptures are thus viewed not as replacing Israel's scriptures, nor does the church's story take over and replace Israel's story; rather, the church's scriptures supplement Israel's scriptures, and the church's mission is seen as a flowering of Israel's mission to the nations. In a famous passage that sets the stage for his reading of the story of the early church as told in Acts, Irenaeus writes of there being

> four principal covenants given to the human race: one prior to the deluge, under Adam; the second, that after the deluge, under Noah; the third, the giving of the law, under Moses; the fourth, that which renovates man, and sums up all things in itself by means of the Gospel, raising and bearing men upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom. (3.11.8)

In other words, the church is not a replacement for Israel but an extension and fresh manifestation of the one ancient people of God. This now is the way in which a number of contemporary theologians, missiologists, and church leaders are beginning to read Israel's story,[30] and this too is what Lindbeck has in mind (as I understand it), in calling for an Israel-like

view of the church. The time is approaching, he writes, "when having corrected some of the errors of the past, Christians can now apply Israel's story to themselves without supersessionism or triumphalism."[31] This too is what I see Pope John Paul II trying to do in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, where he refers to the Jews "as our elder brothers in the faith."[32] One senses a turning of the tide in this direction.[33]

9

Discerning the Bible's Encompassing "Canonical Narrative"

AN INSIGHT THAT HAS BECOME increasingly important for the approach being advocated in this volume is that the Bible as presently published deviates from its original form in ways that subvert the purposes for which it was created. To recapitulate: canon history teaches us that *at its point of origin* the Christian Bible was meant as a defense against those who wanted to rid the church of its Jewish Scriptures (and Jewish God) and replace them with a set of exclusively Christian Scriptures which were believed to reveal a wholly new God. These radical proposals were forcefully rebutted by Irenaeus and others, and, subsequently, Christian writings affirmative of these older Jewish Scriptures were added to the collection in a single volume, in a list and arrangement that demonstrated that the Christian story is a chronological and theological unfolding of Israel's story. The older Jewish Scriptures so affirmed were at first received and read in a strictly chronological arrangement similar to that in Jewish Bibles today and are accordingly thought of (or referred to), in the added Christian writings *not* as "Old Testament" but simply as "scripture" (2 Tim. 3:16), or "holy scriptures" (Rom. 1:2), or sometimes as "the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 5:17), or "the Law of Moses," "the Prophets," and "the Psalms" (Luke 24:44), as was customary at the time.

Thus, the Christian Bible itself testifies to a stage when Israel's scriptures were known and revered among Christians in exactly the way they were known and read in the wider Jewish world.[1] The added Christian scriptures were likewise not set apart initially as "New Testament," but were simply thought of as belonging to "the rest of scripture" (2 Pet. 3:17).[2] Furthermore, like the older scriptures to which they were added, they too