This volume introduces Israel’s Scriptures, or the Hebrew Bible, commonly called the Old Testament. It also traces the legacy of monotheism found in the pages of the Old Testament. Where pertinent to the message of the Old Testament, the book explores issues of history, comparative religions, and sociology, while striking a balance among these topics by focusing primarily on literary features of the text. In addition, frequent sidebar discussions introduce the reader to contemporary scholarship, especially the results of historical-critical research and archaeology. Along the way, the book explores how the Old Testament conceptualized and gave rise to monotheism, one of the most significant developments in history. This work

- pays unique attention to the origins of monotheism, the common heritage of Jews, Christians, and Muslims;
- includes frequent sidebar discussions in each chapter, a generous number of illustrations, and twenty freshly created maps, as well as concise chapter summaries and a glossary of terms;
- has a Web component that includes study guides, flash cards, PowerPoint lecture slides, and a test bank.

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The Old Testament is a complex collection of literary works from a wide range of periods spanning centuries of history. We have many options for launching into the study of the Old Testament. One may take an essentially historical approach, which is helpful because so much of the Old Testament is embedded in history. But this may give the impression that learning Israelite history, or ancient Near Eastern history, is the same thing as learning the Old Testament. Clearly, acquiring an understanding of history is not the same as learning what the Old Testament says.

One could take a theological approach. But as we shall see, the message of the Old Testament has been taken in different ways in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religious traditions sometimes agree on the meaning of the Old Testament, but not always. And today’s secularist reader will also need a basic understanding of the Old Testament.

One may take a comparative approach, studying religious practices and expressions of the Old Testament with other world religions. But much of the Old Testament has little connection with non-Abrahamic religions, and such an approach would move us off the main task of learning the basic message of the Old Testament itself.

In contrast to these approaches, I have taken in this textbook a literary approach since the Old Testament is, after all – although it may sound silly to say this – literature. So this book can be taken as an entée into the literature of ancient Israel as it has been preserved in the pages of the Old Testament. At the same time, I have focused on the Old Testament’s unique contribution to the history of religious ideas in human civilization. The Old Testament has left an enormous legacy in the history of ideas, which naturally leads to connections in theology and philosophy. This introduction to the Old Testament as literature will therefore trace the single most important contribution of the Old Testament – that of monotheism – as a theme throughout this book.

A word about the title, Introduction to the Old Testament. The term “introduction” is not intended in the technical, scholarly sense (German Einleitung),
which would imply that the volume discusses all the critical issues for every biblical book. Rather, this is a textbook, introducing the literature and legacy of the Old Testament for the beginning student.

The book will focus on monotheism as the legacy of ancient Israel’s Scriptures, providing a sub-theme running alongside and parallel to the general discussion. As we will see, the Old Testament itself is not uniform in its understanding of the singularity of God. Only certain portions contribute to that legacy, and so we will not take up the question of monotheistic faith in every chapter along the way. This subtheme will highlight the Old Testament’s enduring legacy in the three monotheistic faith traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which is a topic of renewed interest in our world today.

You will need a translation of the Old Testament close by as you read through this textbook. I recommend a recent translation in colloquial English, the best of which are the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the Common English Bible (CEB), and Today’s New International Version (TNIV). Every translation is itself an interpretation. Translations from the Old Testament in this textbook are from the NRSV, although I have occasionally made slight changes in order to illustrate my points (such as “Yahweh” for “the LORD” with small caps, and “enduring covenant” instead of “everlasting covenant”). I have provided my own translation at other times and will mark with “my translation” where I have done so (e.g., Psalm 1 in Chapter 16).

All dates in this textbook are “BCE” for Before the Common Era, unless otherwise indicated. Most of the chapters include a header with the designation “Old Testament Reading.” I suggest you read the portions of the Old Testament assigned there before reading the chapter, or at least along with the chapter, in this textbook (perhaps taking breaks in the OT readings to study this book).

And finally, it is a joy to express appreciation to the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, and its Lilly Theological Research Grant. I was awarded the Lilly Faculty Fellowship for fall semester 2010, which made it possible for me to devote focused attention to this project. I am also grateful to Asbury Theological Seminary for a study leave in spring semester 2011. To my former students Mark Awabdy, Deborah Endean, Jason Jackson, and James D. Wilson I owe a great debt of gratitude, as well as one to Andy Beck, formerly of Cambridge University Press, and to Dr. Asya Graf, currently assistant editor for humanities and social sciences at the Press, who was extremely helpful at several points along the way. Jim Holsinger was a good advisor and friend during the time I worked on this project. As always, I owe most to Susan.