

THE CAMBRIDGE INTRODUCTION TO THE

Old Testament

SECOND EDITION

This textbook offers students who have no prior background in biblical studies an understanding of the lasting contribution of Israel's scriptures. Bringing a literary approach to the topic, it strikes a balance between historical reconstructions, comparative religions, and theology. Among several distinctive features, it traces the legacy of monotheism first emerging in the pages of Israel's scriptures as an enduring contribution for twenty-first century readers. Monotheism gives the volume an immediate relevance because the so-called Abrahamic religions are rooted in this concept. Whether one is Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or secularist, students will gain a new understanding of the origins of monotheism as their common heritage.

The Second Edition of this textbook includes expanded discussions within the text and in sidebars, notably on the history of biblical scholarship, modern methods of interpretation, and wisdom literature.

Bill T. Arnold is the Paul S. Amos Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary. He specializes in Pentateuchal studies and has written or edited eighteen books on many aspects of Old Testament interpretation, including Hebrew language and the history of Israelite religion. In 2010, Arnold was awarded the Founders Medallion by his alma mater, the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati.

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BILL T. ARNOLD

Asbury Theological Seminary, Kentucky



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-32859-3 — The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Testament
Bill T. Arnold
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/highereducation/isbn/9781009328555
DOI: 10.1017/9781009328586

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When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009328586

First published 2014
Second edition 2026

Cover image: A stained glass window by C E Kempe & Co. depicting Moses holding the Ten Commandments, ASP Religion/Alamy Stock Photo

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Arnold, Bill T. author

TITLE: The Cambridge introduction to the Old Testament / Bill T. Arnold,
Asbury Theological Seminary, Kentucky.

OTHER TITLES: Introduction to the Old Testament

DESCRIPTION: Second edition. | Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY,
USA : Cambridge University Press, 2026. | Includes bibliographical
references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2025037421 | ISBN 9781009328555 hardback | ISBN
9781009328593 paperback | ISBN 9781009328586 ebook

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Bible. Old Testament – Theology | Monotheism – History of
doctrines | God (Judaism) – History of doctrines

CLASSIFICATION: LCC BS1192.6 .A76 2026

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025037421>

ISBN 978-1-009-32855-5 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-009-32859-3 Paperback

Additional resources for this publication at www.cambridge.org/arnold2

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In the preface to the first edition of this work (2014), I made a case for taking a literary approach to ancient Israel's scriptures, commonly called the Old Testament. As I said at that time, the books of the Old Testament are, after all — again, it may seem silly to say it — literature. Now, a decade later, it seems just as important to explain that other textbooks take a narrower historical, theological, or comparative approach, and those textbooks have their own strengths. The beginning reader, however, needs assistance in coming to terms fully with the central message of Old Testament literature, in addition to learning how these other approaches relate to it.

In order to enhance the beginner's first experience with formal study of the Old Testament, this revised edition continues from a literary foundation but with expanded attention to other issues as they arise in the text. Such an approach was widely appreciated by reviewers of the 2014 edition, while others thought greater attention on ancillary topics would be helpful. This edition addresses many of those topics more fully.

As in the first edition, I will also draw attention here to what I then called “the Old Testament's unique contribution to the history of religious ideas in human civilization.” In this way, I spoke of

monotheism as ancient Israel's legacy, especially as it leads to subsequent developments in philosophy and theology. Importantly, it needs to be remembered that the Old Testament itself is not expressly a monotheistic document. Its authors hardly had divine math in view; that is, they were seemingly unconcerned with the number of gods in existence. Yet, taken as a whole, the Old Testament can be understood as a *monotheizing* document, which is remarkably focused on moving its audience to an exclusive devotion to the singular God of Israel, whose name was “YHWH” (or “Yahweh”; see Sidebars 1.2 and 5.6 on the divine name). This volume attempts to hear the voices of these Israelite authors against the background of the ancient Near Eastern environment, which was markedly polytheistic. The universal religious consciousness of that ancient world imagined countless deities, supernatural beings who were fluid shapeshifters, ever-increasing in number and related to each other in families and social hierarchies.¹ Against such a backdrop, the Old Testament's denial that other deities were capable

¹ Bill T. Arnold, “Israel's YHWH Among the Religions of the Ancient World,” in Brent A. Strawn, Richard Purcell, and Jeffrey G. Audirsch (eds.), *The Religions Around the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, in press), and for the religious conceptions of each people group of the ancient Near Eastern world, see the various essays in that volume.

of deserving Israel’s adulation, service, or adoration was more than monotheism. Yet its message gave rise to the unique understanding of God that developed later in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In this revised edition, I have expanded the discussion here and there to clarify that the Old Testament itself is not defining a strict philosophical monotheism, while highlighting those portions that focused on exclusive and wholehearted devotion to the one deity, YHWH. Most reviewers and professors using the first edition seemed to agree that this unique conceptualization of Israel’s God among the deities of the ancient world is still a helpful way of introducing the Old Testament for today’s readership, and especially for grasping the continued significance of the Old Testament for our times.

Behind nearly every sentence of this volume stands a body of scholarly literature that I cannot cite here without unduly weighting the discussion beyond

usefulness for beginning readers. I have tried to update the text to give the beginning student access to the best and most recent literature on certain topics. But even this is a futile goal because there are so many other topics that could be covered. This edition is especially revised in the case of Pentateuchal composition, to address the needs and requests of reviewers and those using the volume who wanted more on the latest theories. I have especially given attention to the more recent scholarship on so-called Wisdom literature to explain to the beginning reader what the issues are related to it.

I am gratified by the continued usefulness of the 2014 edition, and I am especially grateful to Dr. Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press for suggesting a second edition. My research assistant, Evan Lee, the Paul S. Amos Teaching Fellow at Asbury Theological Seminary, has been especially helpful in building the indexes to this second edition.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

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 entrée 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 Old Testament (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.



Plate I Hieroglyphics from Egypt. The Greeks called Egyptian writings “holy carvings” (hieroglyphics) because of their perceived sacred character. This is an inscription dedicated to Amon-Min, a fertility god, from the time of Sesostris I (1950 BCE). (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York)



Plate II Cuneiform from Mesopotamia. This astrological calendar from the ancient city of Uruk illustrates the distinctive “wedge-shaped” (cuneiform) script, the first attested writing system in world history. Cuneiform writing was adapted for use with many languages and exported widely throughout Mesopotamia, Syria–Palestine, and Asia Minor. (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York)



Plate III Egyptian creation. In this Egyptian version of creation from approximately 1000 BCE, the sky-goddess Nut extends over the created order. Below her is her brother Geb, the god of earth, depicted here reclining at the feet of Shu, the air god, who separates the two with the assistance of two ram-headed deities of magic. This version is reconstructed from a fresco from a tomb at Thebes, Valley of the Kings. (Photo: © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, New York)



Plate III (continued)



Plate IV Clay tablet relating an episode of the Gilgamesh Epic (Old Babylonian period, ca. 1800 BCE). The Yale Gilgamesh Tablet is one of the most important copies of this epic poem from ancient Iraq. (Photo: Yale Babylonian Collection)



Plate V The Western Wall with the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem. The Temple Mount in Jerusalem is revered as sacred by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The Dome of the Rock was built over the traditional site where Abraham is believed to have offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22). Additionally, Islamic tradition holds that Muhammad was miraculously transported here in a night vision, and from this place toured heaven and spoke with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. The Western Wall (*foreground*) contains portions of a retaining wall built by Herod the Great for the expanded temple platform. (Photo: © Peter Spierer/Dreamstime.com)



Plate VI The view of the northern Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley from Mount Nebo, the top of Pisgah (see Map 3.1). The Old Testament says God showed Moses the promised land from this vista before Moses’ death (Deuteronomy 34:1–3). (Photo: courtesy of Bill T. Arnold)

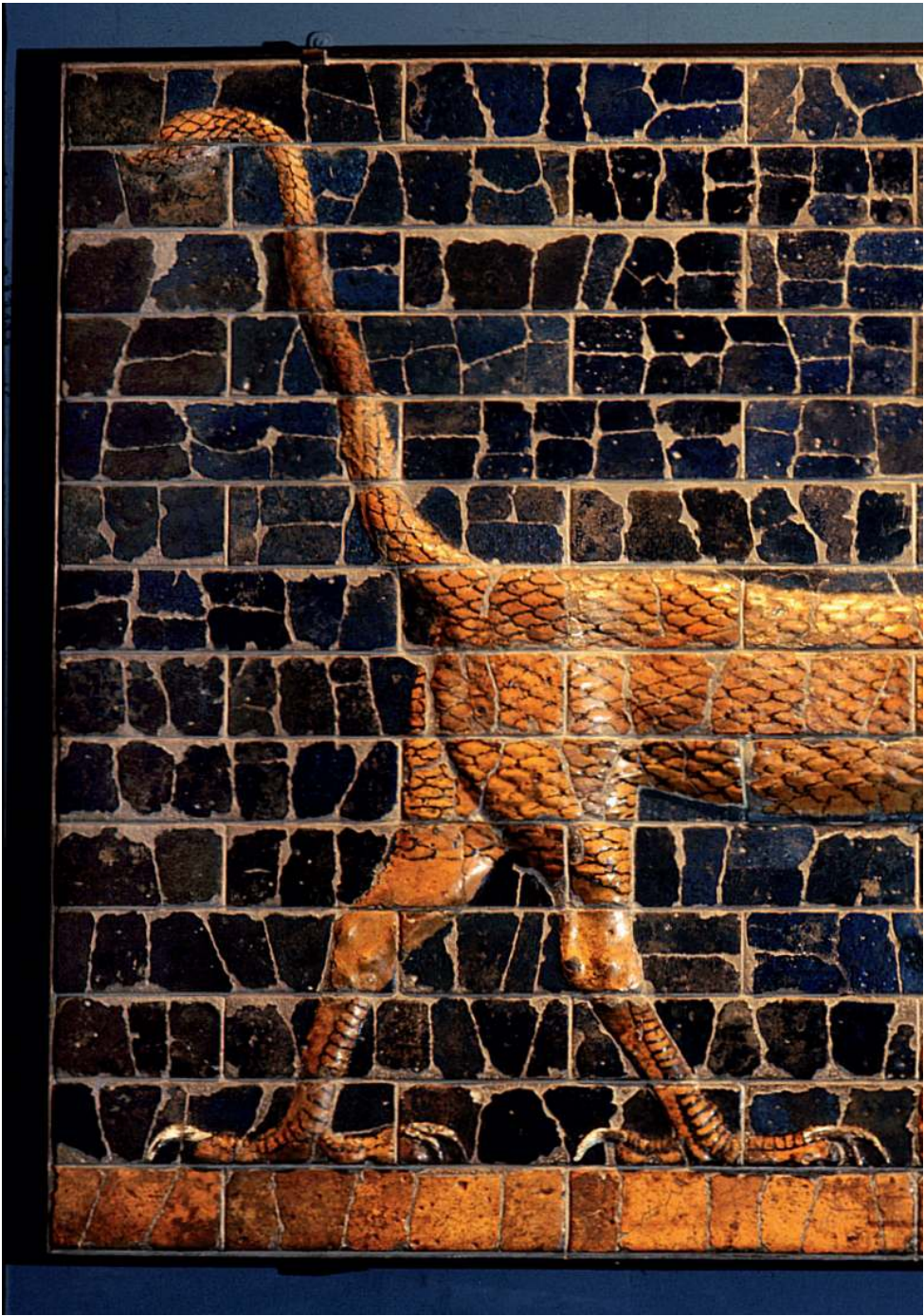


Plate VII Glazed brick relief of dragon from the gates of Ishtar at Babylon, ca. 570 BCE. The surface of the entrance byway of the Ishtar Gate into Babylon was covered with blue enameled bricks, serving as background for alternating animals, including red-and-white dragons, symbolic of the god Marduk, chief deity of ancient Babylon. (Photo: Werner Forman/Art Resource, New York)

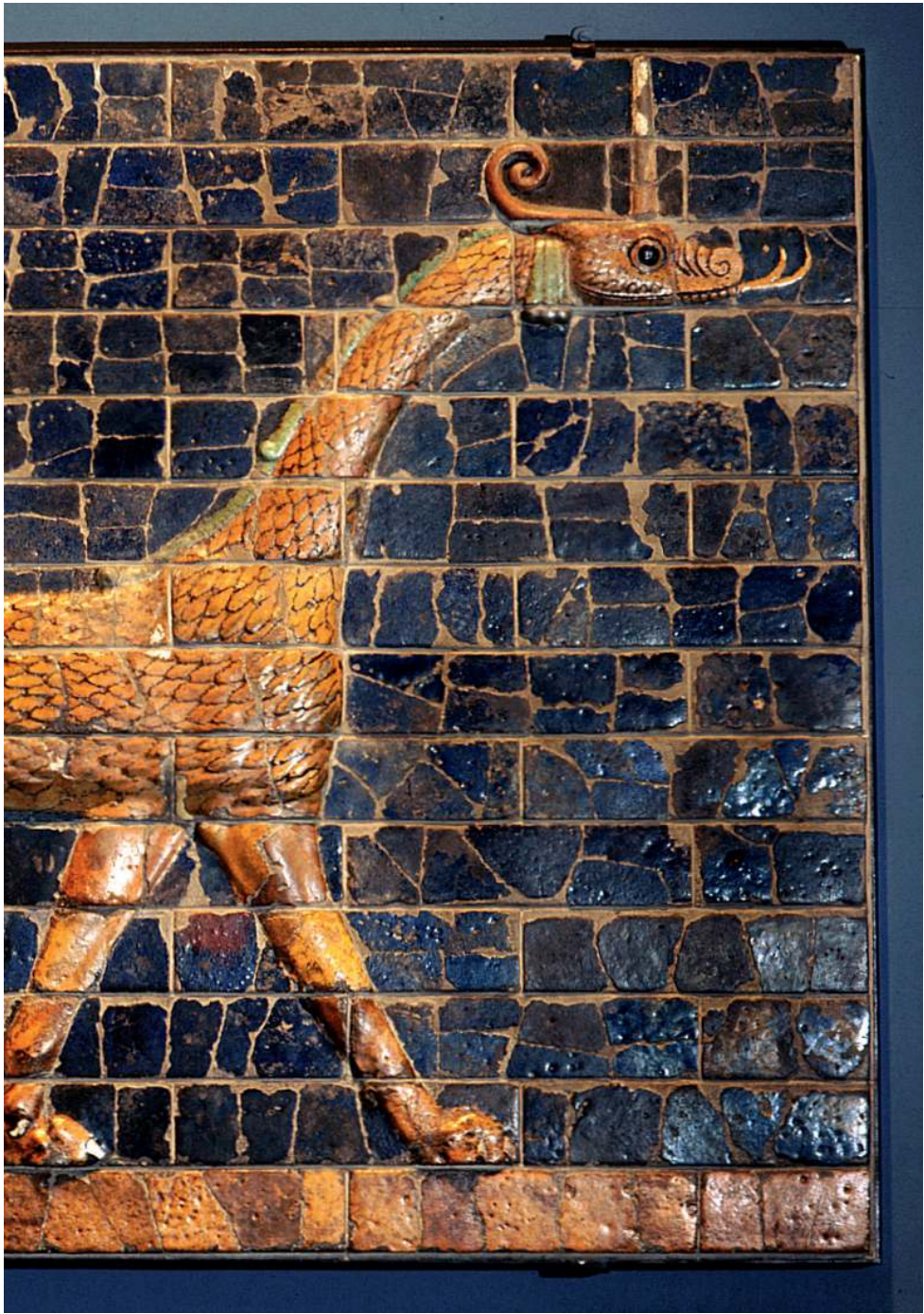


Plate VII (continued)

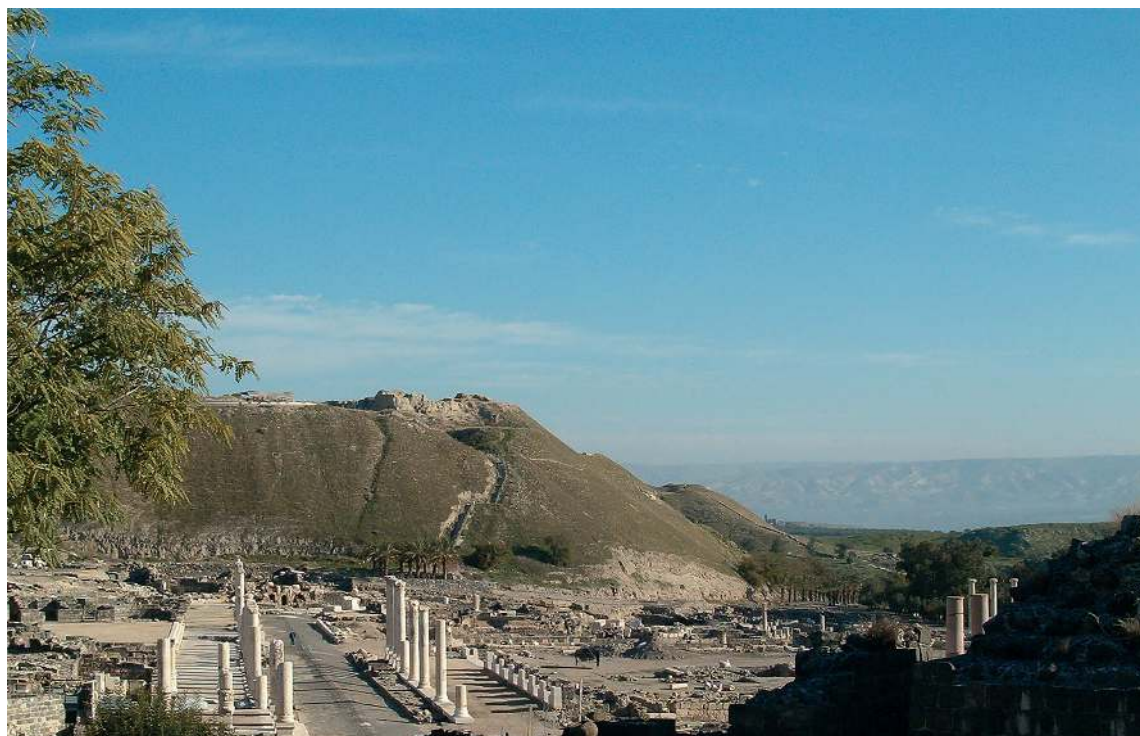


Plate VIII The mound known as Tell el-Husi has been identified as ancient Beth-shan, also spelled Beth-shean, viewed here from the south. Later Roman and Byzantine ruins are in the foreground. The impressive mound itself preserves evidence of occupation from the Neolithic period in the lowest layer (stratum XVIII), all the way to Byzantine remains in the uppermost level of the tell (stratum I). For more on the nature of such tells as ruin heaps, and their significance for archaeological research, see Sidebar 11.1. (Photo: courtesy of Bill T. Arnold)



Plate IX Tower of Lachish under siege. The stone panels from the southwest palace of Sennacherib in Nineveh contain numerous relief sculptures depicting the capture of Lachish in 701 BCE. This image shows the tower of the fortified city of Lachish under attack. The artwork imitates the violence of ancient warfare, showing the Assyrians, supported by archers, maneuvering siege engines up ramps, while the Israelites inside the city hurl torches and stones from the tower and walls against the Assyrians below. (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York)

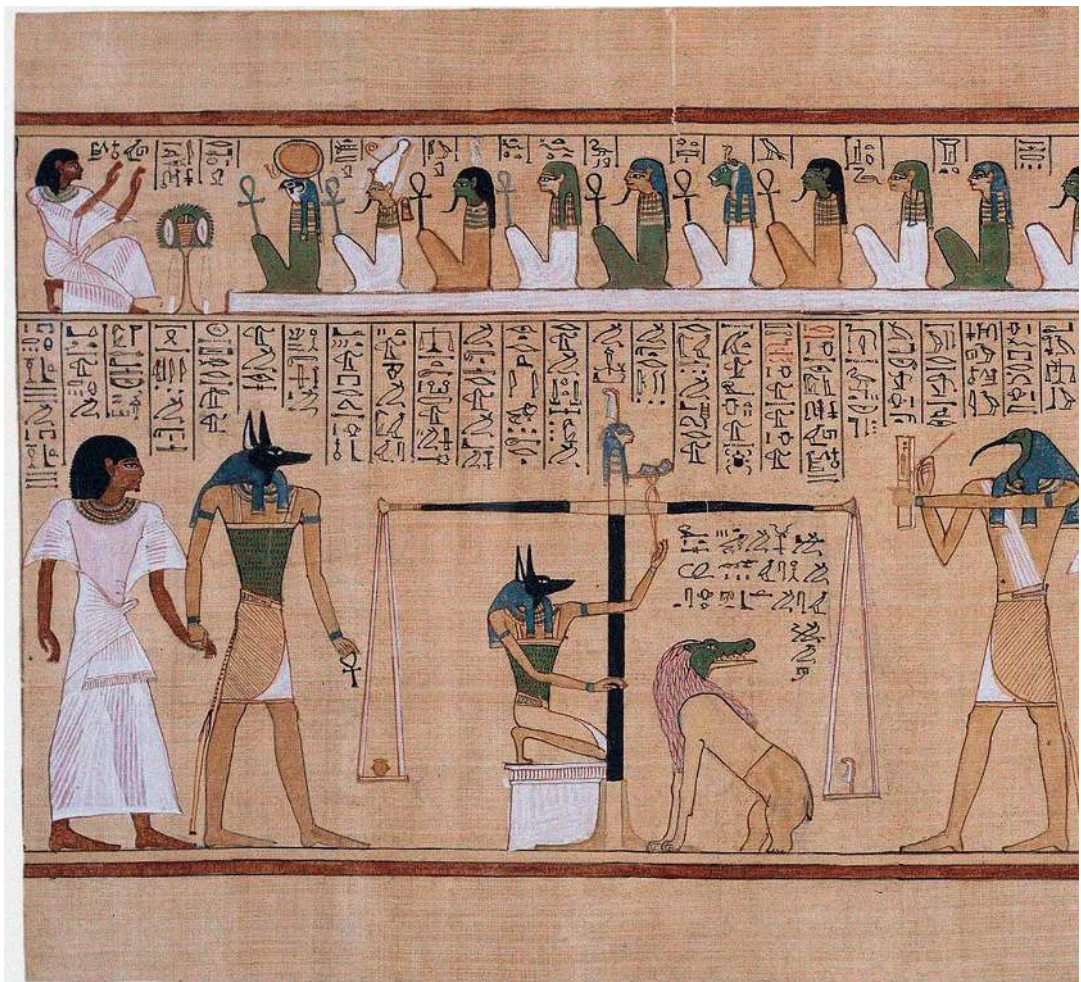


Plate X Page from the Book of the Dead, Thebes, Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1275 BCE). The funerary papyrus shows the weighing of the souls (psychostasis). Reading from the left, Anubis, jackal-headed god associated with mummification, brings the deceased to the place of judgment, where Anubis supervises the judgment scales. The heart of the deceased is being weighed against a feather, the symbol of the goddess Ma'at, cosmic order, truth, and righteousness. (Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, New York)

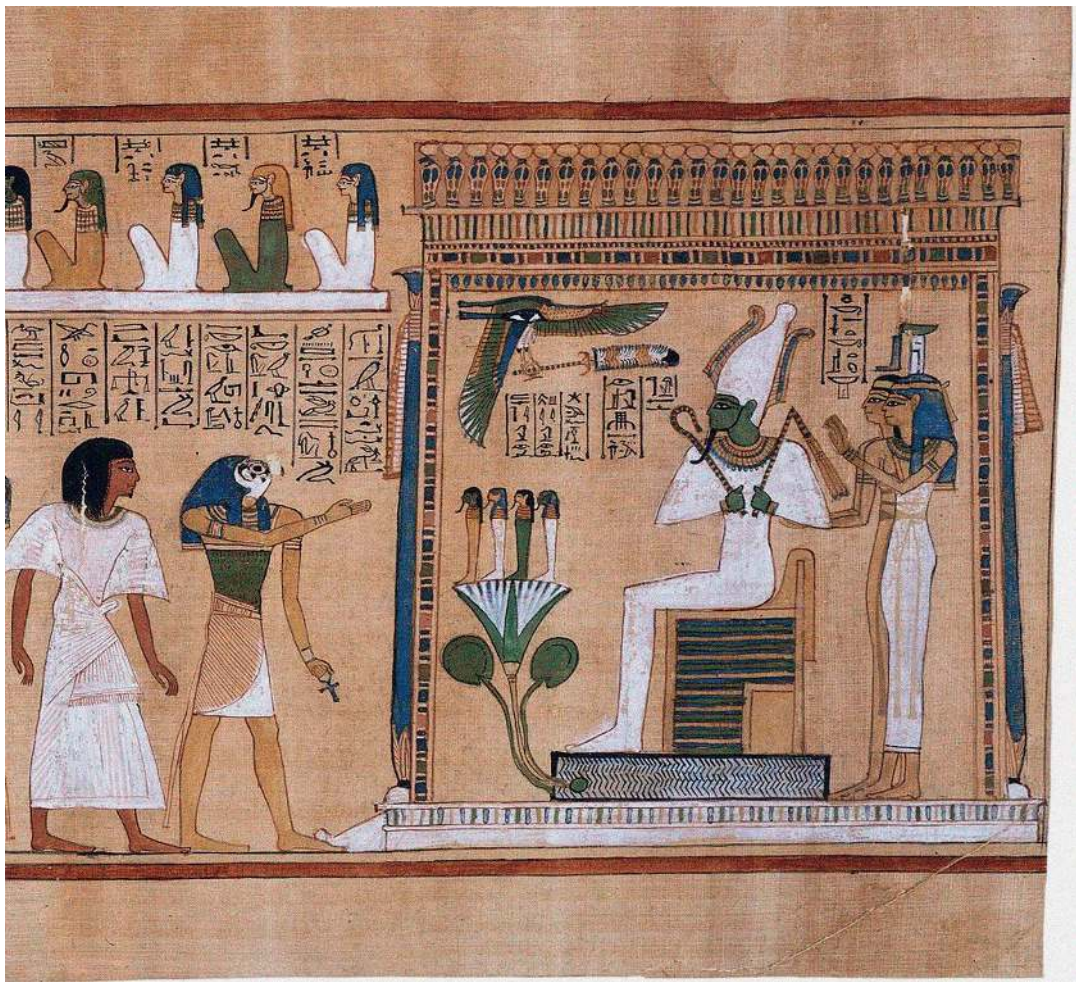


Plate X (continued)



Plate XI In this detail from the Black Obelisk, Jehu, the king of Israel, is seen prostrating himself before King Shalmaneser III of Assyria; see Sidebar 14.6. (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York)



Plate XII The surface of the Dead Sea, or “Salt Sea,” is 1,388 feet below sea level, which is earth’s lowest elevation on land. The Dead Sea is also earth’s deepest hypersaline lake, making it inhospitable to most life forms. Yet the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel envisions a day when the Dead Sea will become Life Sea, the source of life-giving water for nearby Jerusalem. (Photo: courtesy of Bill T. Arnold)