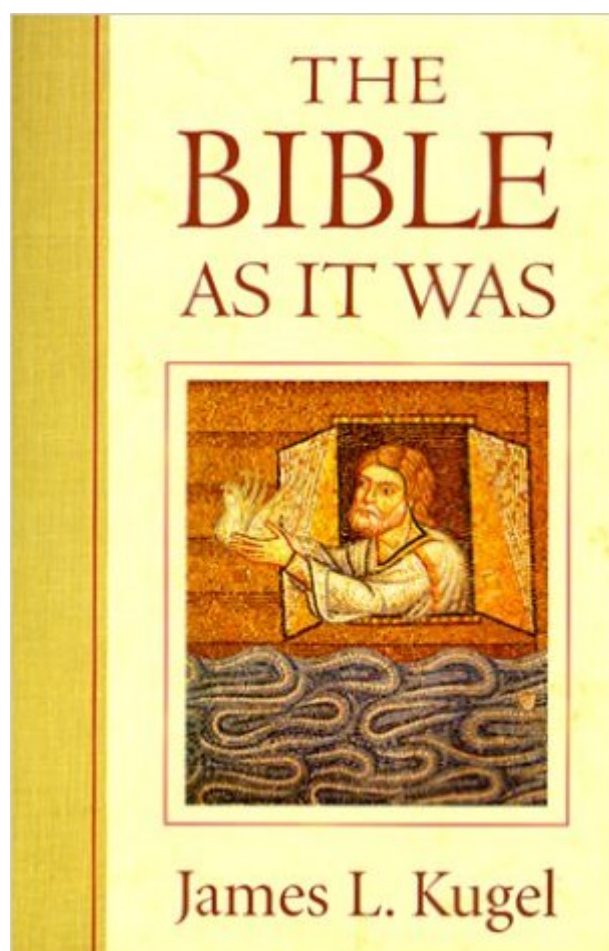


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# The Bible As It Was



## Synopsis

This is a guide to the Hebrew Bible unlike any other. Leading us chapter by chapter through its most important stories--from the Creation and the Tree of Knowledge through the Exodus from Egypt and the journey to the Promised Land--James Kugel shows how a group of anonymous, ancient interpreters radically transformed the Bible and made it into the book that has come down to us today. Was the snake in the Garden of Eden the devil, or the Garden itself "paradise"? Did Abraham discover monotheism, and was his son Isaac a willing martyr? Not until the ancient interpreters set to work. Poring over every little detail in the Bible's stories, prophecies, and laws, they let their own theological and imaginative inclinations radically transform the Bible's very nature. Their sometimes surprising interpretations soon became the generally accepted meaning. These interpretations, and not the mere words of the text, became the Bible in the time of Jesus and Paul or the rabbis of the Talmud. Drawing on such sources as the Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient Jewish apocrypha, Hellenistic writings, long-lost retellings of Bible stories, and prayers and sermons of the early church and synagogue, Kugel reconstructs the theory and methods of interpretation at the time when the Bible was becoming the bedrock of Judaism and Christianity. Here, for the first time, we can witness all the major transformations of the text and recreate the development of the Bible "As It Was" at the start of the Common era--the Bible as we know it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As one who has waded through Genesis Rabbah all the way to Deuteronomy, scratching my head,

making marginal notes like Rashi, and looking up almost every word, this book came like a 500 BTU central unit, to a cottage deep in the rain forest. Dr. Kugel has gathered thousands of lines of commentary from unnumbered sources, but all from a 300 year time period, about 200bce to 100ce-- the same time the gospels and epistles were written, the Mishnah was codified and most of the rabbis of the Pirkei Avot were active. Kugel quotes standard Jewish commentary, but he also quotes from Christian scriptures, treating them (as Christian scholar Rosemary Reuther suggested many years ago) as midrash upon the Jewish texts. He also uses standard histories of the time, such as Josephus' Antiquities, the works of Philo, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. What makes this extensive work such a relief and a delight are the extensive annotations of the author: accurate citations are always given (I checked); end notes are given, describing all sources, and giving dates, or approximate dates. There is a bibliography of modern sources as well. Most importantly, each time a midrash or other commentary is inserted into the text of the Torah, Kugel gives us a most essential bit of information: he tells us what the problem is with that text that the commentator feels needs explaining. It is not always obvious to a reader 2,000 years later what a certain rabbi's problem was with a text that prompted him to write the several lines of commentary he left us. The work Kugel has done-- his gift to us, is to climb into the minds of these people in a different place, discover what their concerns were, and deduce what parts of the texts would have caught their attention and for what reason. Since none of his interpretations (at least none I have looked-- and I've looked at most of them) seem forced or overly creative, I believe this is the work of a great scholar. I cherish it, and I thank him much.

This book would be more accurately titled "The Torah As It Was", but this minor complaint aside, I can only say, "What a book!" The extremely informative introduction lays out the plan: Mr. Kugel is giving us a glimpse into how the Torah, or at least a number of major events in it, were interpreted by a wide variety of authorities during the so-called intertestamental period, from approximately 200BCE-100CE. He takes an event, the Flood, say, and marshals an array of quotes regarding one or another aspect of the story from a truly dizzying variety of authors. Extra-biblical interpretive strains are indicated by words or phrases printed in boldface type. It is fascinating to witness the process, as ambiguous texts metamorphose into moral instruction via interpretive discussion. The variety of creative, and sometimes mutually contradictory, uses to which the texts are put is amazing. It's also surprising how many of these interpretations have stuck with us into the modern age. In addition to over 500 pages of well-presented interpretation, the 50-page listing of Terms and Sources, as well as the 30-page Bibliography, and comprehensive Index of sources cited, make this

a truly useful and valuable resource for anyone interested in the Bible or the thought of this pivotal period in history. If all this isn't enough, the book itself (and keep in mind that I'm talking about a paperback here!) is a delight: from cover, to paper, to typeface, to engravings and illustrations, everything about this volume gives me pleasure as a reader and owner. Hats off to Harvard/Belknap. Too bad more publishers don't follow suit.

This is a marvelous book. For readers of the Bible who think seriously about it, questions arise constantly. Some of these are old, well-known problems like "Where did Cain's wife come from?" Others may be less familiar like "Why was the Brazen serpent which Moses made to cure snake-bites in the wilderness not a violation of the commandment against making images?" One of the many wonders which Kugel reveals to those unfamiliar with biblical interpretation in antiquity is that such questions are not new. They were occurring to readers of the Bible more than 2000 years ago. Kugel has selected some of the most mystifying passages from the Torah and has collected ancient attempts to interpret these texts and fill in the gaps they create. Often, ancient interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, were attempting to defend the biblical accounts against difficulties and inconsistencies. Some readers, like myself, may find that the ancients were a bit too eager to resolve all the tensions that arise in the Torah. Nevertheless, Kugel's compendium allows us conveniently to read the Bible along with some of the great Bible readers from the period within a couple of centuries on each side of the turn of the eras, and such an opportunity is a delight.

"The Bible as it was" is a wonderful and exhaustive work regarding scriptural interpretation and the first five books of the Bible. Early Jewish tradition was to fill in interpretive information when necessary to resolve items that were ambiguous or unclear. In addition, notes and commentary were often passed along with the texts and over time tended to become a part of the text. As a result, the Bible of today includes a lot of commentary as well as the original texts. Kugel's purpose is to try to reconstruct the Bible as it was in its original form as closely as possible. While we all know that no copies of the original Bible exist today, the King James version was based on the Textus Receptus which was a Greek translation of the Bible and considered the oldest reliable source at the time. Since then there have been many archaeological finds of manuscripts from earlier points in time and in the original Hebrew language. Many of these passages differ somewhat from current translations. In theory, the older versions should be closer to the original version. Working from the oldest texts he examines some of the differences in the way passages were interpreted and what that could mean. This gets us closer to an original version without all the

intervening thoughts and interpretations that earlier writers had added in an attempt to make it more understandable and applicable to the people of their time. Dr. Kugel thoroughly documents his work complete with quotes, sources and annotations as appropriate. A fascinating book that sheds new light onto many passages it should be read by anyone attempting a serious and scholarly study of the Bible.

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