

The book you always meant to read: the Old Testament



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Introduction
There are at least two ways to read the Old Testament: in the
>past tense or in the present tense. Read in the past tense
the
>centuries from which the religious heritage of the Western world
>derives begin to come alive
the
>particularly the nineteenth to the
>second centuries B.c. Shifting political dominance in the lands
>bordering the Mediterranean
the
>rise and fall of empires in the
>Tigris-Euphrates and Nile valleys--spreading out into areas in
>northern Africa
the
>southern Europe and western Asia--all become
>the scene of absorbing action. And the people caught in the action
>are not only empire makers; they are the progenitors of our lin-
>gulstle development
the
>the parents of our

cultureï¼Œ the founders of
our lawï¼Œ definitely the instigators of our religious
cults and cus-
toms. We begin to care about their vicissitudes and marvel at
their insights. But however expansive the effect of reading the
Old Testament in
the past tenseï¼Œ the ancients remain the ancients
while we are the moderns.
Reading the Old Testament in the present tense is a more dis-
turbingï¼Œ even
disruptiveï¼Œ experience. We start with a feeling of
identification. After allï¼Œ
what was all that different about the
Hebrews leaving Egypt for the sake of
religious libertyï¼Œ and our
own great-grandparents leaving England and other
restrictive
parts of Europe? The Canaanites seemed no fiercer to the ad-
vancing Hebrews than the Indians to the American colonists; and
neither
Hebrews nor colonials paid any attention to the fact that
the land they
pre-empted belonged to already established land-
needy groups.
In the
pages of this library of thirty- ulne slender books bound

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