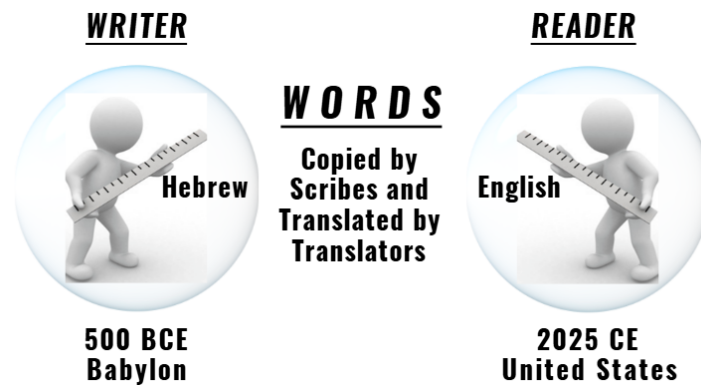


## Getting into the Ancient Mindset

Ethnocentrism” comes from two Greek words: “*ethnos*” (“**nation**”) and “*kentron*” (“**center**”). It means “*people believe their culture is central to the universe.*” It is a tendency to use our culture -- *values, ideas, and rules* — as **a starting point for thinking about and judging other people.** “It is a tendency to believe that our ways are right and those without our ways are less right. This tendency has been described as “each person lives in his or her own **“Bubble of Rightness.”**”



Ethnocentrism reveals its presence in two belief models:

- The belief that “**my society or group is right.**”
- The belief that “**my culture and institutions are right as well.**”<sup>1</sup>

The **Rulers** in the graphic represent the **Ethnocentric Standards** people use measure other people. This isn’t a problem as long as people have the same rulers, but when it comes to translating of reading the words of the Bible – *being ethnocentric is a deadly sin!* In order to prevent this, **translators and readers of English translations “must get into the ancient mindset first.”** If I do not do this first, my mind will use my ruler to judge the translator’s words.

My job as a translator is to help you “**see the world through the writer’s Bubble of Rightness.**” It is not to judge the Writer’s Ruler. I realized I needed to provide you with more scholarly information to help you understand. “*Getting into the ancient mindset*” begins with having Sources of information that are committed to following the **Laws of**

<sup>1</sup> *Ten Questions: A Sociological Perspective* by Joel M. Charon © 2013 Wadsworth, Cengage Learning; Wadsworth, Belmont, CA; p. 134-135.

Language and have been trained to work with the languages the ancient manuscripts of books the Bible. **How Words Work** introduces the first **Law of Language**. The graphic on the previous page reflects this model. Our “#1” goal is to **understand the Writer’s Ruler**:

*The writer’s culture, time period, place,  
and personal experiences.*

**How Words Work**

***A word consists of symbols with  
an attached bundle of  
associations which are a  
product of the Source’s culture,  
historical time period,  
geographical location, and  
personal experiences.***

Our second goal is to “**avoid ethnocentrism**.”

*Do not use “**your Ruler**” to “**interpret the writer’s words!**”*

Dr. Ike Tension, Rabbi Jeffrey Leynor, and I searched for scholars who had the same goals as the two above. I will be introducing scholars we found through our research. I encourage you to add them to your list also. At the top of our list is a group of very special people, who also happen to be scholars.

**Professor Umberto Cassuto** (1883–1951) studied there at the University of Florence (graduated in 1906), and the *Collegio Rabbinico* (ordained in 1908), where its principal Samuel Hirsch Margulies had a profound influence on him. After getting a degree and *Semicha*, he taught at both institutions. From 1922 to 1925, he was **Chief Rabbi of Florence**. In 1925 he became **professor of Hebrew and literature at the University of Florence** and then took the **chair of Hebrew language at the University of Rome La Sapienza**. When the 1938 anti-Semitic laws forced him from this position, he accepted an invitation to fill the **chair of Biblical studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem** in Mandatory Palestine in 1939, where he taught until his death in 1951. He was a life-long Zionist.

Cassuto's last years were clouded by the tragic loss of two members of his family. The first loss was that of his son Nathan (d. c. 1945). A successful physician, he headed the Jewish community of Florence during the Holocaust. Nathan was arrested by the Germans in 1943, and soon after he was joined by his wife, who was also arrested. Both were deported to Auschwitz. The other loss was his daughter-in-law, who lost her life when the convoy to Mount Scopus was ambushed in 1948.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/cassuto-umberto>

## ***Informed Bible Readers Guide #001***

Cassuto was one of the first scholars who understood the importance of the archaeological finds from Ugarit in Syria, and the similarity between the Ugaritic literature and the Bible. His Ugaritic studies thus throw considerable light on the literary structure and vocabulary exegesis of the Bible. His treatise *The Goddess Anath* (1951), a translation with introduction and commentary of Ugaritic texts, particularly “*the epic of Baal*,” is of special importance. Other important works are “*The Divine Name El in Ancient Israel*,” (1932); “*The Texts of Ras Shamra*” (1935–37); and “*The Three Alephs of the Ugaritic alphabet*” (1947).<sup>3</sup> Below are Cassuto’s words with highlights I added.

The first chapters of the *Book of Genesis*, which form the subject of this commentary, deal with topics about which there were numerous sagas in the ancient East, both among the Israelites and among the Gentiles. **Hence, it is not possible to understand the purpose of the Torah in these chapters without constant reference to the lore and learning, the doctrines and traditions, of the neighboring peoples, and of Israel itself, concerning these and I related matters.** For this reason, **I paid greater attention than earlier commentators to the literature of the nations of the ancient East and to all the archaeological data that might possibly throw light on the subject.**

Seeing that **this is the first commentary ever written on these sections of the Pentateuch in accordance with the principles that I have outlined above . . .** it follows that **my exposition is, in its entirety, completely new and original.** I have taken constant care, however, **to avoid any hypotheses that are not well-founded.** I have **endeavored throughout not to forsake the firm basis of the facts; I did not bend the Bible to make it fit in with my theories,** but rather **fitted my theories to the Biblical text.**<sup>4</sup>

It is very clear that Cassuto shared the two goals I stated above. By the way, he wrote his first commentary on Genesis shortly before I was born.<sup>5</sup>

**Nahum Mattathias Sarna** (1923– 2005) moved briefly to postwar Israel (1949), but because conditions there were not favorable for serious study, Sarna came to Dropsie College in Philadelphia and completed his Ph.D. (1955) under Cyrus Gordon. Sarna taught at Gratz College in Philadelphia (1951–57) and between 1957 and 1965 Sarna served at the Jewish Theological Seminary as librarian (1957–63) and as associate

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/cassuto-umberto>

<sup>4</sup> *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis Part One: From Adam to Noah* by U. Cassuto © 1944; (reprinted 1986 by The Magnes Press), The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel; pp. 1, 3.

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umberto\\_Cassuto](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umberto_Cassuto)

professor of Bible. Next he moved to Brandeis University as Golding Professor, and served in that chair from 1965 to 1985. Also, between 1966 and 1981 Sarna was a member of the committee that translated the last section of the Jewish Bible (*Ketuvim*, or Writings) for the *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* of the Jewish Publication Society (1982).

**Sarna successfully employed both ancient Near Eastern material and the traditional Jewish sources to illuminate the Bible.** He also pioneered in "**inner biblical interpretation**," showing how biblical writers often interpreted and reinterpreted each other. In a very active retirement, Sarna edited the JPS Torah Commentary, for which he wrote the volumes *Genesis* (1989), and *Exodus* (1991). Below are Sarna's words:

To successfully understand the biblical narrative, it has to be viewed against the background of the world out of which it grew and against which it reacted. A comparison with Near Eastern cosmologies shows the degree of indebtedness of the Israelite version to literary precedent.<sup>6</sup>

Now I will show you how I use quotes from Cassuto and Sarna to "Get into the Ancient Mindset."

1. Before I read the words in Genesis, I visualize having these two great teachers sitting beside me. How would that influence the way I viewed the Hebrew text?
2. I read the following quotes from them.

*"The purpose of this section is to teach us that the whole world and all that it contains were created by the word of the One God, according to His will, which operates without restraint" (Cassuto).*

*"This story tells us something about the biblical concept of reality. It proclaims the essential goodness of life and assumes a universal moral order governing human society" (Sarna).*

3. When I open the Bible to the first story in Genesis, my goals are to discover: (1) **How the whole world and all that it contains were created by the word of the One God, according to His will, which operates without restraint**; and (2) **The essential goodness of life and the universal moral order governing human society**.

**BHC**

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/sarna-nahum-m>