

Part I
Ancient Israel

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What Is the Hebrew Bible?

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The Hebrew Bible is a collection that contains 24 or 39 books, depending on whether the Minor Prophets are counted as one book (“the book of the 12”) or 12, and whether 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah are counted as one book each, as in the earliest Hebrew editions, or as two, as in Greek versions. Ancient Jewish texts designate these *kitvey (ha)qodesh* (holy writings) and *miqra*. The latter term comes from the root *qr* (“proclaim,” hence, “read”), which also underlies the Arabic word “*qur’an*” and reflects these books’ liturgical use. Medieval Jews spoke of the collection as *Esrim ve-Arba* (“the 24”). More recently, the term “*TaNaKh*,” an acronym based on the Hebrew names of its three sections – *Torah* (“law” or “instruction”), *Nevi’im* (“prophets”), and *Ketuvim* (“writings”) – has become popular.

Christians call these books the Old Testament. Ancient church leaders based that phrase on Jeremiah’s prophecy that the Israelites’ violation of their covenant with God would lead to the institution of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34). The term itself reflects the Christian belief that the traditional Jewish canon is preparatory for the distinctively Christian writings which are called the *New Testament*. Modern thinkers have struggled to find a theologically neutral term that avoids such supersessionist implications and can, therefore, be shared by all religious groups. However, it has proven difficult to find a universally acceptable name. For Christians, the term “*Bible*” includes the *New Testament* books, which Jews obviously don’t recognize, while various compounds, such as “*Hebrew Scriptures*,” “*First Testament*,” and the like, all imply that these books are part of a larger whole of one sort or another. “*Hebrew Bible*” is probably the most widely accepted term, although parts of Daniel (2:4–7:28) and Ezra (4:6–6:18 and 7:12–26) are actually in Aramaic, as are one sentence in Jeremiah (10:11) and two words in Genesis (31:47).

The Jewish tripartite division goes back to antiquity. It is mentioned in the prologue to the Wisdom of Ben Sirah (Ecclesiasticus), which the author's grandson added when he translated that book from Hebrew into Greek towards the end of the second century BCE, as well as in the last chapter of the Gospel according to Luke (24:44), which was composed nearly two centuries later. There may also be an allusion to the tripartite division in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The first section of the Bible (Torah) is also referred to as "the Pentateuch" (lit. "five books"), a term that originated in the second century CE. It includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The literal meaning of the word "torah" is "instruction." During the biblical period that was considered the province of priests (cf. Jeremiah 18:18 and Ezekiel 7:26, where God's word is relegated to prophets), who provided *torot* regarding a variety of different kinds of issues. However, since antiquity it has often been translated "law." That concept has tendentious overtones for both Christians and Jews. Whereas Jews have generally seen the commandments (*mitzvot*) as the Pentateuch's primary content, Christian tradition has often viewed those regulations negatively, frequently contrasting law to spirit. The Jewish emphasis on law has, in turn, raised questions about the purpose of the stories which fill the pages of Genesis and the first half of Exodus. Among the most memorable explanations is that of the medieval commentator Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi), who explained that these are included in order to justify God's allowing the Israelites to conquer the land previously occupied by the Canaanites. That implies that God could also take that land away, as actually happened when the Israelite kingdoms fell to Assyria and Babylonia in the eighth and sixth centuries.

By the first century, all five of these books had come to be attributed to Moses, even though he is never mentioned in Genesis, which relates events that took place prior to his birth, and Deuteronomy, which ends with an account of his death. After describing the creation of the universe and a worldwide flood, this section of the Bible quickly focuses on the history of the ancient Israelites, who originated as a semi-nomadic tribe that migrated from Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan; soon after, they were enslaved in Egypt from which they subsequently escaped. The bulk of the Torah then details the regulations which God gave the Israelites while they traveled through the Sinai desert; these constitute the body of the covenant He established with them in anticipation of their settlement as a nation.

That process is described in the next several books, which are often called the Former Prophets. They begin with an account of the Israelite conquest of the land of Canaan (Joshua), followed by their settlement and establishment of borders (Judges), and the creation of a nation that came to be ruled by David and his son Solomon (1–2 Samuel). After Solomon's death, the kingdom split. The northern half (Israel) endured for two centuries before falling to the Assyrians; a little more than a hundred years later the southern half (Judah) was conquered by the Babylonians (1–2 Kings).

These books are followed by the Latter Prophets, which contains extensive collections attributed to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (the “Major Prophets”) along with 12 much shorter works (hence the “Minor Prophets,” also known as “the Twelve”). The books in each of these latter two groups are arranged in roughly chronological order.

The prophets were distinctive figures, who communicated God’s expectations and promises to the people of Israel. Although the Bible tells of others, such as Samuel and Nathan who were also called prophets, those whose teachings are preserved in books bearing their names were active from the period when the nation was split into two halves through the return from exile in Babylonia. Their message rests on the concept of God’s covenant with the people of Israel. The prophets who lived while the kingdom still existed emphasized His concern that the people abide by its provisions, particularly His expectation that they be loyal to Him and conduct their affairs in a socially just way. Those who preached later cited its promises as a form of consolation.

The final section (Writings) comprises poetic and didactic works (Psalms, Proverbs, Job), followed by five books (“The Five Scrolls”) that are arranged in the order of the Jewish holidays on which they are traditionally read (Song of Songs for Passover, Ruth for Shavuot, Lamentations for the ninth of Av, Ecclesiastes for Sukkot, and Esther for Purim). The Jewish arrangement concludes with several books (Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1–2 Chronicles) that focus largely on Jewish life during the Babylonian exile and into the following period of Persian dominance.

The Christian Old Testament originally included several books, such as 1–2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, and the Wisdom of Ben Sirah (Ecclesiasticus), that are not in the Jewish Bible. These are included in Catholic editions, but were rejected by Protestant churches, which called them the Apocrypha (literally “hidden”), a term first used by the Church Father Jerome (about 400 CE). Roman Catholic editions of Daniel and Esther are also larger than their Jewish (and Protestant) counterparts; these expansions are included in editions of the Apocrypha under the titles Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, and the Additions to Esther. Various Eastern churches have even more books in their Bibles; these are now generally referred to as pseud-epigrapha (lit. “false writings”). That term was originally chosen because several of these books present themselves as being the product of ancient heroes such as Enoch and Solomon rather than their actual authors. However, not all the books included in this category do so (e.g., Jubilees and 3–4 Maccabees), nor did these ever constitute an explicitly defined collection.

Christian Bibles also arrange their contents differently than Jewish editions, grouping books by genre, with the historical books, including Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, first, followed by poetic and didactic works, and finally prophetic books. In this configuration, Ruth is placed alongside the book of Judges, since it opens with the pronouncement that it describes events which took place “at the time that the judges judged,” Lamentations comes after Jeremiah, to whom it was traditionally attributed, and Daniel is included among the prophetic books

which are found at the very end. As a result, the Christian Old Testament begins with the creation of the world and culminates with the prophet Malachi's anticipation of Elijah's return to usher in the day of the Lord (Malachi 3:23), an allusion to the significance of the New Testament books.

The structure of the Jewish Bible also rests on a religious foundation. Both the second (Prophets) and the third (Writings) sections begin with references to Torah study (Joshua 1:8 and Psalms 1:2), and all three sections close with the people of Israel on the brink of hope, whether to enter the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 34), achieve redemption at the time of Elijah's return (Malachi 3:23), or anticipating their return to their homeland and the reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple (2 Chronicles 36:22–23).

None of the biblical books, with the possible exception of Deuteronomy, was written with the intention of being part of Scripture, a concept which only began to emerge towards the end of the biblical period. Most scholars regard the Jewish arrangement as the result of the historical process whereby the various biblical books came to be considered holy and authoritative ("canonization"). According to this view, that took place in three stages: First, the Torah was recognized by the time that the exiled Judeans returned to their land in the fifth century BCE. The Prophets, which are mentioned in the *Wisdom of Ben Sirah*, were added no later than the second century. Finally, the Writings were accepted by the end of the first Christian century, when rabbinic sources describe debates about them as having taken place. This theory is able to explain why Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles are in the Writings section rather than the Prophets, which contains similar works but was presumably closed by the time these books were accepted as part of the sacred corpus.

Several scholars have recently challenged this view, pointing out ancient sources which mention a two-part canon, divided into Mosaic (the Pentateuch) and non-Mosaic books. In their view, the different arrangements are the result of separate canonizing processes within the Jewish and Christian communities rather than a reflection of the historical stages in which these books came to be regarded as sacred. However it came to pass, the process of canonization was clearly complex. It is even possible that the recognition of these books' authority took place separately from that involving their sanctity.

Virtually all the individual books which make up our Bibles are now thought to be composite. That is self-evident for books such as Psalms and Proverbs. The former is even divided into five "books" (Psalms 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, 107–150), while various sections of the latter are explicitly attributed to different sources (thus Proverbs 25:1 "the proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, copied"; Proverbs 30:1 "the words of Agur, son of Jakeh"; Proverbs 31:1 "the words of Lemuel, king of Massah"). It is equally apparent in the way some passages are repeated in different parts of the Bible; for example, the genealogies at the beginning of Chronicles replicate material found in Genesis, and the famous vision of swords turning into plowshares is included in both Isaiah (2:2–4) and

Micah (4:1–3). Such repetition can even occur within a single book, as in the case of Psalm 14, which is virtually identical with Psalm 53.

The rabbis suggested in the Babylonian Talmud (Gittin 60a) that the Torah had been revealed piecemeal; they also acknowledged the presence of contradictions between Ezekiel and the Pentateuch as well as others within the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Early Church leaders also recognized inconsistencies between parts of the Bible, albeit most often within the New Testament, as well as differences between the Jewish and Christian editions of the Hebrew Bible. In the Middle Ages, Moses ibn Gikatilla suggested that Isaiah 40–66 was written long after the first part of the book; today other sections are also attributed to later hands.

The authors of later biblical books seem to have been aware of discrepancies between earlier works, which they tried to reconcile. For example, the book of Chronicles' statement that Elhanan had killed Goliath's brother (1 Chronicles 20:5) appears to be an effort to resolve the inconsistency between 2 Samuel's assertion that Elhanan had killed Goliath (21:19) with 1 Samuel's attribution of that act to David (17:48–51). Similarly, Chronicles' peculiar report about the Passover offering being boiled in fire during the reign of Josiah in accordance with Moses' book (2 Chronicles 35:12–13) combines Exodus' command that the Passover offering be roasted (12:9) with Deuteronomy's insistence that it be boiled (16:7).

The likelihood that biblical books were woven together out of several sources accounts for the presence of diverse literary genres within individual books, such as law and narrative in Exodus or oracles and biography in Jeremiah. At the same time, it means that their literary artistry is not the product of their authors alone, but also the result of the editors who were responsible for their final form. The two stories of creation with which the book of Genesis opens are a useful example. They are stylistically and theologically distinct, focusing on different components of that process and using different terms for God. However, their juxtaposition presents an image of God as concerned with *both* human beings and the cosmos as a whole. That is a significant point for a book that centers on the history of a small, ancient nation. By beginning their account of Israel's history with the creation of the world, the biblical editors presented it as one chapter of universal history and God's treatment of them as His way of addressing cosmic issues.

Modern scholarship has devoted an immense amount of effort to disentangling the strands out of which individual books were constructed in order to comprehend the process of their composition. Differences in vocabulary and grammar in various parts of the Bible reflect both the periods and the geographical regions in which they were written down. Most scholars consider the songs of Moses (Exodus 15) and of Deborah (Judges 5), which were probably composed before the nation was established, to be the oldest parts of the Bible and the book of Daniel, which was finished a thousand years later, to be the last.

Awareness of changes in style and language has provided especially valuable insights, making it possible to reconstruct the development of Israelite culture and

religion. For example, the Passover holiday, which probably originated as a fertility festival, came to be viewed as the anniversary of the Israelites' escape from Egyptian slavery. Although originally celebrated in individual families (Exodus 12), its observance was later centralized at the Jerusalem temple (Deuteronomy 12 and 2 Kings 23:21–23). Legal principles also changed over time, as when the law calling for male slaves to be released after six years of service (Exodus 21:2,7) was broadened to include females (Deuteronomy 15:12). Even theological concepts underwent a process of development, with Israel's originally tribal warrior God (e.g., Exodus 15:1–7) becoming the only God in the universe (Isaiah 44:6–8). Likewise, the ancient concept of collective responsibility (e.g., Exodus 20:4–6), as encapsulated in the proverb “The ancestors have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are blunted,” was rejected by the prophet Ezekiel, who insisted that “the person who sins – that is the one who will die” (18:2–4).

Modern archeological discoveries have greatly enhanced our appreciation of the Bible, demonstrating the extent to which Israelite culture and beliefs were at home in the ancient Near East. Our understanding of ancient Hebrew words and Israelite customs has been immeasurably enriched by what we have learned about its neighbors over the past century and a half. Similarities between Pentateuchal laws and those found in the so-called Mesopotamian codes, such as the one attributed to Hammurabi, are probably the most famous although the differences can be every bit as illuminating. For example, both traditions use a goring ox to exemplify the principle of an owner's responsibility for his animals' actions; however, only in Israel is the animal itself punished (Exodus 21:28–32). On the other hand, female officials play more visible roles in other ancient Near Eastern cultures than in biblical rituals.

Myths preserved in the writings of several ancient Near Eastern cultures demonstrate the extent to which Israelite authors drew from these traditions. The famous Epic of Gilgamesh, which was discovered in the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, includes a story that is very similar to the Bible's account of a worldwide flood. However, the two differ in key regards, such as the hero's name (Utnapishtim rather than Noah). The Mesopotamian deities' fear of the floodwaters also stands in marked contrast to the Israelite God's complete control over nature as well as the moral basis for His actions.

Excavations at Ras Shamra, located near the Mediterranean coast of modern Syria, uncovered myths from the ancient city of Ugarit that describe extensive conflicts among various gods. Among these are Yamm, the god of the sea, and Baal, a Canaanite god whom the Bible accuses the Israelites of having worshipped. Similar ideas may have influenced Israelite descriptions of God's battle against the primordial waters (cf. Psalms 93:3–4), the description of historical events such as the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14–15), and even attitudes towards Jerusalem (cf. Psalm 48).

Much of the Bible conforms to ancient literary genres. The book of Proverbs contains teachings and ideas that resemble those of Near Eastern wisdom traditions.

One section (22:17–24:22) may even have been drawn from the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope. This tradition emphasized the orderliness of the universe. The books of Job and Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) drew on human experience to challenge that idea.

Deuteronomy is constructed on the pattern of ancient vassal treaties, which typically begin by identifying the more powerful king and his gracious acts before enumerating what was expected from his vassal. Recognition of that structure has opened the door to valuable insights into the Bible's ideology: just as vassal treaties were agreements between two unequal parties, offering protection to one in return for support from the other, so the book of Deuteronomy demands Israelite loyalty to God in return for His protection.

Biblical poetry incorporates stylistic features that were common in ancient Canaan. For example, successive lines often repeat ideas using different words but the same syntactic structure, a device called parallelism. Traces of this phenomenon are also found in biblical narrative, as when the book of Genesis introduces the story of the flood with the observation that "The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness" (6:11). It also occurs in legal passages, such as the commandment to observe the Passover, which begins, "This month shall be for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you" (Exodus 12:2).

Biblical prose also uses repetition stylistically, reiterating words (*Leitwörter*) in order to draw attention to important ideas. Thus, the root *rmh* ("deceive") occurs several times in the stories about Jacob (Genesis 27:35 and 29:25) in order to emphasize the nature of his behavior, just as words containing the consonants *y-r-h* appear often in the story of the binding of Isaac – e.g., *Moriah*, *yr'* ("fear"), *r'h* ("see"), and *har* ("mountain") – presumably to imply that passage's connection with Jerusalem (*Yerushalayim*, cf. 2 Chronicles 3:1).

Biblical narrators sometimes use standardized literary motifs in order to create expectations in their readers. For example, the appearance of a woman at a well signals that she will become the hero's mate (Genesis 24:10–20 and Exodus 2:16–21), just as the introduction of siblings as older and younger often foreshadows the latter's eventual ascension over the former.

Biblical narrative style is often succinct. The book of Genesis recounts the Tower of Babel story in just nine verses and Abraham's effort to sacrifice his son Isaac in fewer than twenty. However, authors were fully capable of providing profuse detail. In accordance with ancient Near Eastern stylistic convention, the instructions for constructing the desert tabernacle (Exodus 25–31) are followed by a report of their being carried out (Exodus 35–40) in which many elements are repeated nearly verbatim. Later generations of Christians and Jews exploited these characteristics, justifying apparent redundancies as referring to different ideas, providing names for characters that are anonymous in the Bible, and telling stories about events that took place during periods of time that the biblical account skimmed over. Many of these link later beliefs and practices, such as the coming

of the messiah or the separation of milk and meat, to the biblical text, demonstrating the Bible's importance for later religious communities. Recent scholarship has devoted substantial attention to the history of these interpretations in recognition of the importance of the Bible's role to later generations, even when that has been based on ideas that differ from the original meaning. The process of interpretation had already begun in biblical times. For example, Hosea speaks of Jacob's wrestling with an angel (Hosea 12:5), even though Genesis initially identifies his antagonist as a man (Genesis 32:25) before later claiming that he had fought both divine and human beings (32:29). Similarly, the headings that identify the events in David's life which led to the composition of individual psalms (Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 57, 60, 63, and 142) are probably late efforts to provide historical settings for originally liturgical works.

After centuries of attention to the Bible's literary fissures, recent scholarship now focuses on the elements which bind even composite books, such as Isaiah, together. For example, the Minor Prophets are increasingly studied as a single unit ("the book of the 12") in order to identify their shared features and the editorial processes which led to their final collection. In that same spirit, scholars also note relationships between various parts of the Bible (intertextuality). For example, the instructions for constructing the tabernacle (Exodus 39–40) echo the final stage of creation (Genesis 1:31–2:3), and royal psalms play on concepts found in various historical books (cf. Psalm 89 and 2 Samuel 7). One outcome of that approach has been important insights into themes and perspectives which pervade multiple books, revealing evidence of wisdom influence and Deuteronomistic ideology in works as varied as Jeremiah and Esther.

The oldest existing copies of biblical books are those that were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, where they constitute about a quarter of the texts that were discovered in the middle of the last century, though it took nearly fifty years for them to be fully published. These copies were written during the last few pre-Christian centuries; however, it is difficult to ascertain which of these books were regarded as scriptural, especially since that collection also included works such as Tobit, Ben Sirah, Enoch, and Jubilees, which are part of the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. Although none of these is the original (autograph) text, they do provide a window into what these books looked like during the period of the Maccabees and the centuries preceding Jesus. One of the most striking features of these copies is their lack of uniformity. Some are similar to our own Hebrew edition, which was collated by medieval Jewish textual scholars known as Masoretes. Others match the edition of the Pentateuch that was preserved by the Samaritan sect or the presumed Hebrew originals (*Vorlagen*) from which the ancient Greek and Aramaic translations were made. Remarkably, in those cases where several copies of the same book were found at Qumran, they do not always conform to a single type. That suggests that the text of the Bible had not been standardized at the time these were written. More astounding is the fact that the

conservative, pious group which lived there apparently had no compunctions about including different editions of the same book in their library.

Other copies of biblical works were found in nearby caves that were inhabited by militants who fought against the Romans during the Jewish revolts that took place at the end of the first and the beginning of the second centuries CE. Unlike those from Qumran, these texts generally conform to what became the standard Hebrew edition of the Bible (the Masoretic text), suggesting that a process of standardization was underway in the first centuries of the Christian era.

That process eventually extended beyond the Bible's words. Ancient Hebrew was written with only consonants, making it impossible to be certain as to exactly how each word should be read. In order to avoid mistakes, the Masoretes developed systems for marking vowels and punctuation. Their efforts culminated in the establishment of a reading system which became normative when the great medieval sage Moses Maimonides endorsed a ninth-century manuscript of the Bible that had been produced by the Ben-Asher family of Tiberias. Still, manuscripts diverged in both the biblical text and the order of the books, even as differences among Masoretic schools continued to be noted until the production of a Hebrew Bible at the Venetian printing press of Daniel Bomberg in the sixteenth century resulted in a widely accepted, standardized edition.

The Hebrew Bible as we know it today is, therefore, a compilation of writings from various parts of Israelite society that took shape over several millennia. During that time it was subjected to a wide array of influences, ranging from ancient Near Eastern mythology to the modern printing press. Its concept of a covenant between God and the people Israel is the basis for contemporary Judaism as well as the background for Christianity and an important influence on Islam, even though all three religions subsequently developed in ways that would be barely recognizable to the characters whose words it contains.

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