

THE TEXTS

Increasingly in the Intertestamental Period, the Jewish community became people of the book. In their long history, they already were steeped in the traditional values of the Torah and the other books in the Hebrew Bible. Now, however, they were obliged to make those values relevant in a world much different than that of their ancestors. With the rise of synagogues as places for study and discussion, the texts of the Hebrew Bible took on a more prominent role than previously. Since each synagogue would have had their own copies of scrolls, accessibility to these texts along with an increase in literacy served to make the Hebrew Bible the center of focus for religious life.

Canon of the Hebrew Bible

The canonization of the Hebrew Bible (for Christians, the Old Testament) was more a process than an event, which should not be too surprising, since the various texts were composed over a period of a thousand years. It is fair to say that the canon of the Hebrew Bible was informally accepted and in use well before the time of Christ.

The Hebrew Bible itself does not directly address the issue of when and how canonization took place, but this process can be extrapolated from various ancient historical sources. Jewish traditions, which developed in the period before Christ (and sometimes were accepted by Christians as well), held that the sacred writings of the Hebrew Scriptures, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians, were supernaturally recalled in their entirety by Ezra (2 Esdras 14:37-45) and/or collected by Nehemiah and others (2 Mac. 2:13-14). A group called the Great Synagogue, allegedly under the directorship of Ezra, was believed to have established the Hebrew Canon (*Baba Bathra* 14b-15a). This more or less legendary view, widely accepted until the end of the 19th century, can no longer be upheld. Rather, the Hebrew canon seems to have been recognized in a more progressive way, with several crucial historical junctures. Even within the Hebrew Bible certain important recognitions occurred that approximate what we mean by “canon,” and these can be traced in the three primary divisions of the Hebrew Bible. The law of Moses was delivered to the Levites for public reading every seven years (Dt. 31:9-11), and this same law was passed from the era of Moses to succeeding generations (Jos. 1:7-8; cf. 8:31; 23:6). By the time of the Israelite monarchy, the Mosaic code was the official rule (1 Kg. 2:3). Though it was frequently disobeyed (2 Kg. 14:6; 21:8), and at least some portion of it was lost (probably Deuteronomy) and eventually rediscovered (2 Kg. 22:8ff.), the Torah remained the recognized standard for Israelite faith and conduct.

THE WORD “CANON”

The word “canon” derives from a Greek word (κανών) meaning “rule” or “measuring stick.” Theologically, it has come to refer to those writings which a religious community consider sacred and authoritative. For Jews, the canon is comprised of the 24 books in the Hebrew Bible. For Christians, it includes both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and for Catholic and Orthodox Christians, it also includes the Apocrypha.

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THE DIVISIONS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

The Hebrew Bible, while it contains the same contents as the Old Testament, was arranged somewhat differently than our English Bibles into a threefold division. This division was first recognized as early as 132 BC in the Prologue to Sirach, where there is described "the law, the prophets, and the other books." This threefold division is as follows:

The Law (Torah):

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

The Prophets (Neviim):

Former Prophets: *Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1 and 2 Samuel) and Kings (1 and 2 Kings)*

Latter Prophets: *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)*

The Writings (Kethubim):

Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Five Rolls (Song, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, Ecclesiastes), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles)

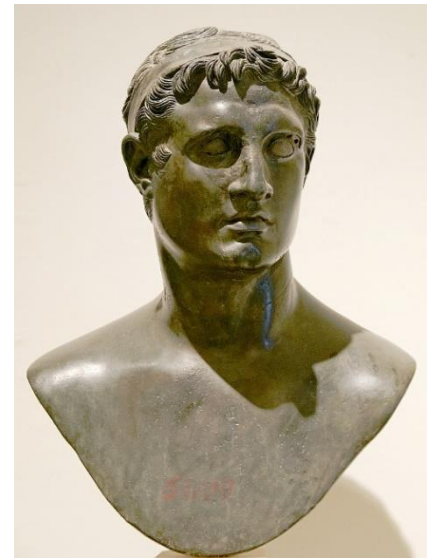
The first two collections in the Hebrew Bible, called the **Law** and the **Prophets**, as well as the majority of books in the third collection, called the **Writings**, were recognized well before the Christian era (Prologue to Sirach; Sir. 49:4-10). Jesus himself refers to these same three sections (Lk. 11:50-51; 24:44).¹ So, also, does the 1st century Jewish historian, Josephus,² and the 1st century Alexandrian Jewish scholar, Philo.³ The "law and the prophets," a phrase familiar from the New Testament (e.g., Mt. 7:12; Ro. 3:21, etc.), seems to refer to the first two sections as fixed collections.

A theory bearing on the canon of the Old Testament is that purportedly a Jewish council of rabbis met at Jamnia in the late first century AD to finalize the development of the canon. This theory, deduced from secondary sources, was that the Jamnia conclusion reaffirmed the canonical status of the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible. Historians debate whether or not such a council even occurred, and a number of scholars argue that the Hebrew canon was fixed much earlier, during the time of the Hasmoneans (140-40 BC). In any case, it seems clear that prior to the time of Jesus, the Hebrew Canon was fixed in 24

books (which, after allowing for some alternative subdivisions, is exactly the same as the Christian Old Testament).

The Septuagint

Another important text was produced in Alexandria, Egypt, where there was a large Jewish settlement. It was the vision of the Egyptian Hellenistic ruler Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-246 BC) to have all the most important literary works in the world collected into a Great Library, and this included the Hebrew Bible. To this end, some 72 Jewish scholars in Alexandria were invited to translate the Hebrew scrolls into Greek, and the work



*Bust of Ptolemy II
Philadelphus*

¹ In Lk. 11:50-51, the murder of Abel (which is described in Genesis 4, the first book of the Torah) and the martyrdom of Zechariah (which is briefly described in 2 Chronicles 24:20-21, the last book of the Writings) seem to be inclusive of the whole. In Lk. 24:44, Jesus speaks of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms, which are clearly recognizable, the Psalms being the first book in the third section called the Writings and probably used representatively for the whole.

² *Against Apion*, I.8.

³ *De Vita Contemplative*, III.25.

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From the LXX, Leviticus, late 2nd century AD, the oldest manuscript of this part of the Bible

began in about 250 BC.⁴ While there appears to be a good deal of legend surrounding this effort, the fact remains that the translation was made, beginning with the Torah and including the books of the Prophets and the Writings along with the Apocrypha (the latter collection was already in Greek).

This translation, called the Septuagint (= LXX), would become the basic Bible of Diaspora Jews in the Greek-speaking world. Later, it would be the Old Testament of the earliest Christians. When James in Jerusalem's first council remarked that "Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath" (Ac. 15:21), he almost certainly was referring to the Septuagint.

The Jews would eventually reject the LXX as an official Bible when it became clear that it was the favorite "Bible" of the Christians.

The Apocrypha

The books that Josephus describes as concerning Jewish history "but have not been esteemed of the like authority with the former [canonical books], because there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time"⁵ is a collection of works commonly called the Apocrypha (= hidden). These books appear in the Septuagint (Jewish), and later, the Latin Vulgate (Christian), but were not included in the Jewish canon. However, they are recognized as canonical for Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, Catholics referring to them as Deutero-Canonical (= second canon) and the Orthodox referring to them as *Anaginoskomena* (= books worthy to be read).⁶

Since the early Christian church used the LXX as their version of Holy Scripture in the Greek-speaking world, books from the Apocrypha were also used for public reading. Some early Christian leaders recognized various apocryphal books as canonical, while others viewed them as noncanonical. This ambivalence about the Apocrypha continued until the Protestant Reformation, when the Reformers treated the Apocrypha as noncanonical as a whole, though they continued to print the apocryphal

⁴ Letter of Aristeas

⁵ *Against Apion* 1:8.

⁶ In Roman Catholic Bibles, the following apocryphal books are included as part of the Old Testament canon: Tobit and Judith (following Nehemiah), Additions to Esther (appended to the end of Esther), 1 and 2 Maccabees (following Esther), Wisdom of Solomon (following the Song of Solomon), Sirach (following Wisdom of Solomon), Baruch (following Lamentations), Song of the Three Holy Men (inserted between Daniel 3:23 and 3:24), Susanna (attached as chapter 13 of Daniel), and Bel and the Dragon (attached as chapter 14 of Daniel). The full canonical status of these apocryphal books was not official in the Roman Church until the Council of Trent (1546). Eastern Orthodox churches recognize a somewhat longer apocryphal canon, also including 1 and 2 Esdras, Psalm 151 and 3 Maccabees. The canonical status of 4 Maccabees and the Prayer of Manasseh is debated.



This striking painting of Judith and her Maidservant by Artemisia Gentilechi (1593-1643) from the Detroit Institute of Arts is based on the story in the Book of Judith.

books between the Old and New Testaments in the major English translations, regarding them as having devotional value, at least until 1827, when they did so no longer due to the influence of the Puritans. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, accepted most of the apocryphal books into their canon, and they remain in the Roman Catholic canon today. The Eastern Orthodox Church also recognizes the canonical status of the Apocrypha.

The Pseudepigrapha

Yet another group of Jewish writings appeared in the late Intertestamental Period. This collection called the Pseudepigrapha is comprised of texts that were attributed (falsely) to Old Testament figures, such as, Adam, Abraham, Moses, etc. Though not considered canonical by either Jews or Christians (the only exception being that 1 Enoch is canonical for the Ethiopic Orthodox Church), they are significant for the background of Jewish thought. At least one of these works is directly quoted in the New Testament.⁷

The Samaritan Pentateuch

An alternative text of the Torah was produced by the Samaritans, probably following their separation from mainstream Judaism in the 4th century BC, though they claim that their version of the Pentateuch has a textual history going back to a copy originally made by Abishah, the great grandson of Aaron. Regardless, it constitutes an independent witness to the ancient text of the Torah. It contains the first five books of the Bible, but it has minor variations from the Hebrew Masoretic Text in about 6000 places (mostly grammatical or orthographic). Still, nearly a third of these variations agree with the LXX. The single major difference is theological and concerns the location of the temple. The Samaritan Pentateuch clearly indicates the temple was to be located on Mt. Gerizim in central Israel, not Mt. Zion in Jerusalem.

The Targums

A targum (= interpretation, translation) is a rendering of the Hebrew Bible in Aramaic, which became important near the end of the Intertestamental Period when the common language of the Jews in Palestine had become Aramaic. Targums tended to have more than just the texts of Scripture, however, for they also include paraphrases, explanations, and examples. Originally given only orally, they eventually were codified. The two most important written Targums are Targum Onkelos (Torah) and Targum Jonathan (Prophets).

⁷ Jude 14 quotes 1 Enoch 1:9, and several New Testament passages allude to other pseudepigraphic works.