

# Chapter 1

## What is the Old Testament?

Visitors to any of the great museums of the world will notice the contrast between the extensive displays of magnificent objects from ancient Egypt, ancient Syria, and ancient Mesopotamia, and those from ancient Israel, which are generally unimpressive and often difficult to find. Artistically, at least for museum curators, ancient Israel was a cultural backwater. Nothing from it is comparable to the tombs and temples of Egypt, the libraries and ziggurats of Babylon, or the glazed tiles and palaces of Persepolis.

Yet one artifact from ancient Israel has survived: its literature, commonly if somewhat controversially called the Old Testament. Prohibited according to an ancient law from making graven images, the Israelites channeled their creative energy into literary activity. Not that literature, even great literature, was exclusively an Israelite phenomenon in the ancient Near East—on the contrary, as we will see. But Israelite literature did not just survive; it became authoritative scripture in both Judaism and Christianity, and it has profoundly influenced and inspired believers, writers, artists, and musicians in the Western world and beyond.

In the literature of ancient Israel as preserved in the Old Testament, we encounter dozens of vividly drawn characters whose stories have been told over and over again, retelling that begins in

the pages of the Bible itself. We are also introduced to concepts that have profoundly shaped religious beliefs, social values, and political institutions over the centuries, concepts such as covenant, commandments, chosen people, Promised Land, and divinely chosen rulers. Both the characters and the concepts occur in the context of a sweeping narrative of divine activity in history, from creation to the end of the first millennium BCE.

One understanding of the Old Testament is that it is an anthology of the literature of ancient Israel and early Judaism, comparable in scope to anthologies of English literature. Like such anthologies, it is a selection of works from more than a thousand years, and like them too it contains many kinds of writing—in the Old Testament there are myths, historical narratives, prophecies, fiction, laws, instructions for rituals, proverbs, and hymns, to name just some.

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These kinds of writing are embedded in larger units called “books.” For the most part each book is a relatively self-contained unit, but sometimes the separation between books is arbitrary. For example, the beginning of the book of Judges continues the narrative from the end of the book of Joshua without any break, and the same is true of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, 2 Samuel and 1 Kings, and others. Within individual books, moreover, the genres are frequently mixed. The historical narratives in Genesis, for example, are sprinkled with both short and long poems, as well as with laws and accounts of rituals. Modern scholars have identified many more genres in Genesis, such as the novella in the Joseph story in chapters 37–50, myth in the first eleven chapters, genealogies, itineraries, lists, speeches, and so on. Thus, many of the books of the Old Testament, especially the longer ones, are also composites.

Modern scholars agree that the books of the Old Testament, and the parts that comprise them, were not written in the order in which they are now found but at various times over more than a thousand years. So, the Old Testament differs from standard anthologies of literature in an important way: the order of its first

dozen or so books is based on the chronology of their narrative rather than on when they and their component parts were written. It is as if one were to start an anthology of English literature with *Paradise Lost*, because that epic, although written by Milton in the seventeenth century, describes events at the beginning of the world (at least as Milton believed it to have been), and then continue the anthology with the rest of English literature arranged by the times in which the works are set: ancient Greece, as in the nineteenth-century poet Tennyson's "Ulysses"; ancient Rome, as in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* from the late sixteenth century; ancient Britain, as in the Arthurian legends from various periods; the Middle Ages, as in the thirteenth-century poet Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; and the like.

The Old Testament follows a consecutive narrative chronology from Genesis through 2 Kings, from the creation of the world to the exile of Jews to Babylon in the sixth century BCE. After that, however, the narrative chronology is essentially abandoned, and books and parts of books move back and forth within and beyond

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### Older books

Occasionally the Old Testament refers to other books. Thus, in Numbers 21:14, an excerpt of poetry is identified as coming from "The Book of the Wars of the LORD." Another collection of ancient poems was "The Book of the Upright," quoted in Joshua 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:18. Throughout the books of Kings and Chronicles there are repeated references to what seem to have been official royal records, including "The Book of the Acts of Solomon" and "The Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel." None of these ancient "books" has survived, but their mention shows that ancient Israelite literature was more extensive than that anthologized in the Old Testament.

that narrative framework. Some books of the Old Testament are arranged not chronologically but in descending order of length, as is also the case with other scriptures, such as the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament and the suras in the Qur'an. At other times their arrangement seems arbitrary, as differences in order for many of them in the oldest complete manuscripts from late antiquity and the Middle Ages show. Different religious communities also present the books in different orders.

## Different communities, different scriptures

A common explanation of the term Old Testament is that it is the first part of the Christian Bible. As usual in the study of religion, however, things are often more complicated than they first appear, and that definition needs to be clarified and even corrected.

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Christianity began as one of several subsets of Judaism in the first century CE. It quickly moved away from its parent in beliefs and practices, in part because many non-Jews also became Christians. But as in parent-child relationships, the separation was never complete. Early Christian writers accepted the Jewish scriptures as authoritative—there was not yet a “New” Testament, for they were still writing it. Discussing “sacred writings,” the second letter to Timothy describes them as “inspired by God and . . . useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:15–16). “Sacred writings” here means the Jewish scriptures, which at least since the early second century BCE had three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Under their Hebrew names, Torah, Neviim, and Ketuvim, these parts, abbreviated by the first letter of the names of each, eventually came to be called Tanak (also spelled Tanakh), a term Jews frequently use for the Bible.

The first part is the Torah, a word that means not only “law” but also “teaching” or “instruction.” It consists of the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Genesis opens with

accounts of Creation and the Flood, and continues with stories of the ancestors of the ancient Israelites: Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; and Jacob and Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah and their children. The remaining four books, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, continue the narrative of Genesis with the story of the Exodus, the escape of the descendants of Jacob from slavery in Egypt and their journey to the eastern border of the Promised Land. These four books cover a much shorter time than the many generations of Genesis. Their framework is the life of Moses, their principal human character: Moses's birth occurs in the second chapter of the book of Exodus, and his death and burial are described at the very end of Deuteronomy. Embedded in the narrative of these first five books of the Bible there are also hundreds of divinely given laws—hence the understanding of Torah as “law.”

The second part of the Jewish scriptures is the Prophets, divided into the Former and Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets consists of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. These books continue the narrative where the Torah ended, relating the Israelites' history in the Promised Land of Canaan, from their conquest of that land under Moses's successor Joshua, through the often troubled history of the kings of Israel, and finally to the loss of the land to the Babylonians in the early sixth century BCE. The Latter Prophets are the books named after individual prophets. There are the three “major” prophets, so called because of their length: the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and the twelve “minor” or shorter prophets: the books of Hosea through Malachi.

The third part of the Jewish scriptures, the Writings, is a collection of works in several different genres, a kind of anthology within the larger anthology that is the Bible. There is poetry of various kinds in the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations. There are reflections on the human condition in the book of Job, also mostly in poetry, and the book of Ecclesiastes.

There is historical fiction, as in the books of Ruth, Esther, and Daniel. The Writings also include historical narrative: the books of Chronicles cover the same chronological span as the Torah and Former Prophets, and conclude with the return from exile in Babylon in the second half of the sixth century BCE. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah continue this narrative, relating the history of the Jews in the late sixth and fifth centuries BCE.

By the end of the first century CE, these three parts—the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings—had become the Bible of ancient Judaism, its “sacred scriptures,” that is, writings believed to be divinely inspired and thus having a special authority. For Jews today, they are simply the Bible. Modern scholars often use the term Hebrew Bible to distinguish those books from the Christian Bible, which includes the New Testament as well, and also because the designation Old Testament, which was not used until the late second century CE, can be seen as pejorative, implying that the Jewish scriptures that comprise the “Old” Testament have apparently been superseded by the later writings that form the “New” Testament. But the term Hebrew Bible itself is something of a misnomer, since a few chapters of these scriptures are not in Hebrew, but rather in the closely related Semitic language of Aramaic.

Before the late first century CE various Jewish communities did not completely agree which books belonged to the category of sacred scripture. The Torah was fixed, as were the Prophets, but the Writings were more fluid. Other Jewish religious texts had been written toward the end of the biblical period and shortly thereafter, in the last two centuries BCE and the first century CE, and for some communities these writings were also scripture. One example is the book known as The Wisdom of Ben Sira (also called Sirach and Ecclesiasticus). Originally written in Hebrew around 200 BCE, this collection of proverbs and other poetry was translated into Greek in the late second century BCE by Ben Sira’s grandson, who, by the way in his preface, mentions the division of scripture into

three parts, “the Law, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books.” The Wisdom of Ben Sira was regarded by at least some Jewish communities as scripture and was revered well into the Middle Ages. For the most part, however, Jews have not considered it to be part of the Tanak.

## Canons

Stabilizing the contents of the Bible in what came to be called a canon, an official list of the authoritative books, was a gradual process. By the end of the first century CE there was considerable agreement among various Jewish groups on which books were scriptural, but the status of some books continued to be debated. Although we have no explicit account of the process, several criteria seem to have informed it. One was that the book be in Hebrew (or Aramaic). Many of the books considered scripture by Jews in the Hellenistic world had been written in Greek, or, like the Wisdom of Ben Sira, were originally written in Hebrew but more widely circulated in Greek translations. A second criterion had to do with date: for a writing to be considered canonical, it should have been written no later than the mid-fifth century BCE, the time of Ezra, the last of the individuals thought to have been directly inspired by God. Jewish authorities therefore included in their canon works such as the book of Daniel; although modern scholars have concluded that it was written in the second century BCE, the book has as its hero—and for parts even its narrator—the character Daniel, who is described as living in the sixth century BCE. The same is true of other books that modern scholars date later than the time of Ezra. The book of Ecclesiastes, although probably written no earlier than the fourth century BCE, is attributed to Solomon, who was king of Israel in the tenth century BCE, and the book of Esther, probably to be dated to the fourth century as well, is set in the early fifth century. Books such as the Wisdom of Ben Sira, on the other hand, were clearly much later, as both their authorship and their content showed.

Many other factors were involved in defining the canon, but these two, language and antiquity, seem to have been paramount. So the books of Judith, Tobit, the Wisdom of Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch, and the books of the Maccabees, along with some additions to the books of Daniel and Esther, were in the end not included in the Tanak.

Before the process of canonization in Judaism was complete, however, Christianity had already begun to take shape, and very soon most Christians were Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles. Early Christians, like some of their Jewish contemporaries in the Hellenistic world, accepted books such as the Wisdom of Ben Sira and Judith as scripture, and they were included in the Christian canon until the Reformation. It was then that Martin Luther (1483–1546), followed by other Reformers, decided that only the “Hebrew truth” should be part of the Christian Bible, and they limited their canon to those books found in the Tanak, the Hebrew Bible of Judaism. This conclusion was one that had earlier been implied by the great fifth-century CE Christian biblical scholar Jerome, who called these books Apocrypha, which literally means “hidden books” (although they were not really hidden), as opposed to the canonical books. Nevertheless, these books are still considered canonical by Roman Catholics and most Eastern Orthodox Christians; they are also called Deuterocanonical, in recognition of their somewhat ambiguous status.

The order of the books was another issue. The order of the books of the Torah was fixed by their narrative chronology, as were the Former Prophets. Until the Middle Ages, however, some Hebrew manuscripts included the book of Ruth among the Former Prophets, after the book of Judges, because it was set in the same period as that book. Eventually it was included among the Writings. The order of the books of the Latter Prophets also varied. Each of the longer books was apparently written on one scroll. In chronological order, the prophets for whom those books are named were Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, although again a different



1. A section of the book of Isaiah from one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in 1947. Dating to the second century BCE, it is the oldest complete manuscript of any book of the Bible. There are fifty-four columns on the parchment scroll; this one contains Isaiah 11:12–14:1. Each column is about ten inches high, and the entire scroll is about twenty-four feet long.

order was sometimes used. The Minor Prophets, Hosea through Malachi, also fit onto one scroll, and their order varied considerably. Within the Writings there was even more variation.

The early Christians believed that the Jewish scriptures in their entirety were a divinely revealed plan for the advent of Jesus, the Messiah—a plan, to be sure, that could not be deciphered until he had actually come. This was especially true of the Latter Prophets, and so from an early stage in Christian Bibles these books were placed last, immediately before the New Testament, which was seen as their fulfillment. That order is generally followed in modern Christian Bibles, although in many study Bibles the Apocrypha are inserted between the Prophets and the New Testament. There is a kind of theological logic in this rearranged order of the Jewish scriptures in Christian Bibles. The first part is a more or less continuous historical narrative dealing with the past—the books of Genesis through Esther (and, for some Christians, through the books of Maccabees). This sequence is followed by books that can be understood as dealing with the present: those concerned with the human condition, such as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (along with the apocryphal Wisdom of Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon), and the Song of Solomon, and with prayer, notably Psalms. Finally come the Prophets, thought to be about the future. Lamentations is included among the prophetic books, because the prophet Jeremiah was traditionally considered its author, as is the book of Daniel, probably because of the use of Daniel 7 by New Testament writers; in the Jewish canon both are grouped with the Writings.

The word *Bible* originally meant “book,” but the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament is not one book but many, an anthology of ancient Israelite and early Jewish religious writings. Different religious communities have different versions of this anthology, as well as different names for it. Jews and Protestant Christians have the same contents, although in a different order. Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians include in

their Old Testament other authentic Jewish religious writings, the Apocrypha or the Deuterocanonical books. The result is a complicated listing. (For a chart of the various canons of Judaism and Christianity, see the appendix.)

The processes of canon formation also have a significant implication: Despite naïve views to the contrary, the Bible was not handed down by God as a complete package but was the result of a series of decisions made over the course of centuries by the leaders of different religious groups, decisions concerning a variety of works written by many authors also over the course of centuries.