

JEWISH LITERACY
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Bible: Torah, Prophets & Writings

I. The Books of the Bible

- A. Bible as library rather than a single book
- B. Translations
 - 1. Original written in Hebrew without vowels (these were added in 7th century CE).
 - 2. *Septuagint*, translation of the Torah into Greek in the period 300-250 BCE. Remainder of Bible translated to Greek in the next 200 years.
 - 3. Translation to Aramaic (the *Targum*) also in this period
 - 4. Translation to Latin (the *Vulgate*) in the 4th century CE by St. Jerome.
 - 5. King James version in 1604-11.
- C. Hebrew Bible = Protestant Old Testament = Catholic OT – Apocrypha (see list, last page)

II. Torah – Meanings of the Word Torah

- A. Instruction, teaching, law
- B. Scroll
- C. First five books of the Bible (*Chumash, Pentatuch*)
- D. All of Jewish Sacred Literature

III. History of Torah

- A. Traditional: God dictated the Torah to Moses (1200 BCE) who wrote it down
- B. Scholarly understanding (called Biblical criticism) identifies at least 5 voices:
 - 1. “J” who refers to God as YHVH from which (mistakenly) became *Jehovah* and is translated as “Lord”. J is a storyteller whose characters are very human.
 - 2. “E” who refers to God as *Elohim* translated as “God”
 - 3. “P” the priestly author, concerned with ritual and religious observances, begettings, and genealogies and accounts, refers to God as *Elohim* and as *El Shaddai* (God Almighty).
 - 4. “H” a subsorce within P who wrote the Holiness Code of Lev. 19.
 - 5. “D” the author of the Book of Deuteronomy
- C. The Bible opens with a P narrative and shifts to J in Gen. 2:4.
- D. In II Kings 22:10, the “discovery” of the book of Deuteronomy is reported.
- E. The Torah is canonized (the word *canon* meant originally a carpenter’s rule, thus a standard of measurement) between 420 and 400 BCE.

IV. The Torah Scroll

- A. Written on the skin of a kosher animal using a quill of a kosher animal and special ink.
- B. Parchments are sewed with the dried sinews of a kosher animal.
- C. Takes a scribe about a year to write.
- D. Many scribes will immerse themselves in a *mikveh* each day they write. They recite special blessings before writing the name of God.
- E. The tradition of kissing the scroll is taken from the Song of Songs where Israel is a bride and God as represented by Torah her bridegroom.

V. A Quick Tour of the Bible

A. Torah

1. **Genesis:** Creation, Flood, Abraham, Joseph in Egypt
2. **Exodus:** Moses, plagues, exodus, Sinai, laws and stories
3. **Leviticus:** Ritual laws, sacrifice, dietary laws, the holiness code
4. **Numbers:** Wandering and whining for 38 years
5. **Deuteronomy:** Repetition of story, the Shema, death of Moses

B. Prophets (*Nevi'im*):

The prophets come to speak in the name of God (this is one reason Jews don't accept Jesus as prophet since he speaks in his own name) and remind the people of God's law. They don't reveal new truths but emphasize the old. In these writings the failings of the Jews are well documented (adding to their credibility).

1. **Joshua:** Probably originally part of the Torah, it describes the conquest of Canaan
2. **Judges:** More history, contains the folktale, Samson
3. **Samuel 1&2** (originally one book, divided because the Greek translation took twice as much room as the Hebrew): Kingships of Saul and David
4. **Kings 1&2** (also originally one book): Continues history until time of Babylonian captivity, split into two kingdoms (Judah and Israel), Elijah, destruction of the Temple and exile into Babylon
5. **Isaiah:** First Isaiah (Ch. 1-39) pre-exile; Second Isaiah (40-55) during exile, and Third Isaiah (56-66) post exilic. Introduces concept of Messiah.
6. **Jeremiah:** Condemnation of practices before exile combined with consolation that Israel will be rebuilt.
7. **Ezekiel:** Vision of God's throne, vision of the dry bones,
8. **12 Minor Prophets:** Minor only in the brevity of the books, not in their importance. Covers period from pre- to post-exile. Idea of social justice stressed, story of Jonah teaches God accepts repentance and gentiles are also God's children, Micah teaches that God requires "only to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)."

C. Holy Writings (*Ketuvim*) or *Hagiographa*:

Incorporated into the canon in 90 CE

1. **Psalms:** Lyric poetry, many attributed to David, many sung in the Temple by the Levites. 150 in all, longest book in the Bible. 23rd psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd..."
2. **Proverbs:** Practical rules for living, attributed to Solomon. Not only directed to Israel.
3. **Job:** Essay on theodicy (why is there evil and tragedy in the world, why do innocents suffer), rejects simplistic view of Torah. Bottom line, we can't completely understand God's ways.
4. **Song of Songs:** Erotic love poetry understood as an allegory of God's love for Israel. Read at Passover. God not mentioned.
5. **Ruth:** The prototypical conversion, the product of which will be King David and the Messiah. Read on *Shavuot*.
6. **Lamentations:** Lament for Judea and Jerusalem after destruction of Temple. Hebrew name, *Echah*, means "how?" Read on *Tisha b'Av*
7. **Ecclesiastes:** A search for life's meaning, attributed to King Solomon, called *Kohelet* in Hebrew. "Vanity of vanity, all is vanity (1:2). Bottom

- lines: enjoy life, work for something worthy, practice moderation, fear God and keep His commandments. Read on *Sukkot*.
8. **Esther:** The Purim story told without mentioning the name of God. Read at *Purim*. Written on a scroll or *megillah* (origin of the expression “the whole *megillah*.” – there are five *megillot* in the Bible.)
 9. **Daniel:** Story of exile, speaks of apocalyptic times (distant future, end of days) including immortality of the soul and resurrection of the dead. Only book in which angels have specific names (Michael and Gabriel) of angels. About a third of this book is written in Aramaic.
 10. **Ezra & Nehemiah:** Tells the story of the return to Jerusalem in 538 BCE and the adoption of religious reforms such as public reading of the Torah and prohibitions against intermarriage.
 11. **Chronicles 1&2:** A history written with religious and moral focus.
- D. Note that Chanukah is not in the Bible!

VI. Some Interesting Reading in the Bible

- A. The story of David and Bathsheba (II Samuel 11:1 - 12:24)
- B. Solomon’s wisdom (I Kings 3:5 - 28)
- C. Messianic prophesy (Isaiah 2:1-5)
- D. Virgin birth? -- Isaiah 7:14 (*ha-alma* as used in the text means “the young woman,” *bethulah* is the Hebrew word for “virgin”)
- E. A ‘light unto the nations’ (Isaiah 49:6)
- F. Justice and righteousness rather than sacrifices (Amos 5:21-27)
- G. 23rd Psalm. Note the shift from 3rd to 2nd person in verse 4 while in the valley of the shadow of death.
- H. Psalm 90:12 – “So teach us to number our days that we may get us a heart of wisdom.”
- I. Overview of the Book of Job. Job’s family destroyed, his response 1:20. Job’s friends sit *shivah* with him (2:13). Job refuses to abandon his faith (13:15). He demands a trial with God as Judge, Witness and Jury (13:20-23). God finally responds (38 - 41). Job concedes (42:1-6). God wants to punish Job’s friends but Job intervenes (42:7-9).
- J. On the 5 scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther):
 1. We read the 5 books of Moses and the 5 scrolls throughout the year.
 2. Of the story scrolls, the heroes are heroines.
 3. These are the 10 books which the *Midrash Rabbah* addresses.
- K. Song of Songs: 1:1-4; 1:12-2:10; 4:1-7; 5:2-8. Arthur Waskow suggests that this may be the new model for sacred sexuality since we have accomplished our Genesis task of being fruitful and multiplying and subduing the earth.
- L. Ruth is a very short, very readable book. Most famous portion is 1:16-17
- M. Ecclesiastes – for me, the most difficult book in the bible. Bottom line is 9:7-10.

Readings for Next Time

- Lotker: Chapter 3 (pp. 14-29)
- Handbook: 537-540