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The Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament

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What is traditionally known as the Old Testament is a collection of the main books that were regarded as sacred Scripture in Judaism by the last few centuries BCE. The majority were written in the kingdom of Judah (which later became the Persian province of Yehud) and indeed in its capital, Jerusalem, between the eighth and the second centuries. But there is material in the books that may be much older: some think that there are texts here that go back into the tenth or eleventh century and thus are older than Homer in Greece.[1] So far as actual manuscripts are concerned, the earliest are those found at Khirbet Qumran by the Dead Sea in the twentieth century, normally known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain at least fragments of almost all the biblical books. These manuscripts are in most cases no older than the first century BCE, and thereafter we have nothing before the great codices of the early Middle Ages, the Aleppo Codex and the Leningrad/St. Petersburg Codex. So whereas for the cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt we possess actual manuscripts from as far back as the third millennium BCE, in the case of the literature of ancient Israel we are dependent on much later texts. It is clear, however, that the contents of the books do in many cases go back into a much earlier period than the extant manuscripts.

The Old Testament is often rightly referred to as a library of books rather than a single book, since it consists of a large variety of texts of different kinds, reflecting different periods in the history of ancient Israel. Though there are stories in the early books that tell of leaders and heroes such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Joshua, it is not until the eleventh century at the earliest that we can really speak of Israel as a nation, under the reigns of David and Solomon: many biblical scholars think that even these figures are mostly legendary. After the

death of Solomon, in the mid-tenth century, "Israel" divided into two, the larger northern kingdom (known variously as Ephraim and, confusingly, Israel) and the smaller southern kingdom of Judah; these kingdoms continued to exist until the 720s, when the northern state was conquered by the Assyrians and became an Assyrian province, and the early sixth century, when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar and many of the population of Judah were deported to Mesopotamia. It is widely believed that many books in the Old Testament came into being during the eighth and seventh centuries: one or two, such as Hosea and Amos, in the north, but far more in the south, where Jerusalem was probably a center of scribal culture. The major ancient traditions about Moses and his predecessors, now in the Pentateuch ("five books of Moses"—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), may have begun to take shape during this period, though they were certainly also worked on after the exile.

The Babylonian Exile of the Judaeans never ended, in that there was a sizable Jewish presence in Mesopotamia from the sixth century onward; but nevertheless a substantial number of the exiles (or their descendents) succeeded in returning to the land once the Babylonians were conquered by the Persian king Cyrus, and Judah was reconstituted as a small Persian province under a native governor, so that Jewish life continued in the homeland. The sixth century, which was so disastrous politically for the Jews, was also an era in which writing seems to have flourished, with significant collections of prophetic texts such as parts of the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel taking shape, alongside a major edition of the history of Israel from the settlement under Joshua down to the exile itself, in what are usually called the "historical" books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings). The postexilic age also saw many important writings, with the collections Psalms and Proverbs (though parts of those books may be older), the book of Job, and large sections of the Pentateuch being written at this time.

In the fourth century Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire. Under him and his successors Jewish life continued quietly until the political upheavals of the second century, when Judaism began for the first time to be persecuted by the Syrian king Antiochus IV, provoking revolt by the freedom fighters known as the Maccabees. It is from this "Hellenistic" period, when Greek customs and thought began to make

inroads into Jewish life, that we have the book of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth in Hebrew) and the book of Daniel, as well as a number of what are nowadays often referred to as "Jewish novels," such as Ruth and Esther. Even more important, the Hellenistic age saw the codification of Jewish scripture into a coherent collection, so that something recognizable as the collection we now possess had come into being.

OLD TESTAMENT OR HEBREW BIBLE?

This book is called *The Hebrew Bible*, but so far I have freely used the term *Old Testament*, which is the name by which the collection of books just described is usually known in Western literary culture. It is obvious, however, that it is in origin a Christian term, since it contrasts with the "New Testament," which tells of the acts and words of Jesus in the Gospels and contains an account of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles, as well as early Christian letters and the book of Revelation. We first hear the Jewish scriptures described as books "of the old covenant" in the work of Bishop Melito of Sardis, who died about 190 CE. By this it is meant that God has entered into a new kind of relationship with the human race through Jesus Christ—the "new" covenant, as described in Hebrews 10; and the books of Jewish scripture are witnesses to his previous, or "old," covenant with his people in pre-Christian times. (*Testamentum* is simply the Latin translation of *covenant*.)

From a Christian perspective this would have seemed a merely factual point, but it is easy to see that from a Jewish point of view it might not sound so innocent. The Letter to the Hebrews describes the new covenant in Christ as superseding the old one, so that *old* is not just a temporal but in a sense an evaluative term: "He abolishes the first in order to establish the second" (Heb. 10:9); "In speaking of a 'new covenant,' he has made the old one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear" (Heb. 8:13). So in Christian usage, as heard, at least sometimes correctly, by Jews, *old* can have the sense of "superannuated," surpassed, superseded. Hence in modern times many Jews, and Christians sensitive to such matters, have come to think that the term *Old Testament* is somewhat anti-Jewish in tone. It is of course not common on Jewish lips anyway: Jews tend to refer to the collection simply as

"the Bible," since for them the "New Testament" is not part of their Bible anyway. (In Israeli universities people who teach the "Old Testament" are called professors of Bible, and the departments in which they work are called departments of Bible, entirely logically.)

In academic circles a popular response to this problem has been to call these books "the Hebrew Bible" (sometimes "the Hebrew Scriptures"). This avoids the problem of the "supersessionism" felt to be implicit in the term *Old Testament*. There are, however, at least three problems about it—not necessarily reasons not to adopt it but revealing, once probed, some important aspects of the books in question. First, "Hebrew Bible" is not strictly accurate, since parts of the collection are in fact in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. Second, "Old Testament" scholars have traditionally been very interested in the Greek and Latin translations of these books, which produces the odd result that there are "Hebrew Bible" scholars who in fact work mainly on Greek or Latin texts. And third, not all of what at least some Christians have included in their Old Testament is part of the scriptures of Judaism, and that includes some texts that never existed in Hebrew or even Aramaic but were in Greek from the beginning. We shall go on next to examine these difficulties.

Meanwhile, however, it is fair to note that the term *Hebrew Bible* does resolve the "supersessionist" difficulty, and in North America it is now the normal term of choice in academic discussion of the Bible. In Britain the usage is more patchy, but "Hebrew Bible" is gaining ground. Within the Christian churches "Old Testament" seems likely to persist on both sides of the Atlantic, though even in Christian liturgy some prefer to speak of "readings from the Hebrew Scriptures." The shift has slightly affected the term *New Testament*, too, since there is little point in that once the term *Old Testament* is abandoned; and it too can sound supersessionist. But there is as yet no agreed alternative. "Early Christian writings" is accurate but does not convey the sense of a fixed canon of texts that is implied in the term *New Testament*.

Some call the two parts of the Christian Bible the "First" and "Second" Testaments, which sounds suitably neutral from a religious perspective, though it is not clear why one should still use the word *Testament* at all in these formulations, given that the reference to two covenants has been abandoned. I think that it will be some time before there is any resolution of these issues. On the face of it the substitution of "Hebrew Bible"

for "Old Testament" seems easy and innocent, but as just pointed out it runs into a certain amount of difficulty once we start to think about it more carefully. The next three sections will explore the difficulty from the three points of view mentioned above: the language of the texts, the existence of ancient translations, and the question of the exact contents of the collection.

THE LANGUAGES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Most of the "Old Testament" is in Hebrew. Hebrew belongs to the Semitic family of languages, of which the major example in the modern world is Arabic, though there are other important Semitic languages still in use, such as Maltese and the various kinds of Ethiopic. There is a subgroup of Semitic languages called Northwest Semitic, and it is here that Hebrew belongs, along with now-defunct tongues such as Moabite, Phoenician, and Ugaritic. It is the local ancient language of the southern Levant, the area now containing the state of Israel and the Palestinian territories. Of course, Hebrew is not defunct but is the national language of Israel and is also spoken where there are groups of Israelis elsewhere in the world, such as in parts of the United States. Modern Hebrew is a deliberate revival of the ancient language, enriched with grammatical and syntactical borrowings from various European languages and vocabulary from all over the world. But Hebrew had not in fact totally died out even before modern Israel revived it. After the Bible was complete, some rabbis continued to write (and possibly to speak) Hebrew, in the form now known as Mishnaic Hebrew—that is, the language in which the Jewish collection of laws from the first few centuries CE known as the Mishnah is written. Throughout the Middle Ages there continued to be Hebrew speakers both in the land of Israel and in the diaspora communities of Mesopotamia—the descendents of the exiles from the sixth century—as well as in Egypt, where there had long been a Jewish community. Alongside this active use of later forms of Hebrew, the Bible has continued to be read and studied intensively in Hebrew. There has never been a time when Hebrew "died out."

Even within the Bible itself, however, there is some evidence that the Hebrew language developed over time. There are differences between

the main narrative books such as Samuel and Kings and the considerably later Chronicles, while Ecclesiastes (probably third century BCE) shows signs of changes that would become more apparent in Mishnaic Hebrew. Linguistic shifts such as these can be of some help in dating the biblical books, though there is a danger of circular arguments, since sometimes it is precisely the supposed dates of the books that enable us to trace the linguistic changes. But there is widespread consent that Hebrew literature written after the exile did begin to show differences from earlier works—not only in its vocabulary, with borrowings from Persian and, eventually, from Greek, but also in its grammar and syntax.

But, as pointed out above, one problem in calling the Old Testament "the Hebrew Bible" is that parts of it are not actually in Hebrew at all. Several sections of the books of Daniel and Ezra are written in Aramaic,[2] which uses the same script as Hebrew but is a distinct language. Because Aramaic had supplanted Hebrew as the language of everyday speech by the second century BCE, and Jesus and his disciples certainly spoke it, it is sometimes thought that Aramaic is a "late" language—even that Hebrew "turned into" Aramaic. But this is not the case. Historically, Aramaic, also a Northwest Semitic language, is a more important language than Hebrew and just as ancient. As Akkadian, the East Semitic chief language of Mesopotamia, declined as an international language in the eighth to seventh centuries BCE, Aramaic came to take its place: Persians communicated with Egyptians through the medium of Aramaic as they had once done via Akkadian and would come to do, from the third century onward, in Greek. Imperial Aramaic, as this lingua franca is known, is close to the "biblical Aramaic" found in Ezra and Daniel.

Hebrew and Aramaic are not mutually comprehensible, but they are very closely related, and anyone who knows one can readily learn the other: they are about as close as German and Dutch, or Spanish and Italian. Once you know which letters in one language correspond to which letters in the other—for example, that words with a *z* in Hebrew will often have a *d* in Aramaic—you can quickly learn to read them both. (Thus "gold" is *zahab* in Hebrew and *dehab* in Aramaic.) Puzzling as it is that Daniel switches from one language to the other in the middle of a chapter, the original readers were probably bilingual and would have had no trouble with the shift. Even the names of the two languages were often confused: when the New Testament refers to words being "in

Hebrew" (Greek *hebraisti*), it means "in Aramaic." But the title "Hebrew Bible" is certainly somewhat misleading in seeming to imply that the collection of books is in one language only and that that language is what we call Hebrew. We ought to say, more precisely, "the Hebrew and Aramaic Bible."

Aramaic survives in the version nowadays known as Syriac—a mainly Christian dialect of Aramaic, which is written in an adapted Arabic script and is used in the Syrian churches to this day. It has a rich religious literature, little of it known to most people in the West.

A peculiarity of the writing of both Hebrew and Aramaic needs to be understood if one is to grasp some of the difficulties in reading the Old Testament. This is that in early times only consonants were recorded, with vowels left to be supplied by the reader. This is not as difficult as it sounds, and it persists today in most Modern Hebrew publications, including Israeli newspapers. Where the material is reasonably familiar, the reader can often guess almost instantaneously what vowels are required: no British reader of English would have the slightest difficulty in decoding *Gd sv th Qn* as "God save the Queen." And this is easier in Semitic languages than in Indo-European ones such as English, since the vowel patterns in words are considerably more predictable.

Even in the earliest Hebrew texts we possess, however, some consonant signs are used also to indicate basic vowels: *y* can be either a consonant or a vowel, just as it can in English, and *w* can stand for *o* or *u* as well as for the consonant we call "double-u." Thus *dor*, "generation," can be written simply as *dr*, with the reader supplying the vowel from the context, or more helpfully as *dwr*. This system was already well developed by the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which use a lot of these so-called vowel letters to assist the reader, just as also happens in Modern Hebrew.

Later, however, a more sophisticated system of dots and dashes was invented, written above and below the line to create an absolutely unambiguous guide to pronunciation. These "vowel points," as they are known, were finally codified in the early Middle Ages, and they can be seen in our earliest complete Hebrew Bible, the Leningrad Codex, the work of the scholars known as the Massoretes of Tiberias, whose task was to transmit the Hebrew text in such a way that no one could be in any doubt about its traditional form (*masorah* means "tradition"). In supplying all these vowel signs the Massoretes were not innovating but

simply recording what had come down to them through oral reading of the traditional text, and so it is likely that in most cases the Massoretic Text (MT) reflects much earlier reading traditions—the Leningrad Codex often coincides with the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, though it also sometimes differs from it. Partly because the vowel points now do some of the work previously achieved by vowel letters, MT often has fewer vowel letters than the Dead Sea texts—this is technically described by saying that MT often writes "defectively" what the Dead Sea texts record in a "full" way (*defectivum* rather than *plene* spelling, in the traditional Latin terminology).

Nevertheless, the vowel points cannot be regarded as so ancient as the consonantal text, and modern scholars will more often suggest that the Massoretes may have made mistakes in the vowels than that they may have mistransmitted the consonants. As Hebrew has a large number of words that are identical in their consonants but differ in their vowels (like *pan*, *pen*, *pin*, and *pun* in English), this can make a difference to the meaning of the text; however, again as in English, often one vocalization is far likelier than another, and the Massoretes much more often than not got it right. (In English *th pn s mghtr thn th swrd* could conceivably mean "the pun is mightier than the sword" but hardly "the pan" or "the pin"; and in fact we recognize "the pen" as correct partly because the saying then makes more sense and partly, of course, because we probably know it already.) The different age of the consonants and the vowel signs is a reminder, though, that the text of the Bible is not an absolute given but developed over time even after the books were written.

ANCIENT TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE

To call the Old Testament the "Hebrew Bible" may be a bit misleading, given that some of it is in Aramaic, but it does register the fact that it existed in ancient Semitic languages before it became part of the scriptures of the Christian church. In treating as authoritative this collection of books, the church was accepting an already existing body of material, not creating or inventing one itself. The relationship in the new "covenant" the church believed God had entered into with "his people," and indeed with the human race, through Jesus Christ had always to be re-

lated to a Scripture that already existed. This relationship, sometimes one of continuity but also sometimes one of dialogue or tension, existed from the very beginning of the Christian movement. But another important factor that may give us pause in using the term *Hebrew Bible* for the older collection of Scripture is this: early Christians in many cases read or used the Jewish scriptures not in Hebrew (or Aramaic) at all but, rather, in Greek.

Jesus presumably read the Bible in Hebrew (and Aramaic), and Paul certainly knew the languages and could read them. But all the sayings of Jesus that we have referring to the Old Testament have come down to us in the Gospels in Greek, despite the fact that Aramaic was his daily language; and Paul wrote only in Greek. One explanation would be that Paul and the Gospel writers made their own translations from the Hebrew and Aramaic text of the Bible, but in fact this is both unnecessary and unlikely because a Greek translation already existed.

Our only evidence about its origins lies in a legend preserved in a document called the *Letter of Aristeas*, which tells how Pharaoh Ptolemy II (309–246 BCE) arranged for the Jewish laws (which may mean the Pentateuch or Torah) to be translated into Greek, so that he might understand the laws under which his Jewish subjects lived and so that Jews not fluent in Hebrew might be able to read them. There were seventy-two translators, and by a miracle they all produced the same translation. Their version was thereafter known as the Septuagint (Latin for "Seventy" and sometimes abbreviated LXX). In reality we do not know for sure when and where the Septuagint was produced, but it was definitely between the fourth and the first century BCE and almost certainly in Egypt, where there was the highest concentration of Greek-speaking Jews.

Whether the Pentateuch was indeed the first part of the Bible to be translated is not known, but it is a reasonable conjecture: by this time it was regarded as preeminent among the Jewish Scriptures and was certainly more important for the regulation of Jewish life than other parts of the Bible. But translations of the other biblical books followed, and by the time of Jesus and Paul, in the first half of the first century CE, many Greek-speaking Jews knew their Bible primarily through the Greek translation. Paul was almost certainly bilingual in Hebrew and Greek (and no doubt could also speak Aramaic): he had had the equivalent of a university education. But Jesus himself may have spoken at least some

Greek, even if he could not read it. The Gospel writers were all Greek speakers and very often, like Paul, cite the Bible in Greek according to the LXX version, not in accordance with the original Hebrew or Aramaic.

Thus, whatever the origins of the Greek translation of the Hebrew and Aramaic texts, by the time of the New Testament writers it was already an established fact, and all, or virtually all, of the biblical books were available in Greek—indeed, as we shall go on to see, the Greek version actually contained more books than the Hebrew. In studying the "Hebrew Bible" today scholars therefore need to know Greek as much as they need to know Hebrew, since sometimes the Greek will contain wording that differs from the MT but which may attest an older underlying Hebrew text. In one notable case, the Greek text of the book of Jeremiah is much shorter than the Hebrew, and the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls suggests that the shorter version may reflect the fact that there was an older edition in Hebrew, which the LXX translators had in front of them. The present Hebrew text is, then, a lengthened version of the original, and the Greek is a better guide to the original book of Jeremiah than the Hebrew we encounter in printed Bibles. We cannot assume that the Hebrew we have is always older than the Greek we have, even though there is no doubt that the books were originally written in Hebrew. Sometimes the "original" text may be represented better by the Greek than by the Hebrew of the MT that has come down to us. For some religious believers, this raises questions of biblical authority: In such cases, which is the *real* Bible? Or is that a meaningless question?

The Greek Bible is assumed by many to be simply a translation of the truly authoritative Hebrew text. But for early Christians, many of whom could not read Hebrew, any authority the Hebrew original possessed was very theoretical, since they only ever encountered the Old Testament in Greek and treated its wording as the authority for faith and life. Since the LXX is at many points a faithful rendering of the Hebrew, so far as we can tell, this may not seem to matter very much. But if one starts to press the *exact* wording of the text, matters become more complicated. To take one of the most famous examples: Isaiah 7:14 refers in the LXX to a virgin becoming pregnant, and this became an important "proof text" for Christians who believed in the virgin birth of Jesus. But the Hebrew word underlying the translation means simply a young

woman. In the original Hebrew the verse therefore contributes nothing to the doctrine: it probably refers to the imminent birth of a son to King Ahaz of Judah. In the Greek, it has wide doctrinal implications. Which text is "authoritative" for the Christian church? The question is hard to answer; but if authority lies with the Greek, then one needs some theory of the inspiration of the Greek translators, a little like that in the *Letter of Aristeas*, perhaps. In modern times the issue has hardly been discussed: most Christians who think about the matter assume that authority lies with the original Hebrew, and modern biblical translations are always made from that, though the evidence of the LXX is allowed to influence decisions in places where it might reflect an earlier Hebrew text. For early Christians, with no access to the Hebrew at all, the matter appeared in a different light.

As Christianity spread from Greek-speaking circles to those where Latin was the everyday language, Latin translations were made—but always from the Greek. It is only with Jerome (347–420) that we encounter a translator who sought to weigh the evidence of the Hebrew text in producing a Latin version, and his translation (traditionally called the Vulgate) may again in places preserve traditional readings in the Hebrew that are older than our MT. The older Latin translations (*vetus Latina*, "old Latin") cannot help us with the Hebrew but can sometimes point to old traditions in the Greek Bible that are older than the Greek we now possess, in just the same way as the Greek can attest to earlier Hebrew readings. Biblical scholars need to be able to consider Hebrew, Greek, and Latin versions if they are to establish the earliest versions of the biblical books. Even so, to get back to the *original words* written by the authors of the books is no more than a pipe dream. The best we can ever do is to establish what may be the earliest version that can be reconstructed.

THE APOCRYPHA

A further problem is that the Greek Bible contains more books than the Hebrew one. The additional books can be found in English Bibles that contain a section called "The Apocrypha," which since the Reformation has been understood by Protestants to mean the majority of books either

that never had a Hebrew original (such as the Wisdom of Solomon, composed in Greek) or whose Hebrew original was lost (such as Tobit or Sirach [= Ecclesiasticus], large parts of the original Hebrew of which have now been found). *Apocrypha* means "hidden books," and in the early church the term was used to describe "secret" books, often those used by sects such as the Gnostics, of which orthodox Christians disapproved; there was also a theory that there were certain divinely inspired books that God had chosen to keep hidden (see 2 Esdr. 14:45–46). The Protestant Reformers borrowed the term to refer to biblical books that were not accepted by the Jews as inspired, which they excluded from the list of books fully approved by the church; some Protestants, such as Lutherans and Anglicans, continued to read them and think highly of them, while others, such as Calvinists, rejected them altogether.

In the early church, as soon as contact with the Hebrew Bible was lost, the books in question were mostly treated as simply part of Scripture: most people did not know that Jews did not accept them or would not have cared if they had known. Early Christian writers quote freely from some of them as if they were wholly on a par with all other biblical books. An awareness that they did not form part of the Jewish "canon" can be found as early as Melito of Sardis, who made a fact-finding journey to the Holy Land to discover Jewish attitudes to Scripture. But in the fifth century a row erupted about them between Jerome and Augustine (354–430). The former, in touch with Jews and, as we have seen, knowing Hebrew, became acutely aware that Christians were using books not accepted in Judaism and not extant in Hebrew, and he argued that they should stop doing so. The latter contended that these books had always been regarded as holy, and should continue to be so regarded, within the church. The matter was tacitly resolved in Augustine's favor, since the "apocryphal" books continued in use from then on. At the time of the Reformation Jerome's view of the matter resurfaced and resulted in a move to assert that only the Jewish canon of the Bible should count as the church's Old Testament. Catholics, however, continued to affirm the inspiration of the Apocrypha, and in Catholic Bibles today they do not appear in a supplementary section but, rather, integrated among the other Old Testament books, standing next to those they most resemble—thus Tobit and Judith are next to Esther, and the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus are next to Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Though

they are sometimes referred to as "deuterocanonical," "belonging to a second order of the canon," they are treated in both theology and liturgy as entirely on a par with other biblical books. And there the question rests: the extent of the Old Testament canon never seems to be on the agenda for ecumenical discussion, and it is simply accepted that different churches have different Old Testaments. Indeed, the Orthodox churches recognize a few additional books (Psalm 151, 3 and 4 Maccabees, the Prayer of Manasses) that are not even in the Catholic Bible; while the church in Ethiopia has an even more expansive canon of Scripture. Whereas all Christians agree on every detail of the New Testament, the Old Testament remains a gray area.

So far I have written about the "early church," meaning the church from about the second century onward, in which Greek was the standard language and access to Scripture in Hebrew was barely available to most Christians. But what was the situation if we go back still earlier, into the age of the New Testament? What was the biblical canon (i.e., the authoritative list of scriptural books) for Jesus or Paul or their immediate followers? Here the issues become complicated. It is a natural assumption that Scripture for Jews—and Jesus and Paul were Jews—comprised only the books that exist in Hebrew (and Aramaic) and that the Greek books cannot have been regarded as canonical. But, as we saw, many Jews were bilingual in Hebrew and Greek even in that period, and Jews in Egypt may in many cases have been monolingual in Greek and unable to read the Hebrew books at all: that is why the LXX was made in the first place. So it is not at all a matter of course that Jews would have regarded only the Hebrew books as holy.

An old theory was that the shorter Hebrew canon of Scripture was authoritative in Palestine but the longer Greek one was authoritative in Egypt, and there was sense in such a conjecture. But it now seems likelier that in both areas the Bible, rather than being a tightly defined set of books in which a given book was definitively "in" or "out," consisted of a central core and a penumbra. The central core contained the Torah or Pentateuch and many of the historical and prophetic books, especially perhaps Isaiah (which is referred to so plentifully in the New Testament), together with the Psalms. The penumbra consisted of various other books, including some that are now in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Job, Ecclesiastes) and others that are only in the Greek Bible (e.g., Wisdom of

Solomon, Judith). Some Jews revered some of the penumbral books more than others, but there had been no definite rulings on the exact extent of the canon. It may be that some Jewish groups were clearer than others about these questions. It has recently been argued that the Pharisees tended toward the Hebrew canon and were followed in this by the Jewish historian Josephus; while the Dead Sea community, for example, probably had a more expansive Scripture, which included books such as *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees*, which did not in the end make it into the main Jewish or Christian canons (though *1 Enoch* is canonical in Ethiopia).

If this is broadly correct, then the word *canon* itself may be a bit anachronistic for the very early period. Most Jewish communities knew and revered the main books that are now in the Hebrew Bible, but they did not positively reject other books, and the boundary between scripture and nonscripture was not a clear one. (New Testament writers nowhere discuss which books they regarded as Scripture; we can only work it out by seeing which books they cite.) Though there is no record of any formal canonization process in Judaism, it is perfectly clear by the time of the Mishnah (second and third centuries CE) that the Bible was taken to include the books that are now in the Hebrew canon: only they are cited as scriptural. (This accords with what Melito established.) Very occasionally we hear of discussions of canonicity: the main example is Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), which was widely approved of but regarded as too recent to be part of Scripture. Some think (though I disagree) that there were disputes about Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. But no one ever *decided* that Genesis, say, should be regarded as Scripture: it had been so for as long as memory stretched back. Christians in later times were much more prone than Jews to discuss the issue of what belonged in the Bible, but even among them decisions about the canon were mostly a matter of endorsing what had come down from the past, not creating a canon from first principles, as it were. And doubts were only ever expressed about books on the margins; there was a very large fixed core.

To return to the issue of terminology: If we use "Hebrew Bible," does that include or exclude the books some call Apocrypha? On the face of it, it excludes them, since they exist in Greek, not Hebrew. Or worse still, it includes any such books for which an original Hebrew turns up, as it did for Sirach, but excludes Wisdom of Solomon, which is plainly Greek in its whole conception and never existed in Hebrew. In practice, bibli-

cal scholars who say that they study "the Hebrew Bible" are quite likely to be interested in the "Apocrypha," and indeed one cannot be a biblical scholar without knowing about these books. But "Hebrew Bible" is, then, a very inexact way of describing the subject of study. "Old Testament" also has the drawback that it does not clearly indicate whether or not the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books are included. In the end there is no ideal term, but of the two under consideration, *Hebrew Bible* is the more restrictive and less informative, even though it avoids the danger of supersessionism, which we have seen to be a major concern and which probably tips the scales for most scholars today.

It is sometimes said that, whatever the theoretical position, in practice New Testament writers only appeal at all substantially to the books now in the Hebrew canon, not to those in the Apocrypha. In terms of actual quotation this is generally true, though there is the remarkable fact that the Letter of Jude quotes from *1 Enoch*, which, as we have seen, is not even in the larger Greek canon as that has come down to us.[3] (Arguments that it is not quoted "as Scripture" are usually special pleading on behalf of a conservative theory of the canon.) But Paul shows extensive knowledge of the Wisdom of Solomon in his argument about human sin in the first chapter of Romans—or at least of something very like it; and when he discusses the origins of sin as lying with Adam, he cannot be dependent on the Hebrew Bible alone (which never reflects on Adam's sin after Genesis 3) but, rather, more on the traditions to be found in Wisd. of Sol. 1:12–16 and Sir. 25:24, which clearly identify Adam and Eve as the source of universal human sinfulness and death in exactly the same way as Paul does. On a traditional understanding of the matter, we should have to say that Paul was deeply indebted to some noncanonical books. But a better way is probably to say that Paul knew many Jewish books, some nearer the center of Scripture than others, which he drew on for his ideas. Unless we have a heavy personal investment in knowing exactly which books are to be counted as "The Bible," we can best express this by saying that for Paul, as for many early Jews and Christians, many books that were known to be ancient exercised a certain authority and influence. The question "Is this book part of the canon of Scripture or not?" was not one that exercised their minds: no one had yet formulated it in those terms. For the modern "biblical scholar" any books from ancient Israel are similarly of interest and concern, and

it does not matter very much whether or not they were "canonical." Accordingly it probably also does not matter much for the discipline of biblical scholarship whether we call the subject of study "Hebrew Bible," "Old Testament," "First Testament," or something else. Within religious communities, however, it may matter a good deal; and finding a term that will not be offensive to other religious groups is an important aim.

THE HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Both Judaism and Christianity regard the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible as possessing special authority, which is implied by calling the collection of books "Scripture." But in both cases the authority is not exactly like that of a legal document or constitution or of a creed or "confession" in the Christian case (such as the Augsburg Confession for Lutherans or the Westminster Confession for Presbyterians). In both communities the authority of the Old Testament is subject to various complicated checks and balances, different in character in the two cases and different, indeed, in different branches of the two religions.

In Judaism the books of the Hebrew Bible are organized differently than what is familiar from the Christian Old Testament. There are three divisions: the Law or Torah (the Pentateuch); the Prophets (which includes not only what everyone calls the prophetic books, such as Isaiah and Hosea, but also the "historical books," Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings); and the Writings, a miscellaneous section including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ezra–Nehemiah but also Chronicles, which does not therefore appear alongside the other historical books as it does in the Christian Bible. The threefold division is reflected in the name sometimes used in modern Judaism for the Bible, "Tanakh," an acronym from the initial letters of *Torah*, *Nebi'im*, and *Ketubim*, the Hebrew words for Law, Prophets, and Writings. It is possible that the threefold division reflects the historical realities of "canonization" and that in the Greek Bible, which is arranged more according to the types of literature (history, wisdom, prophecy), an ancient order has been disturbed; or it may be that the Jewish and Christian arrangements are roughly contemporary and simply represent different ways of ordering the material. If the

Jewish system is older, however, it may indicate that the Pentateuch was the first section to be universally accepted as holy scripture in ancient Israel (possibly as early as the fourth century BCE), and some think that the Prophets came next and then finally the Writings, which were still fluid into the first century BCE or even CE. On the model suggested above, it is perhaps more likely that the Prophets and Writings were both still in flux down almost into the age of the New Testament and that the division between them occurred in rabbinic times (after the end of the first century CE). This may be suggested by the fact that the New Testament seems to attest more to a twofold distinction ("the law and the prophets") and that early rabbinic sayings also differentiate the Law from the rest but do not point to a division between Prophets and Writings. But as things now stand, the threefold division is regarded as standard in Judaism, and printed Hebrew Bibles, following the earliest evidence for the MT in the Aleppo and Leningrad codices, adopt this pattern.

Sometimes it has been suggested that the threefold division reflects the contents of the books. The Torah is the word of God spoken directly by him; the Prophets represent God's word mediated through human vehicles; the Writings are human reflection on the word of God. This scheme works more or less well in practice, but with some inconsistencies: Deuteronomy, for example, within the Torah, is presented very much as mediated through Moses, while, on the other hand, there are places in Job—in the Writings—where God is represented as speaking directly. However, it is very unlikely to be historically the reason for the division: it is more a homiletic account of the given fact, trying to make it fruitful for religious faith.

The distinctions are definitely functional liturgically in Judaism. In the synagogue liturgy, the whole Torah is read through annually in large sections; and to each section there corresponds a second reading, always from the Prophets, though they are read only very selectively. Five of the Writings (Lamentations, Esther, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Ruth) are read at various festivals, and parts of the Psalms are used regularly in worship, but other books in the Writings do not appear in the liturgy at all. The reading of the Torah is surrounded by ceremonial, and the scrolls from which it is read must be handwritten and occupy the holiest place in the synagogue; the other scriptural books can be read from simple

printed editions. Just when these usages all became established is not known for certain, but in modern times they are certainly more or less universal in Judaism and attest to the functional importance of the threefold division.

Does the division have any importance for interpretation? It is overwhelmingly the Torah that matters for questions of *halakhah*, that is, for how life is to be lived. Texts from the Prophets and Writings may be adduced in support, but the Torah reigns supreme. In the Mishnah, material from the Writings, especially from Proverbs, is rather more plentiful than that from the Prophets, but overall in Jewish texts, especially the two Talmuds, all of the Prophets and Writings certainly contribute to rabbinic discussions, and in principle any text can clinch an argument, whichever section it comes from. Furthermore, the canon is clearly "closed": that is, there is no fluidity about which texts count as Scripture, since only those from the Hebrew Bible are ever cited with the formula "as it is written" or "as it is said."

But to speak of the authority of the Bible in rabbinic discussion can give a misleading impression. In Talmudic discourse—and even in the Midrash, where texts are commented on serially—the biblical text is appealed to as an authority, but the rulings and arguments presented often exist in a world more controlled in reality by what is called the *Oral* Torah—that is, the accumulated teachings and speculations of generations of rabbis. True, every opinion must be traced back to a scriptural text; but it is not often the biblical text itself that calls the tune. In theory, the written Torah has absolute jurisdiction; in practice, it is the accumulation of traditional interpretation that determines what is taught. Citations from the Torah (or from the rest of the Bible) come in to underscore what is taught, but they are not its true origin.

Thus there is a paradox, a paradox that tends to characterize many religions that appeal to fixed scriptures. Precisely because the scriptures are so central, they tend to be read in such a way as to endorse what is already believed as part of the religion in question. Yet that religion would not be what it is without the scriptures. Judaism would not be Judaism without the Hebrew Bible, from which in many ways it derives. Yet it reads the Bible in accordance with norms that themselves are postbiblical. As religious believers, we read our sacred texts in the light of what we already believe, yet what we already believe does to some degree arise from those same sacred texts.

Christianity is no exception to this rule. In desperate attempts to extract the doctrine of the Trinity from the Bible, for example, one sees the same tug-of-war between what the text appears to mean and the meaning that the religion it supports needs to derive from it. Traditional Catholicism has in some measure avoided this problem by stressing that the essence of the faith derives from tradition rather than from Scripture, though that solution then takes its own revenge by leading people to read the documents of the tradition—creeds and bulls and encyclicals—in the same "creative" way, so as to make sure that they speak with the voice of later orthodoxy. And even then it has often had to interpret the Bible in accordance with tradition, since it has not been willing simply to abandon the idea that the Bible is authoritative, even if functionally it occupies a more secondary role than it apparently does in Judaism. But Protestantism, which has traditionally invested all authority in the Bible, has been very strongly constrained to read all it wanted to believe out of the Bible and has done so by reading at least some of it into the Bible in the first place.

Christianity, however, has a more complicated relationship than Judaism to the Old Testament in particular. There are varieties of Protestantism, and, indeed, of traditional Catholicism, for which the Old Testament is seen as exactly on a par with the New in terms of its authority. In principle, for them, the laws in Leviticus are as binding on Christians as they are on Jews, though in cases such as the food laws they tend to be interpreted metaphorically rather than literally. But most kinds of Christianity see the relation of the faith to the Old Testament more dialectically. The Old Testament presents the basic picture of God to which Christians are committed—as one, as the creator, as the deity whose chose Israel, as the preserver of all humanity; yet in the light of the revelation in Christ some of what it affirms needs modification, and some is perhaps even abrogated. Thus many Christians would think that the more vengeful aspects of the Old Testament God have to be moderated in the light of what is revealed of God in Christ, and most would see some of at least the so-called ceremonial laws as no longer applicable in the Christian dispensation.

How far down this road Christians should be prepared to go is a matter of opinion. The mainstream churches have always rejected "Marcionism," the belief (attributed to Marcion of Sinope, ca. 85–160 CE), that in Christ the Old Testament is revealed as the scriptures of a hostile

and alien God. Yet many (and perhaps especially in Lutheranism) have contrasted the Testaments to the detriment of the Old, rather than seeing the Old as flowing seamlessly into the New (as Calvinists are more likely to do). How much these various approaches can be justified is perhaps one of the biggest issues dividing Christians today. It bears on all manner of social and moral issues, not least the (among Christians) hugely controversial area of homosexuality, where so many of the biblical prohibitions (though not all of them) occur in Old Testament texts. Biblical conservatives regard any attempt to give the Old Testament a second rank in Christianity as a form of "liberalism"; those whose tradition has always done this regard those who equalize the Testaments as fundamentalists (the ancient church would probably have called them "Judaizers," a term of abuse that thankfully is no longer used). Though the interpretation of the Old Testament, like the question of its exact contents, is seldom on the agenda at ecumenical conferences, in truth it is a very contentious issue. The Old Testament's place in Christianity is a complex one, entirely unlike its unproblematic status in Judaism, and large theological issues hinge upon it.

NOTES

1. The "Song of Deborah" in Judges 5 is widely thought to go back into the eleventh century BCE, and some think that there is a very early "core" to the Song of Moses in Exodus 15. On the other hand, it is most unlikely that the Ten Commandments, for example, are earlier than the time of the Hebrew monarchies, since they reflect a settled, agrarian lifestyle, not at all the desert milieu from which they purport to come.
2. Ezra 4:8–6:18, 7:12–26; and Dan. 2:4b–7:28.
3. See Jude 14–15.

FURTHER READING

On the textual history of the Hebrew Bible, see the full discussion in Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). On its development through time, a good guide is John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

For further reflections on the question of terminology (Old Testament or Hebrew Bible?), see John J. Collins, *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); J.F.A. Sawyer, "Combating Prejudices about the Bible and Judaism," *Theology* 94 (1991): pp. 269–78; J. A. Sanders, "First Testament and Second," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 17 (1987): pp. 47–49; R.W.L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

For the character and development of the Hebrew language, an excellent guide is Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, J. F. Elwolde, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

On the Greek Bible, an accessible guide is T. M. Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Canonical questions are discussed in L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders, *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002); and J. Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007). For the question of the Pharisaic canon, see T. Lim, *The Formation of the Jewish Canon* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013). For a general overview of the variety in the Old Testament canon, see J. Barton, "The Old Testament Canons," in J. Schaper and J. Carleton Paget, eds., *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to 600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 145–64.

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