

UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Abstract

This article explores the origins, authors, collectors, and canonization of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Tanakh. We begin with an overview of the three divisions of the Tanakh - the Torah, the Nevi'im, and the Ketuvim - and the books that make up each division. We then examine the early formation of Hebrew scriptures, the canonization of the Tanakh during the Hellenistic period, the Second Temple period, and the Rabbinic period. Finally, we address the debate over the authorship of the Hebrew Bible, drawing upon the research of prominent scholars such as Richard Elliott Friedman, Joel Baden, and James Kugel. While there is ongoing debate among scholars regarding the authorship of the Hebrew Bible, the text has played a central role in Jewish culture and identity.

Keywords – Tanakh, Hebrew Bible, Judaism, Holy Scriptures, Religious History

Introduction

The Hebrew Bible, also known as the Tanakh, is composed of 24 books, and is the primary scripture of the Jews and Christians alike. But what are the origins of the Hebrew Bible? Who wrote it, collected it, and determined its canon? And what is the role of human agency in these books? In this article, we will explore the complex and fascinating history of the Hebrew Bible, examining its origins, authors, collectors, and canonization, and delving into the ongoing debates about its composition and meaning. By the end of this article, you will have a deeper understanding of the cultural and religious heritage of the Hebrew Bible and the ongoing significance it holds for the followers of Judaism.

Is the Hebrew Bible different from the Old Testament?

The Tanakh and the Old Testament are similar in that they both contain writings about the Jewish

faith. However, there are some differences between them.

The Tanakh is the Hebrew Bible, which is the primary text of Judaism. It consists of the Torah (Law), the Nevi'im (Prophets), and the Ketuvim (Writings). The Tanakh is written in Hebrew, and its canon was established by Jewish scholars in the second century CE.

The Old Testament is the Christian version of the Hebrew Bible. It includes the same books as the Tanakh but in a different order and with additional books, such as Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, and First and Second Maccabees. The Old Testament is written in Greek, and its canon was established by early Christian leaders in the first few centuries CE.

The arrangements of sections in both Tanakh and Old Testament are different from each other. The Tanakh is arranged in three sections, while the Old Testament is arranged in four sections, (i) the Pentateuch (the first five books), (ii) the Historical Books, (iii) the Wisdom Books, and (iv) the Prophets. The Tanakh is often printed with Hebrew vowels and cantillation marks, while the Old Testament is generally printed without them.

An overview of the structure of the Hebrew Bible

The Tanakh consists of three main sections, (i) the Torah (also known as the Pentateuch), (ii) the Nevi'im (Prophets), and the (iii) Ketuvim (Writings).

1. *Torah (Law):*

i. *Genesis (Bereshit)*

- Contains 50 chapters and 1,534 verses.
 - It begins with the story of creation and the first human beings, Adam and Eve (Adam and Hawwa - عليهم السلام), and continues with the stories of Noah (Nooh - عليه السلام), Abraham (Ibrahim - عليه السلام), Isaac (Ishaq - عليه السلام), Jacob (Yaqoob - عليه السلام), and Joseph (Yusuf - عليه السلام).
 - It explores subjects like the nature of God, human relationships, and the origins of the Israeli people.
- ii. *Exodus (Shemot)*
- Contains 40 chapters and 1,209 verses.
 - Begins with the Israeli's enslavement in Egypt and their eventual liberation under the leadership of Moses (Musa - عليه السلام).
 - Chronicles - the giving of the Ten Commandments and the construction of the Tabernacle, a portable sanctuary.
 - Explores subjects like freedom, covenant, and revelations.
- iii. *Leviticus (Vayikra)*
- Contains 27 chapters and 859 verses.
 - It primarily deals with the laws of ritual sacrifice, the duties of the priests, and the culture of Israeli community.
 - Explores subjects like sin, atonement, and the relationship between humans and God.
- iv. *Numbers (Bamidbar)*
- Contains 36 chapters and 1,288 verses.
 - Chronicles the Israeli's wanderings in the wilderness and their struggles with leadership, rebellion, and faith.
 - Contains laws, genealogies, and accounts of battles and conquests.
- Explores themes such as trust, obedience, and the consequences of disobedience.
- v. *Deuteronomy (Devarim)*
- Contains 34 chapters and 959 verses.
 - Consists of a series of speeches attributed to Moses (Musa - عليه السلام) addressed to Israelis before they entered the Promised Land.
 - Recounts the history of the Israelis from the time of the Exodus to receipt of Ten Commandments. It also provides an account of the code of laws for the Israeli community.
 - Explores subjects like obedience, loyalty, the blessings and curses that result from following or disobeying the commandments and not following the code of conduct.
2. *Nevi'im (Prophets):*
- i. *Joshua (Yehoshua)*
- Contains 24 chapters and 658 verses.
 - Chronicles the Israelis' conquest of the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua.
 - Explores subjects like faith, courage, and the consequences of disobedience.
- ii. *Judges (Shoftim)*
- Contains 21 chapters and 618 verses.
 - Chronicles the period of Israeli history after Joshua's death, when they were governed by a series of judges.
 - Contains stories of heroic leaders like Deborah, Gideon, and Samson, as well as accounts of war, diplomacy, and religious conflicts.
 - Explores subjects like leadership, faithfulness, and the role of God in human affairs.

iii. *Samuel (Shmuel)*

- Contains 31 chapters and 810 verses.
- Tells the story of the prophet Samuel and the reigns of the first two kings of Israel, Saul (Talut) and David (Dawood - عليه السلام).
- Chronicles the establishment of the monarchy in Israel and the challenges and successes of its early years.
- Explores themes such as obedience, faithfulness, and the responsibilities of leadership.

iv. *Kings (Melachim)*

- Contains 40 chapters and 1,580 verses.
- Chronicles the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah from the time of Solomon (Sulaiman - عليه السلام) to the Babylonian exile.
- Contains stories of political intrigue, religious reform, and prophetic witness.
- Explores the subjects like idolatry, faithfulness, and the consequences of national sin.

v. *Isaiah (Yeshayahu)*

- Contains 66 chapters and 1,292 verses.
- Contains prophetic messages to the Israelis during a time of political crisis and uncertainty.
- Contains messages of judgment and hope, condemnation of idolatry, and promises of a future redemption.
- Explores themes such as repentance, justice, and the sovereignty of God.

vi. *Jeremiah (Yirmiyahu)*

- Contains 52 chapters and 1,364 verses.
- Contains prophetic messages to the Israelis during a time of impending disaster and exile.

- Contains messages of judgment and hope, condemnation of false prophets, and promises of a future restoration.

- Explores subjects like faithfulness, obedience, and the consequences of sin.

vii. *Ezekiel (Yechezkel)*

- Contains 48 chapters and 1,273 verses.
- Contains prophetic messages to the Israelis during their exile in Babylon.
- Contains messages of judgment and hope, visions of the glory of God, and descriptions of a future temple.

- Explores subjects like sin, repentance, and the nature of God.

viii. *The Twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)*

- Contains 12 short prophetic books, each with its own message and style.
- Contains messages of judgment and hope, condemnation of sin, and promises of a future restoration.

- Explores subjects like justice, mercy, and the relationship between God and his people.

3. *Ketuvim (Writings)*

i. *Psalms (Tehillim)*

- Contains 150 chapters and 2,527 verses.
- A collection of religious poems, prayers, and hymns.
- Includes contributions from multiple authors, including David (Dawood - عليه السلام) and other kings, as well as anonymous writers.

- Explores subjects like praise, thanksgiving, lament, and trust in God.

ii. *Proverbs (Mishlei)*

- Contains 31 chapters and 915 verses.
 - A collection of sayings and teachings on morality and practical living.
 - Generally attributed to King Solomon (Sulaiman - عليه السلام) but is reported to include contributions from other authors as well.
 - Explores subjects like wisdom, virtue, and the fear of God.
- iii. *Job (Iyov)*
- Contains 42 chapters and 1,070 verses.
 - Tells the story of a man named Job (Ayyub - عليه السلام) who suffers terrible losses and afflictions, and questions why God allows such things to happen.
 - Includes dialogues between Job (Ayyub - عليه السلام) and his friends, as well as speeches attributed to God.
 - Explores subjects like suffering, faith, and the mystery of divine providence.
- iv. *Song of Songs (Shir Hashirim)*
- Contains 8 chapters and 117 verses.
 - A collection of love poems that celebrates the beauty and passion of human love.
 - Often interpreted allegorically as a portrayal of the relationship between God and his people.
 - Explores themes such as love, desire, and the joys of intimacy.
- v. *Ruth (Rut)*
- Contains 4 chapters and 85 verses.
 - Tells the story of a Moabite woman who becomes the ancestor of King David.
 - Explores themes such as loyalty, kindness, and God's providential care.
- vi. *Lamentations (Eichah)*
- Contains 5 chapters and 154 verses.
 - A collection of funeral poems mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile.
 - Often attributed to the prophet Jeremiah.
 - Explores the subjects like sorrow, repentance, and the consequences of sin.
- vii. *Ecclesiastes (Kohelet)*
- Contains 12 chapters and 222 verses.
 - A philosophical reflection on the meaning of life and the pursuit of happiness.
 - Generally attributed to King Solomon (Sulaiman - عليه السلام), but may have been written by another author.
 - Explores subjects like the futility of earthly pursuits, the inevitability of death, and the importance of enjoying life in the present.
- viii. *Esther (Ester)*
- Contains 10 chapters and 167 verses.
 - Tells the story of a Jewish woman who becomes queen of Persia and saves her people from destruction.
 - Explores themes such as courage, faithfulness, and God's providential care.
- ix. *Daniel (Daniel)*
- Contains 12 chapters and 357 verses.
 - Tells the story of a Jewish exile in Babylon the noble Jewish youth Daniel who becomes an advisor to the king and has visions of the future.
 - Includes accounts of miraculous deliverances and apocalyptic prophecies.
 - Explores subjects like faithfulness, courage, and the sovereignty of God.

- x. *Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra-Nechemiah)*
- Contains 23 chapters and 613 verses.
 - Chronicles the restoration of the Jewish community in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile.
 - Includes accounts of rebuilding the temple, reforming the community, and rebuilding the walls of the city.
 - Explores the subjects like faithfulness, repentance, and the importance of rebuilding the community of faith.
- xi. *Chronicles (Divrei Hayamim)*
- Contains 29 chapters (divided into two books in Christian translations) and 942 verses.
 - Chronicles the history of Israel from Adam (Adam - عليه السلام) to the Babylonian exile and the return from exile.
 - Emphasizes the importance of the Davidic line and the temple.
 - Includes genealogies, accounts of the reigns of various kings, and retellings of stories from earlier biblical books.
 - Likely written by a later author or authors, and may have drawn on earlier historical sources.

The Canonization of the Hebrew Bible

The process of canonization of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) was a long and complex one, spanning several centuries and involving many multiple authors.

1. The early formation of the Hebrew Scriptures

The early formation of the Hebrew Scriptures is shrouded in mystery and is the subject of much debate among scholars. According to Jewish tradition, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Torah, were written by Moses (Musa - عليه السلام) in the 13th century BCE. These books contain the creation story, the history of the

patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, and the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.

Over the next few centuries, additional writings were added to the Hebrew Scriptures, including the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, and the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the twelve minor prophets. These books record the history of the Israelis from their conquest of Canaan to their exile in Babylon and include the writings of the prophets who spoke against idolatry, social injustice, and other sins.

The process by which these writings were added to the Hebrew Scriptures is not entirely clear. Some scholars believe that the stories and sayings of the Israelites were passed down orally from generation to generation, and that they were eventually written down by scribes and editors. Others believe that the Israelis were influenced by the literary traditions of neighbouring cultures, such as the Babylonians and the Egyptians, and that they adapted these traditions for their own purposes.

2. The Hellenistic Period

The process of canonization of the Tanakh during the Hellenistic Period is a complex and controversial topic among scholars. The Hellenistic Period, which lasted from the 4th century BCE to the 1st century BCE, was a time of great cultural and political change in the Middle East. The influence of Greek culture and thought was spreading throughout the region, and the Jewish people were grappling with how to maintain their identity and religious traditions in this new context.

One of the key figures in the canonization of the Tanakh during this period was the high priest and scholar, Ezra. According to tradition, Ezra led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem from Babylon in the 5th century BCE, and was instrumental in re-establishing the worship of Yahweh and the study of the Torah. Some scholars believe that Ezra was responsible for the final editing and compilation of the Torah, and that he played a role in the formation of the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Another important figure in the canonization of the Tanakh during this period was the Jewish historian and priest, Josephus. In his writings, Josephus describes how the Hebrew Scriptures were collected and preserved by the Jewish people, and how they were recognized as authoritative and sacred. He also notes that different Jewish communities had different collections of sacred texts, and that it was not until the 2nd century CE that a definitive list of books was agreed upon.

Despite these accounts, the canonization of the Tanakh during the Hellenistic Period remains a subject of debate and speculation among scholars. Some argue that the process was gradual and organic, with different books being added to the canon over time as they gained acceptance and popularity among the Jewish people. Others contend that the canon was deliberately created in response to the challenges of Hellenistic culture, as a way of asserting Jewish identity and resisting the influence of Greek philosophy and literature.

3. The Second Temple Period

The canonization of the Tanakh during the Second Temple Period was a significant development in Jewish history, and laid the foundation for the Jewish and Christian scriptures that are still widely read and studied today. The Second Temple Period lasted from the 6th century BCE to the 1st century CE, and was characterized by a series of religious and political changes that had a profound impact on the Jewish people.

During this period, the Jewish people were living under the rule of various foreign powers, including the Persians, Greeks, and Romans. One of the key developments during this period was the process of canonization, which involved selecting and organizing a definitive list of books that were recognized as authoritative and sacred.

The canonization of the Tanakh during the Second Temple Period was a gradual process that took place over several centuries. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Torah, were recognized as authoritative and

sacred, and were likely compiled and edited during the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE. The prophetic books, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, were also recognized as authoritative during this period, and were generally read alongside the Torah in the synagogues.

The process of canonization continued throughout the Second Temple Period, as Jewish scholars and leaders debated which books should be included in the canon, and how they should be organized and interpreted. Some books, such as the books of Esther and Song of Solomon, were initially controversial and were only later accepted as part of the canon. Other books, such as the books of Tobit, Judith, and 1 and 2 Maccabees, were not ultimately included in the Jewish canon, but were later recognized as part of the Christian Old Testament.

Despite these debates and differences, the canon of the Tanakh was largely established by the end of the Second Temple Period. This canon included 39 books, organized into three main categories: the Torah, the Nevi'im (prophets), and the Ketuvim (writings).

4. The Rabbinic Period

The Rabbinic period in Jewish history began in the 2nd century CE and lasted until the 6th century CE. This period was characterized by the development of Rabbinic Judaism, which emerged in response to the destruction of the Second Temple and the loss of Jewish political autonomy.

During the Rabbinic period, the process of canonization of the Tanakh continued, as Jewish scholars and leaders sought to clarify the meaning and interpretation of the sacred texts. One of the key figures in this process was Rabbi Akiva, (died 135 CE) was a leading Talmudic scholar who was executed by Romans after a long prison sentence for his involvement in Bar Kokhba revolt, also known as the Third Jewish Revolt. Rabbi Akiva played an important role in establishing the canonicity of the Torah and the prophetic books and helped to clarify the rules for interpreting and understanding these texts.

Another important figure in the canonization of the Tanakh during the Rabbinic period was Rabbi Judah the Prince (135-217 CE), the editor of the Mishnah, the first major written collection of the Jewish oral traditions that are known as the Oral Torah. It is also the first major work of rabbinic literature. He was a key leader of the Jewish community during the Roman occupation of Judea.

During the Rabbinic period, the canon of the Tanakh was determined and recognized as the authoritative scripture of the Jewish people. This canon included 39 books, organized into three main categories: the Torah, the Nevi'im (prophets), and the Ketuvim (writings).

The Rabbinic period also saw the development of the Talmud, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and Jewish law (halaka). There are two Talmuds, (i) Babylonian Talmud (Talmud Bavli), and (ii) Jerusalem Talmud (Talmud Yerushalmi).

Talmud has two components, (i) Mishnah (200 CE in Hebrew) and (ii) Gemara (500 CE in Aramaic). It consists of 63 tractates called Vilna Shas, and 2,711 double sided folios containing (i) Mishnah (Palestine – 220 CE), (ii) Gemara (Babylonia – 500 CE), (iii) Comments by Rashi (France – 1040-1105), (iv) Comments of Tosafists (France and Germany 12-13 centuries), (v) Comments of R. Nissim Ben Jacog (Tunisia – 11th Century), (vi) Notes of Aqiva Eger (Prussia – 1761-1837 CE), and (vii) Undated and anonymous comments.

History of Jewish beliefs

It is an accepted fact that all Prophets sent to Jewish people, believed, and taught the same Adamic religion, which is the belief in one Omnipotent God. There are references to this effect in all surviving scriptures of Abrahamic religions. Torah says, 'God, the Cause of all, is one. This does not mean one as in one of a pair, nor one like a species (which encompasses many individuals), nor one as in an object that is made up of many elements, nor as a single simple object that is infinitely divisible. Rather, God is a

unity unlike any other possible unity. (Yesode Ha-Torah 1:7).

However, in Judaism and later in Christianity, the identity of the one God blurred under the influence of polytheistic influences on their societies. All Israeli prophets from Ishaq, Yaqoob, to Musa and Isa (عليهم السلام) taught the Adamic religion. However, by 8 BC, the Jewish society got divided into many groups and subgroups who worshiped different gods. The oldest books of the Hebrew Bible reflect this situation. Famous ancient books like Hosea and Nahum, condemn the apostasy of the people of Israel, threatening them with the wrath of God if they do not give up their polytheistic cults.

Yahweh was originally the national god of the Kingdom of Israel. Later the name of their god was changed to Elohim.

Some Jews believe that Yahweh and Elohim are two separate gods who together created this world. Similarly, some Jews believe in henotheism, meaning, worship of a single, predominant god while not denying the existence of other lower gods.

It is said that in the Kingdom of Judah, the henotheistic cult of Yahweh grew increasingly militant in its opposition to the worship of other gods. Later, the reforms of King Josiah imposed strict Monolatry on Jewish community. Monolatry is worship of one God, at the same time not denying that others can worship other gods/divine beings within the community with equal truth.

King Josiah or Yoshiyahu was the sixteenth king of Judah (640–609 BC) who, according to the Hebrew Bible, instituted major religious reforms by imposing monolatry on Jews. As described above, monolatry is the worship of one God, at the same time not denying that people can worship other gods/divine beings within the community with equal truth. Who were these divine beings that can be worshiped? They believed angels were the daughters of God and certain prophets were the sons of God. Jews could worship angels and other powers in heaven, but they were to offer sacrifices to the

god of Israel. There is a reference to this aspect in the Quran - The Jews call (Prophet) Uzair (عليه السلام) a son of God, and the Christians call Isa (عليه السلام) the son of God. That is a saying from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers (polytheists) of old used to say.

Multiple Authors across several centuries

The question of whether the Hebrew Bible was written by human authors or divinely inspired ones is a complex and controversial issue, and scholars have debated it for centuries. While there is no definitive proof one way or the other, many scholars today believe that the Hebrew Bible was written by human authors, and that the text reflects a complex process of redaction, editing, and compilation over many centuries.

One of the key pieces of evidence for this view is the fact that the text of the Hebrew Bible contains many inconsistencies, contradictions, and variations in language and style. As scholar Richard Elliott Friedman notes in his book *Who Wrote the Bible?*, 'the texts of the Hebrew Bible are replete with doublets, divergences, inconsistencies, and outright contradictions' (Friedman, 1987, p. 6). For example, the book of Genesis contains two different creation stories that differ in their details and order of events, while the books of Samuel and Kings contain parallel narratives of the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah that differ in their details and perspectives.

Moreover, many scholars have pointed out that the language and style of the Hebrew Bible vary widely from book to book, and even within individual books. As scholar John J. Collins notes in his book *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 'the various books of the Hebrew Bible exhibit different genres and literary styles' (Collins, 2004, p. 1). Some passages are highly poetic and lyrical, while others are dry and legalistic. This suggests that the text of the Hebrew Bible is the result of a long process of composition, redaction, and editing by many different authors and editors over many centuries.

In addition, scholars have pointed out that the Hebrew Bible contains many literary and cultural influences from the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East, including Babylonian, Egyptian, and Canaanite. As scholar Marc Zvi Brettler notes in his book *How to Read the Jewish Bible*, 'the Hebrew Bible reflects a larger ancient Near Eastern cultural world and not only a specifically Jewish one' (Brettler, 2005, p. 11). This suggests that the text of the Hebrew Bible is not the product of a single, divine author, but rather the result of a complex process of cultural and literary borrowing and adaptation.

Conclusion

The Hebrew Bible, also known as the Tanakh, is a complex and multifaceted text that has undergone many changes and transformations over the course of its long history. From its early origins as a collection of oral traditions and written texts to its eventual canonization and widespread dissemination throughout the Jewish community.

The question of the authorship of the Hebrew Bible remains a subject of ongoing debate among scholars. While some argue that the text reflects divine revelation, others argue that the text reflects a complex process of redaction, editing, and compilation by many different human authors and editors over many centuries. Most of the modern scholarship tends to support the latter view, as evidenced by the research, and works of scholars such as Richard Elliott Friedman, Joel Baden, and James Kugel, among others.

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