

Shape & Structure

The formation of the Jewish Bible

SESSION LEARNING GOAL

Learners will discuss the nature and arrangement of biblical texts to provide an overview of the structure of the Hebrew Scriptures.

THE LIVING LIBRARY

Introduction

'The Bible' (lit. 'the Book') is a collection of writings that, for many Christians, are a written record of God's self-revelation within time and space, the basis of truth and faith. They regard the writings as living words, not only because they are 'God-breathed' (2 Tim 3:16), but also because they have brought life-changing experience to millions down through the centuries.

When we hold a Bible in our hands it is as a single volume. It is often leather-bound, semi-yapp with gold edges. It doesn't even look and feel like most books we use in our everyday life. Its physical appearance can create an aura that inhibits people discovering its reality. The Bible is not a 'magic' book; we must not approach it with a super-spiritual attitude. It is, for many, a book of power and life; a reality most clearly discovered when we approach it humbly, but with our eyes wide open to its true nature.

Again, the fact that we use the Bible as a single bound volume leads us to forget that it is not a book but in fact a whole library. Written over hundreds of years, with many different authors, in numerous styles and exploring every possible subject.

Divided yet united

Within the Christian community it is traditionally presented as 66 books, divided into two main sections; 39 in the first half and 27 in the second. We shall see that the way they are arranged, especially in the first section, is unhelpful and even inhibiting. The answer to the question, 'How many books are there in the Bible?' becomes an interesting and open question!

It has become unquestioned that the first section of this collection is referred to as the 'Old Testament'. Those writings are never referred to in this way in the New Testament; there they are spoken of simply as 'the scriptures'. In popular thought to call something 'old' is to disparage it, which is just the attitude many have to the Hebrew Scriptures.¹ These writings are not 'old', but rather 'foundational'. We will never un-

¹ For this reason a number of scholars prefer to speak in terms of 'First and Second Testaments' when speaking of our Christian Bible. See John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand



derstand the full wonder of the new covenant until we have discovered the profound nature of the original one that it fulfils.

In this section of the course we will develop the skills and insights to explore this living library.

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

Rabbinical approach

In the traditional format of the Christian Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures are presented as a compilation of 39 separate books. This follows the general pattern of the Greek and Latin versions; but as we have indicated above it is a distorted and misleading structure. The original rabbinic arrangement of the Jewish scriptures in Hebrew was quite different and much closer to their essential nature. They took the form of 24 books divided into three main sections, which in some cases are further sub-divided. This rabbinic format is not only much simpler and more helpful but also, as we shall see, draws out the distinctive qualities and characteristics of individual documents and groups of books much more clearly. The rabbinic structure of the Hebrew Scriptures is as follows:

The Law (Torah)

- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

The Prophets (N^ebi'im)

- Former Prophets
 - Joshua
 - Judges
 - Samuel
 - Kings
- Latter Prophets
 - Isaiah
 - Jeremiah
 - Ezekiel
 - The Twelve

Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1994), 2, n. 7. The term 'Hebrew Scriptures' is often used of the OT in Workshop. However, for scholars, this has a technical meaning: the TaNaKh (see below) read in Hebrew (and Aramaic).



The Writings (*K^etûbîm*)

- Psalms
- Job
- Proverbs
- The Megilloth
 - Ruth
 - Song of Songs
 - Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth)
 - Lamentations
 - Esther
- Daniel
- Ezra-Nehemiah
- Chronicles

On the basis of this structure the Jewish community refers to its scriptures as the *TaNaKh*; reflecting the three sections of the *Torah*, *N^ebî'im* and *K^etûbîm*.

The Law (Torah)²

This is the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. The Torah is not only the beginning of the Bible by its position, but by virtue of its very fabric and nature it forms the foundations of all biblical teaching and life. It is upon the Torah that all future revelation is both built and checked.

The word 'Torah' means 'instruction' rather than 'law'; the feel to the Torah is that it is the words of loving direction that a parent would give to their child to show them how to live. The idea of God giving instruction to people goes right back to the time of Eden where God gave specific instructions to man and woman in the garden. The instructions found in the Torah are not only particular laws but also the recounting of stories of God's dealings with his people, and their response in either obedience or disobedience, so that subsequent generations might learn. The Torah is a written record of both the 'words' and 'acts' of God.

The five books must be recognised as one document (not five). The Jewish rabbis speak of the 'five fifths of the law'. Each book is simply the size you can manage to put on one scroll at a place where there is a natural break in the narrative. In Hebrew the names of the books are simply the words of the opening sentence making the point that this is just the continuing story and text from the previous scroll.

How the Torah came to be compiled in its present form has been a subject of great debate and division among biblical scholars for generations; the issues are complex and the theories many. The subject matter of the Torah would have been

² The whole subject of the Torah/Pentateuch will be dealt with at much greater length in Section 4 below.



made up of oral and written traditions from different sources. We are told that Samuel wrote down 'the rights and duties of kingship' (1 Sam 10:25), which must have been part of the process; he was certainly in touch with most, if not all, the traditions through his contact with the sanctuaries (1 Sam 7:16).

We have no way of knowing at what date the Torah, as we have it today, was finally complete. References to the law in Ezra and Nehemiah seem to confirm that the Pentateuch took its final canonical shape in the late 5th century BCE. The translation of the Pentateuch into Greek from the middle of the 3rd century BCE adds additional proof. However, the authority of its many sources reaches back to the earliest days:

- Its law codes became required reading for both the rulers and the nation (Deut 31:11);
- It soon became considered the divine rule for life and faith (1 Kgs 2:3);
- It was appealed to by the prophets as the basic interpretation of covenant life; to ignore it would bring God's judgment;
- It received pledged obedience during Josiah's reign (2 Kgs 23:2ff.), and during the work of Nehemiah/Ezra (Ezra 7:6), when the nation committed itself to 'obey the Law of the Lord'. In both cases this was at least part, if not all, the Pentateuch.

In the New Testament the books of the Torah are referred to as 'Moses' or the 'books of Moses' (cf. John 1:45; 7:19), but this is not implying that he penned every part of it. Clearly his life and teaching make up the bulk of the narrative and under his leadership some of the earlier traditions may well have been collected. While Moses' work must have been a central force in shaping the ethos of the Pentateuch it was clearly long after his death that it finally reached its present form. It is also interesting that Moses is always referred to in the third person (never 'I' but 'he'); there are no equivalent to the 'we' passages in Acts; all this suggests distance between the events and the editors.

The Pentateuch is shaped around the events of the covenant making at Sinai. This must be seen as the 'core' or 'hub' around which the other traditions are gathered. It is important to think about the body of literature as a whole, taking an integrated holistic approach with the covenant making and instructions (Exodus 19 – Numbers 9) as central, with a symmetry of traditions either side; rather than taking a linear approach that simply starts with Genesis and concludes with Deuteronomy:

- **Prologue** – Genesis 1–50
- **Towards Sinai** – Exodus 1–18
- **COVENANT** – Exodus 19 – Numbers 9
- **From Sinai** – Numbers 10–36
- **Epilogue** – Deuteronomy



Looking at the Torah in this way brings out a whole fresh set of perspectives and understandings.

The Prophets (N^obi'im)

These writings are sub-divided into the 'Former' and the 'Latter' Prophets, with four books in each sub-section.

Former Prophets

This section comprises of four books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings. While the Pentateuch is a clearly defined and self-contained literary unit, the 'Former Prophets' are the natural continuation of the story that concludes with Numbers 36 (and Deuteronomy 34). There is an integrated connection between these two sections, making up a collection of nine books with one uninterrupted story. However, at the same time the books of the 'Former Prophets' are clearly distinct.

The four documents that make up the 'Former Prophets' are 'prophecy' and not 'historical' books in the popular understanding of that term. While they tell the story of the Jewish people from the period of the Conquest to the collapse of Israel under the Assyrians and Judah under the Babylonians, they tell and interpret the story in the light of the covenant. This is not simply an account of the life of the Israelites in the land of Canaan; it is the story of the outworking of God's covenant within the community and the history of God's people.

This is 'prophetic history'; it is God speaking and revealing himself through the activity of history. The people – as individuals, as groups and as a whole – are seen as agents in his drama. This is prophetic material not simply because many of the narratives speak about prophets, but because the whole is God communicating covenant truth through the medium of history. Here we have keys to interpreting salvation history. We see the important fact that prophecy is proclaimed as much through events as through oracles.

The nature of these documents is distorted when they are referred to simply as 'historical books' along with others such as Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. As we shall see, these other writings are quite different and must be recognised as such if they are to be interpreted properly. The sources for these documents would have been drawn from religious and state records and edited and interpreted in the light of profound spiritual prophetic reflection.

Notice that the books of Samuel and Kings are single units, not double books as in our editions of the Scriptures. Their form in the Hebrew Bible is correct; where unpointed Hebrew they are single volumes. Once the Hebrew was pointed, and later translated into Greek, the books could no longer be contained on a single scroll and so they were divided simply for practical convenience. The archaic practice of



referring to them as the four books of Kings³ is another anomaly that goes back to the Greek text and has no validity.

Latter Prophets

This section contains the four books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and The Twelve.⁴ The Christian tradition of referring to the last volume as the 'Minor Prophets' is both distorted and devaluing. These writings are much more akin to the popular expectation of a prophetic book. They are often referred to as the 'Classical' or 'Written' prophets; such titles simply emphasise that the main focus of these books is a written record of the oracles and spoken words of these individual prophets. There is more detail about their proclamations than is given about prophets mentioned in the 'Former Prophets'; but, with the possible exception of Jeremiah and perhaps Hosea, few clues are given of their personal or historical circumstances.

Here we have individuals bringing God's word to their contemporary situation by distinctive acts and sayings. As we piece their message together with what we now know about their personal and historical circumstances from other sources we see how brilliantly they crafted their words, and in some cases acts, to speak to their contemporary situation. Their images and language were perfect vehicles both for God's message and the times in which they lived.

The Jewish community would have held the words of these prophets as authoritative from an early date. First by their disciples; who would have been the main agents for preserving their prophecies both in oral and written form. Later, as predictive elements of the prophecies were seen to be true, the authority of their message increased as the community was forced to consider the validity and implications of other aspects of their words.

These prophets appealed to the Torah and the covenant for their authority. They saw themselves standing in the mainstream and spirit of this tradition. They also saw themselves standing in the centre of a whole stream of prophetic tradition reaching back to the earliest times. They freely quoted the Torah and other prophets.⁵

Much of the prophets' teaching may well have been written down during the prophet's own lifetime (cf. Jeremiah and Baruch in Jeremiah 36). If not, then it would have been written down soon after their death by their faithful disciples, during which time an editing process would probably have taken place. Daniel 9:2 refers to 'the books', which is almost certainly a reference to the prophetic writings; a strong suggestion that they had established authority by his day.

³ As in some editions of the King James Version.

⁴ Note the absence of the book of Daniel.

⁵ cf. Micah 4:3 with Isa 2:4 and Joel 3:10; also Micah 3:12 with Jer 26:16-19.



It is important to recognise that books such as Joel, Obadiah and Isaiah 40 –66 present us with real chronological problems. However, these are not insurmountable, and while many questions may remain the message of these books is reasonably clear.

So the 'Former' and 'Latter Prophets' present us with a beautifully poised and honed perspective on biblical prophecy. The two flow naturally from the foundations of the Torah and show that history and oracle, act and word, are inseparable elements of prophecy. The historical framework of the 'Former' creates the setting for many of the oracles of the 'Latter', while in their turn the oracles illuminate more sharply God's declaration about particular events.

The Writings (K^etûbîm)

This final section of the Hebrew Scriptures was probably originally called 'Psalms'; the name of the first book in the collection serving as a title for the whole. In Luke 24:44 Jesus speaks about 'the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms', he is almost certainly referring to the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures in its three main sections, *Torah*, *N^ebî'îm* and *K^etûbîm*, in the popular way of the time. This final section is now sometimes referred to as the 'Hagiographa', literally 'the sacred writings'. We shall discuss this section under its main sub-sections.

Psalms

Psalms (lit. 'Songs of Praise') is made up of five books that form the Psalter. They hold a vital place in Israel's spiritual life being used in both public and private devotion. Contents reach back to early times and are made up of important earlier editions and collections, now carefully edited to form five books almost certainly to parallel the five books of the Torah.⁶ Important new light has been shed on the composition history of the Psalms by the discovery of a Psalms Scroll amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran. It contains most of the last third of the biblical Psalter but not in their biblical order. However, it also contains the text of 2 Sam 23:1-7, Psalm 151 (this is also in the LXX), Psalms 154-155 (which are also in the Syriac Bible), a poem related to Ben Sira 51:13-19, 30⁷ and three previously unknown Psalms. The evidence from Qumran suggests that both the order and content of at least the latter part of the Psalter was still fluid in the second century BCE.

Job

Job is an ancient story (cf. chapters 1–2, 42) cast into a brilliant poem at some later date to deal with the perplexing issue of why the righteous suffer. The

⁶ This subject is dealt with in much more detail in Section 6 below.

⁷ Ben Sira is a book in the Apocrypha (as far as Protestant Bibles are concerned). It is also known as Ecclesiasticus or Sirach.



ancient wisdom that God blesses the good and punishes the evildoer simply isn't true in practice. However, when God finally speaks in chapters 38-41 the speeches bypass completely the issue of the suffering of the righteous. The genius of the book, as we shall see later, is that it exposes the scape-goating mechanism that is endemic to human society in general and religion in particular.

Proverbs

Proverbs are teachings of the Wise to Hebrew youth. Showing how the covenant should work out in the practice of everyday life. It is not a 'cause and effect' approach (i.e. 'do this and this will automatically happen'), but rather revealing the practical texture and character of the covenant; this is the kind of life the covenant brings into being.

The Megilloth

The title of this section means the 'Festal Rolls' and contains five scrolls, which are read at one or other of the major Jewish feasts throughout the year. As we shall see they provide a profound overview of the way God moves or can be found within life. These are also writings which in the biblical arrangement used by Christians often get lost among other books; the Hebrew arrangement gives them both presence and power:

- **Ruth** (read at Shavuot/Pentecost) is a compact story about the way in which Hebrew covenant truth reaches into the nations and draws outsiders towards it; is a missionary story. Ruth's declaration to Naomi, 'Where you go, I will go ... your people shall be my people and your God my God...' (1:16), would have been a prayer the Hebrew hoped many Gentiles would pray; she is the example of the true proselyte. The story was also important in her being an ancestress of the great King David, and of the expected Messiah. Rabbis interpreted the love relation between Ruth and Boaz in Messianic terms.
- **Song of Songs** (read at Pesac Passover) presents us with a collection of deeply erotic love poetry. The nature of the lyrics has proved something of an embarrassment to both the Jewish and Christian communities down through the centuries. The rabbis would only allow men over the age of 30 years to read it. Traditionally it has been presented as an allegory of Yahweh's love for Israel or Christ's love for the church; however, the simple allegorical approach is flawed. It must be understood first as a declaration of human sexual love in its purest form, and only then does it become a window to understand the true nature of divine love.
- **Qoheleth** (Ecclesiastes) (read at Sukkoth/Tabernacles) is made up of the reflections of one of the Wise,⁸ a covenant philosopher. The writer looks at all

⁸ There have been suggestions that up to eleven people had a hand in writing Qoheleth, but we are persuaded that it is more likely the work of one hand!



the hard questions of existence and feels the full force of skepticism and doubt in the face of the apparent absurdities of reality. Yet, while still left with more questions than answers, comes to the conclusion, 'Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of everybody' (12:13).

- **Lamentations** (read at 'the 9th of Ab', commemorating the destruction of the Temple) is born out of the rubble and ashes of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE at the hands of the Babylonians. Here are the cries (Heb. *ekah*, 'Ah, how!') in the face of God's just judgment. There is recognition of the nation's failure to have responded to the repeated call of the prophets but there is hope that the future, amid the pain, can be different.
- **Esther** (read at Purim) is written in the face of the impending genocide of the Jewish people within the Persian empire. It illustrates the hostility the people of God can expect to face. It shows the miraculous way in which God can reverse an impossible situation. It shows how God can use a solitary individual, who is prepared to be obedient, to be his servant.

The scrolls of the Megilloth bring a variety of messages and perspectives, each is quite different from the others, and yet together they present a remarkable picture of the ways and places God is to be found. He is at the centre of erotic sexual passion, among the peoples of other nations, at the heart of grief and despair, working to save in the face of destruction and inspiring faith out of the skepticism and doubt produced by the enigma of existence.

Daniel

Daniel is not a prophetic book as the biblical book arrangement in our contemporary editions of the Bible erroneously suggests. The rabbis early recognised that Daniel was unique in style and content and identified it quite separately among the Writings. The structure of the book is unusual. The first half is stories encouraging faithfulness to Yahweh in a pagan environment. The second half is made up of high-energy visions filled with strong impact symbolism. This style of visionary writing is known as 'apocalyptic' (lit. 'unveiling'); it has been described as a 'child of prophecy' and as a 'literature of crisis'. Probably written and widely read during the crisis of the intertestamental period and the horror of Greek rule.⁹ The message of the concluding part of Daniel is that God is in control of history.

Ezra-Nehemiah

Nehemiah and the closing chapters of Ezra (8–10) contain more personal memoirs of these two leaders who served the returned Jewish community in Judea at the close of the biblical period. The relationship between these two is

⁹ Discussed in much more detail in Section 7 below.



complex and difficult to reconstruct but it does not distract from the message they bring.

Chronicles

Chronicles and Ezra 1-7 are no more history than are the 'Former Prophets'. The narrative tells the story of the Jewish people, as a worshipping community, from the time of Adam right through to the restoration of the Exile community in Judea. It does this with a particular emphasis on both the monarchy and the Temple. The early part of the chronicler's narrative uses genealogy to tell the story; the chronicler also uses much of the same source material to be found in the 'Former Prophets' (Samuel/Kings), but uses it in quite a different way and any material that does not fit the particular theme is excluded. The chronicler knows the readers are familiar with the 'Former Prophets'.

The Deuteronomistic History

Since the ground breaking work of the German scholar Martin Noth in 1943,¹⁰ scholars have recognised that the Former Prophets have been shaped by the book of Deuteronomy. Accordingly, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are referred to in modern scholarship as the 'Deuteronomistic History'. The final editor[s] of this collection is known as the Deuteronomist.

The Deuteronomist divided the history of Israel into four major periods: the time of Moses, the conquest, the period of the judges and the monarchy. Key speeches by Joshua (Joshua 1 and 23) and Samuel (1 Samuel 12) mark the transitional phases. In addition, 2 Samuel 7 is recognised as a pivotal chapter for the Deuteronomist.

Although Noth argued that the entire Deuteronomistic History was composed by one editor during the Babylonian exile, his view has been extensively criticised. The most influential view currently is that of Frank Moore Cross who argues for a two-stage editorial process.¹¹ The first took place during the reign of Josiah in the seventh century BCE. This edition had a positive view of the monarchy and served as propaganda for Josiah's reform. The second edition was composed during the Babylonian exile and emphasises the failure of the monarchy.

¹⁰ Reprinted as Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (JSOTSup15; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991).

¹¹ Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 99-105.



QUESTION

The biblical texts were written over a long period of time in a wide range of literary styles. They are the work of creative individuals and communities shaped by different cultural influences, spiritual understandings and perspectives; and the result of a range of theological questioning, reflection, insight and adaptation. What factors do you think draw it all together and hold it as a unity? What gives it its sense of integrity? Does this question help us to understand something about the nature of truth, how we encounter it and should try to communicate it?

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