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THE BIBLE - OLD TESTAMENT

The Book



The Bible (from *biblos*, Greek for 'book') is the basis of two great religions, Judaism in the Old Testament and Christianity in the New Testament. In each case it brings together a group of documents to tell the story of the founders and early followers of the religion. In doing so it also explains their beliefs.

The conventional sources of historical evidence (archaeological remains, written documents) provide few traces of the Old Testament story and none at all of the events described in the New Testament. Yet in the Bible the early Jews and Christians provide an account of themselves which is unparalleled, among religious groups of those times, in its wealth of detail.

The books of the Jewish Bible are believed to have been written over several centuries, beginning in the 10th century BC - by which time the Hebrews are settled in [Canaan](#), or Palestine. But in many parts the scribes are writing down a much older oral tradition. It is thought that some of the events described may go back as far as the 18th century BC.

The holiest part of the Bible for Jews is the first five books, known as the Torah ('instruction' or 'law' in Hebrew). In non-Jewish sources these books are sometimes called the Pentateuch ('five scrolls' in Greek, from a translation done in [Alexandria](#)).

Genesis, the first book of the Torah, begins with a resolutely monotheistic story of the creation and goes on to provide a series of myths which can be echoed in other religions - the fall of man into a state of sin through disobedience (Adam and Eve eating the apple), a great flood which sweeps away the whole of sinful mankind except for one small group of survivors (Noah and his family), and the emergence of different languages (God's punishment for man's presumption in building the mighty tower of Babel, which almost reaches to heaven).

With the entry of Abraham, *Genesis* reaches the story of the Bible's own people, the Hebrews.

Abraham's people: 18th - 13th century BC

In *Genesis* Abraham is the patriarch of a nomadic tribe. The story has him moving through Mesopotamia (from Ur to Harran) and then down into Canaan - a land which, God promises, his descendants will inherit.

Many tribes move with their flocks among the settled cities of Mesopotamia and Phoenicia. No doubt several, from time to time, have charismatic leaders long remembered by their descendants. There is no reason to doubt that a figure such as Abraham exists, and scholars put his likely date at about 1800 BC. What makes him significant is the idea of his pact with God, by which God will help [Abraham's](#) people in return for their fulfilling God's law. This is the covenant at the heart of the story of the Hebrews.

Abraham's grandson is Jacob, whose story provides the origin of the tribal division of the Hebrews. When God renews the covenant with Jacob he gives him a new name, Israel. Jacob eventually has twelve sons, from each of whom a tribe descends - the twelve tribes of Israel.

In *Genesis* the sons of Jacob cause his family to move to Egypt - first by selling one of their number (Joseph) into slavery there, and then by moving south themselves in a time of famine. People called *habiru* feature in Egyptian records. They have been identified by some scholars with the Hebrews, but there is no firm evidence to prove the link.

Moses and Exodus

In *Exodus*, the second book of the Torah, the religious identity

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of the Hebrew tribes is firmly established through the leadership and inspiration of Moses - as he brings them north towards Canaan, escaping from a state of slavery in Egypt.

It is to Moses that God reveals his name (from the burning bush), saying 'I Am Who I Am'. This gives him a name written with four Hebrew letters, YHWH, meaning 'He Who Is'. God's name is later considered too holy to be spoken, but with its vowels added it is Yahweh. In Christian versions of the Old Testament it becomes written as Jehovah.

God also reveals to Moses the ten commandments. If the Hebrews obey these laws, God will favour them as his chosen people and will bring them into the promised land of Canaan.

This pact is a renewal and development of the long-standing covenant between God and the Hebrews. It now becomes literally the centrepiece of the Hebrew religion. God, in *Exodus*, tells Moses to engrave the laws upon two tablets of stone and to place them in a wooden chest covered in pure gold. This chest is the ark of the [covenant](#). As the most sacred object of the Hebrew cult, it will eventually be housed in the inner sanctuary of the temple at Jerusalem.

In *Exodus* and the three remaining books of the Torah, the Hebrews are wandering in the Sinai desert under the leadership of Moses and of his elder brother Aaron, later seen as the prototype of the Hebrew priesthood. The third book, *Leviticus*, is priestly material - largely given over to listing the proper details of ritual and sacrifice. The fourth, *Numbers*, describes something of the social and political structure of the tribes on the slow journey north towards the promised land. *Deuteronomy* is an amplification of God's law for his people.

At the end of *Deuteronomy* Moses glimpses the land promised by God to Abraham, but dies before he can enter it.

The Torah: 1000-400 BC

The five books of the Torah, made up of passages composed at various times from the reign of David onwards, are amalgamated and amplified by the priests in about 400 BC. They attribute all five books to Moses, inspired by God.

The underlying purpose of the priests is to reinforce the identity of the Jewish community after the [return to Jerusalem](#). In this they succeed beyond all possible expectation. The Torah becomes, and remains today, the centre of Judaism. The most sacred part of a synagogue is the ark containing the Scrolls of the Law. Reading from them, in a cycle which completes the Torah each year, is the heart of the liturgy.

After the five books of the Torah, the Old Testament consists of material which can be classed in three categories. There are historical books, continuing the story of the children of Israel; prophetic books, in which the prophets (in effect preachers) castigate the Israelites for their sins and warn them of the wrath of God to come; and poetic works, ranging from the devotional (*Psalms*) to the more literary (*Song of Solomon*).

In Jewish Bibles the warnings of the prophets are interspersed with the history, of which they are indeed an important part. In the Christian arrangement the prophets are kept to the end, after the poetic books.

Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings: 11th - 8th century BC

The historical books of the Bible begin with two, *Joshua* and *Judges*, which describe the attempts of the Hebrews to enter the promised land. In spite of the resounding story about the walls of Jericho falling down when Joshua (the chosen successor of Moses) marches round them, the texts make it plain that the move into Canaan is a long and fiercely contested process - with the various tribes achieving their own small victories and glorying in their own local heroes.

The most famous of these heroes is Samson, a great slayer of the people who are the Hebrews' main rivals for this land of milk and honey. They are [The Philistines](#).

The peak of the Israelite achievement is described in the two books of *Samuel*. These tell how the tribes of Israel finally unite against the Philistines. Samuel, a combination of priest, prophet, soldier and politician, anoints Saul as king and thus creates the Israelite monarchy.

Saul's success is limited, and it is not until the throne has been usurped by David that the monarchy in Israel is secure. It then seems to go into a steady decline, from Solomon onwards (as described in *Kings*). Even so, David's dynasty will rule for 400 years. And moral decline has certain attractions, as a theme, for the stern prophets.

Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel: 8th - 6th century BC

The message of the prophets is a constant one. The threats facing Israel are the direct result of the failure of the people and of their rulers to live according to God's commandments. The disasters, when they come, will be God's punishment. But

by the same token there is hope. The Israelites are, after all, his chosen people. If they repent and mend their ways, he will again protect them.

Among the three major prophets, Isaiah preaches in the 8th century when the threat is from Assyria; Jeremiah pronounces doom in the early 6th century, when the enemy is Babylon; and Ezekiel, in exile, comments a few years later on the same disasters, after Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians.

A variable text: from the 5th century BC

After the return from Babylon the priests in Jerusalem are determined to establish a definitive text of the Bible. Scrolls are exhibited in the Temple forecourt, against which other manuscripts can be checked and corrected. Yet over the centuries the text becomes increasingly subject to change for a purely practical reason.

The original version shows only the consonants. To help in the study of the Torah, schools add vowels and accents to give assistance when reading aloud. This allows ample opportunity for variations to creep in.

Masoretic text: 9th century AD

The problem is not finally resolved until a major effort in the 9th century AD by Jewish scholars in Jerusalem and in Baghdad (the successor city to Babylon) results at last in consensus. Their agreed Hebrew Bible becomes the standard for all subsequent manuscript copies, and thereafter for printed versions. As guardians of the biblical text these scholars are called Masoretes. The authorized version is known as the Masoretic text.

Meanwhile the Hebrew Bible becomes the first body of sacred scripture to be translated - in the form of the **Septuagint**, for the Greek-speaking Jews of **Alexandria**. And it acquires a new and influential identity as the Old Testament, prefacing the **New Testament** of the Christians.

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