

## Introduction

# What Are the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament?

### Key Points

Christianity and Judaism are often described as “religions of the book” due to the central role the Bible plays in both traditions. As a result, it is important to ask what *type* of book the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament is? How is it arranged? When were its texts written, translated, and accepted as a fixed collection? What sort of literature does it include? How do we attend to its interpretation? Thus understanding the Hebrew Bible involves not only knowing more about its content, but also about its history and development as a collection of books.

The Hebrew Bible is actually more like a library than an individual book. In the Jewish tradition, it consists of twenty-four books arranged in three divisions (the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings). These books were written over a long period of time and reflect diverse theological perspectives. This “library” also includes various types of literature: historical narratives, poetry, law, prophecy, and wisdom literature. In light of its complexity, scholars have traditionally analyzed the Hebrew Bible using multiple interpretive methods, such as source, form, and redaction criticism. More recently, scholars have begun to utilize insights from other fields, including ancient Near Eastern studies, sociology, and art history, to shed new light on the meaning and background of biblical literature.

The books of the Hebrew Bible were originally written and preserved on individual scrolls. However, we do not have access to these original texts today. Modern English translations are based on complete manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible from the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. The form of the Hebrew Bible in these manuscripts was established by ancient scribes known as the Masoretes. Much earlier evidence of biblical books is found among the Dead Sea Scrolls (third century BCE–first century CE), but these texts are mostly preserved in small fragments. Though written predominantly in Hebrew, biblical scrolls were translated into Greek by the second century BCE. The list of books we have in the Hebrew Bible

today was first accepted as “canonical” in the first century CE. Early Christianity recognized the content of the Hebrew Bible as part of its Scriptures, but slightly different canons are used in Protestant, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and other Eastern churches.

## Key Terms

**Canon** The term canon, meaning “rule” or “measuring stick,” refers to the corpus of biblical books viewed as sacred Scripture. The canon of the Hebrew Bible, which consists of twenty-four books, emerged gradually over time and attained its final form in the first century CE. The Christian Old Testament includes the same content, but in a slightly different arrangement.

**Septuagint (LXX)** The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Its name comes from the legendary *Letter of Aristeas*, which claims that the Torah was first translated into Greek by seventy-two Jewish elders (Septuagint means “seventy”) at the request of an Egyptian king. Eventually, the term Septuagint was applied to the whole collection of Greek Scriptures, which included a variety of books not found in the Hebrew Bible.

**Masoretes/Masoretic text (MT)** The Masoretes were ancient scribes responsible for transmitting the Hebrew Bible. They established the form of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Masoretic text (MT), that modern English translations are based on. This text is preserved in the most important ancient manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, including the Aleppo Codex from the early tenth century CE.

**Dead Sea Scrolls** The Dead Sea Scrolls are a large collection of texts found in caves near Qumran

(south of Jericho) and dating from as early as the third century BCE. This collection includes about two hundred small fragments of biblical scrolls as well as the whole book of Isaiah. These texts correspond closely to the Masoretic text, but in some cases they reflect a form closer to what is presupposed by the Septuagint.

**Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books** In Protestant terminology, Apocrypha (literally, “hidden away”) refers to books in the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic canons that are not found in the Hebrew Bible. These same books are often called deuterocanonical (or “secondarily canonical”) by Catholics. Examples include Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and 1–2 Maccabees.

## Key Personalities

### Julius Wellhausen

Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) was a German biblical scholar most well known for his work in the area of source criticism. This method of biblical interpretation, which in the nineteenth century was known as “literary criticism,” attempts to come to terms with the composite character of a literary text by separating and describing its underlying sources. While this method can be applied to both biblical and non-biblical texts, Wellhausen primarily used source criticism in his work on the Pentateuch. Wellhausen’s “Documentary Hypothesis” which will

be discussed in more detail in chapter two, made an enormous contribution to the scholarly understanding of the origins of the Pentateuch.

### Hermann Gunkel

Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), another prominent German biblical scholar, is regarded as the founder of form criticism. While not denying the validity of source criticism, Gunkel shifted focus

toward the literary form or genre of smaller textual units. Gunkel also emphasized the importance of the social location (the *Sitz im Leben*) of the text for understanding its meaning. Gunkel's form critical approach drew heavily upon newly discovered ancient Near Eastern literature, which offered new possibilities for comparison with biblical stories, themes, and imagery.

### Questions for Study and Discussion

1. The chapter claims that the Hebrew Bible is problematic as a source for history. What are some of the arguments used in support of this claim? Do you agree with them? Why or why not?
2. For many religious people, the Hebrew Bible continues to have an authoritative status. Do the arguments presented in this chapter discredit or call into question the Hebrew Bible's status in religious communities? Why or why not?
3. What are some of the major methodological changes and archaeological discoveries that have shaped biblical studies over the last several hundred years? What sorts of problems and possibilities do they bring to light?
4. Why are the Dead Sea Scrolls important for understanding the Hebrew Bible?