



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic **An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians**

Script 5: What is the Hebrew Bible?

The term “Bible” has many different meanings and is used in many diverse ways. Jews and Christians use different words to describe the scriptures that are sacred to their religions. Let’s examine the differences between some of the terms that Jews and Christians use for the sacred scriptures that they refer to as “the Bible.”

The term “Bible” is often used as a generic term by both Jews and Christians, sometimes for the same scriptures and sometimes for different scriptures. For example, a Jewish person may refer to the 24 sacred books that are the foundation of the Jewish religion by a few different names, such as the *TaNakh*, the Hebrew Bible, or just the Bible. Christians may refer to the same scriptures as “the Old Testament,” the First Testament, or “the Bible.”

The Christian “New Testament,” when published in its own volume, may be called a “Bible,” “The New Testament,” or “The Second Testament.” Sometimes both the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament” are published in one volume. This is often also referred to by Christians as “a Bible” or “the Bible.” Jews refer to this as “the Christian Bible.”

For many Jews, the Hebrew acronym *TaNakh* is the term that is used to identify the Bible. The Hebrew letter *tav*, “T” in English, stands for Torah, the Five Books of Moses, also known as the Pentateuch. “N,” *nun*, is for *Nevi'im*, Prophets, the second major section of the Hebrew Bible. This section contains early historical books about the settlement of the Israelites in the land of Canaan. It also presents the writings of Israel’s great prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea.

“Kh” represents *Ketuvim*, the Writings, which comprises the third section of the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew letter “*khaf*” becomes a “k” sound when it comes at the beginning of a word, while it has a “ch” or “kh,” *khuh* sound in the middle or end of a word. This section is composed of the literary writings of the Bible, including poetry, wisdom literature, and narrative texts, such as Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and the Book of Esther, among others. Of particular interest is that the Book of Ruth appears in this section of the *TaNakh*. In Bibles

published by most Christian denominations, the Book of Ruth appears in the section *Nevi'im* (Prophets) after the Book of Judges.

For Jews, the Torah is considered to be the most sacred of the three parts of the *TaNaKh*. It contains the foundational commandments given by God to the Jewish people and is the basis of their covenant. The Torah is composed of the first five books of the *TaNaKh*. The Hebrew title of each book of the Torah is derived from the first important word that appears at the very beginning of each book. For example, the title “*Bereshit*” is the very first Hebrew word of the very first book of the Hebrew Bible.

The English title of each book is based on an early translation of the *TaNaKh* from Hebrew into Greek called the Septuagint or from a later Latin translation known as the Vulgate. These titles represent the topic of each of the five books. Exodus, for example, is the English title of the second book of the Torah and deals with the Israelites’ escape from Egypt.

Here are the five books of the Torah in order:

Bereshit (In the Beginning) – Genesis (Beginnings)

Shemot (Names) – Exodus (Escape)

Vayikra (And God Called) – Leviticus (Relating to the duties of the Levites)

Bemidbar (In the Wilderness) – Numbers (This book starts with the taking of a census)

Devarim (Words) – Deuteronomy (Second Law or Repeated Law)

While the Torah always comes first in the Bible, there is a significant difference between the order of other books as they appear in the Hebrew Bible and in Christian collections. In Jewish tradition, the Hebrew Bible moves from the Torah to prophetic works to later writings. By contrast, Christian versions of the Hebrew Bible typically include the historical material in the middle and conclude with the prophetic works. When followed by the New Testament, this order creates a foundational message that is central to Christian theology – prophecy did not end with the Hebrew Bible and continued with Jesus into the New Testament period. By including the books of the prophets in the middle section before the other writings, the Hebrew Bible used by Jews presents the theological message that prophecy has ended and the Biblical canon is closed.

The Hebrew Bible was written in a language we now refer to as Biblical Hebrew. This is different from, but historically connected to, modern Hebrew, the official language of the modern State of Israel, which draws some idioms from the Bible. Hebrew is one of the oldest languages and, in its various forms, has been in continuous use from ancient to modern times.

The Hebrew Bible used by Jews is similar to the text that Christians call “The Old Testament,” although some versions of the Old Testament include works not found in the *TaNaKh*. As we noted earlier, the order of the books differs in the Jewish and various Christian canons of the Bible. Jews prefer not to use the term “Old Testament” to refer to these writings because the term “Old Testament” suggests that there is a later group of scriptures that were more important than the earlier scriptures. For Jews, the original Hebrew text, written in Biblical Hebrew, is the most important of all sacred scriptures. A Jewish Bible does not include the New Testament. Seminarians do well to understand and appreciate what Christians and Jews share in

common as sacred scripture, and also how they differ in their respective canons of the Bible and its interpretation.

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