

The Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible is the holy scripture of Judaism and the basis of the Jewish religion. In Hebrew, it is called **TaNaKh** (also “Tanach” or “Tenak”, an acronym based on the initial Hebrew letters in the names of its three principal parts:

- **Torah** (“instructions”, “law”); “Pentateuch”, the “Five Books of Moses”:
5 books narrating the history of Israel till the death of Moses and containing the Law of Israel in several versions.
- **Nevi'im** (“prophets”): 8 books with historical and prophetic texts.
- **Kh'tuvim** (“writings”): 11 books of history, wisdom, and poetry.

The Hebrew Bible thus contains 24 books. Traditionally, the oldest books are ascribed to Moses (ca 1455 BCE), the youngest to a “Great Assembly” (ca 400 BCE). In the opinion of modern bible scholars, the oldest text (the “Song of Deborah” in Judges 5: 2–31) took form around 1200 BCE, the youngest text, among the psalms, was written around 70 BCE.

The official list (“Canon”) of the books took form around 70 CE.

I. Torah

In Hebrew usage, the five books are named according to their initial word, in modern vernaculars according to their contents:

1. B'reshit (= Genesis)
2. Sh'mot (= Exodus)
3. Vayiqra (= Leviticus)
4. B'midbar (= Numbers)
5. D'varim (= Deuteronomy)

II. Nevi'im

a) Older prophetic writings

6. Joshua
7. Judges
8. Samuel 1 and 2 (counted as one book)
9. Kings 1 and 2 (counted as one book)

b) Younger prophetic writings

10. Isaiah
11. Jeremiah
12. Ezekiel

c) Minor prophetic writings

13. Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi (counted together as one book)

III. Kh'tuvim

14. Psalms (T'hilim)
15. Proverbs (Mishlei)
16. Job
17. Song of Songs
18. Ruth
19. Lamentations (Eikha)
20. Ecclesiastes (Qohelet)
21. Esther
22. Daniel
23. Ezra and Nehemiah (counted as one book)
24. Chronicles 1 and 2 (counted as one book)

Interpretations of the Hebrew Bible: Midrash und Talmud

Around these scriptures there gradually arose a body of traditional rabbinic interpretations of the biblical texts, especially of the provisions of the law. These commentaries **Midrash** (= "study", "interpretation") to individual books of the Bible came to be committed to writing after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

Around 200 CE, a systematic collection of the rabbinic legal opinions and debates reflected in the *Midrash* took shape, organized now by topics rather than by books of the Bible. This original collection was given the name **Mishna** (= "redaction" or "study") and represents the first written compendium of oral Jewish law. The *Mishna* consists generally of rather short texts elucidating a specific point of law.

In subsequent centuries, a further body of rabbinic commentary arose to interpret the individual units of the *Mishna*. This secondary commentary is called the **Gemara** (Aramaic = "teaching", "knowledge"). Together, *Mishna* and *Gemara* form the **Talmud**, next to the Bible the principal textual basis of Judaism.

There are two versions of the *Gemara*, one originating in Palestine and completed around 350/400 CE, the other originating in Iraq (Babylon) and completed by 500/800 CE. Of the two versions, which differ in scope and content, the so-called *Babylonian Talmud* is by far the more important version and is the one generally meant, when the word "Talmud" is used without further qualification. The Talmud is much more extensive than the Bible: complete editions of the *Babylonian Talmud*, which often include additional rabbinic commentaries, can run to some 10 000 pages spread over a dozen or so volumes.