

THE HEBREW CANON AND THREE-FOLD DIVISION OF SCRIPTURE

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Soli Deo Gloria!

"And he said unto them, **These are the words which I spoke unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.**" **Luke 24:44**

THREE-FOLD DIVISION OF THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES. The Hebrew canon of Scripture is identical to the 39 books of the Old Testament, although they are ordered differently. The Hebrew canon is organized in three divisions: 1) the Law (Heb., *Torah*), 2) the Prophets (Heb., *Nevi'im*), and 3) the Writings (Heb., *Ketuvim*). The first three letters of these divisions, in Hebrew T-N-K, became the name of the Hebrew Scriptures (i.e., the Tanakh).

THE TORAH. The first division of the Tanakh, the Torah (i.e., the Law), is comprised of the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

THE PROPHETS. The second division of the Tanakh, the Prophets, itself has a three-fold structure: 1) the Former Prophets, 2) the Major Prophets, and 3) the Minor Prophets. The major and minor prophets together are also referred to as the Latter Prophets.

- 1) **The Former Prophets.** The former prophets are Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Their order is chronological.
- 2) **The Major Prophets.** The major prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Their order is chronological.
- 3) **The Minor Prophets.** The minor prophets, known in the Hebrew canon as a single book designated "The Twelve", are: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Their order is roughly, though not strictly, chronological (Amos may have been a contemporary of Hosea, but arguably preceded him). The minor prophets are "minor" in the sense that they are considerably shorter books than those of the other prophets.

THE WRITINGS. The third division of the Tanakh, the Writings, contains the remainder of the O.T. books ordered as: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

Note on Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible. Despite the names of the divisions of Scripture in the Tanakh, prophetic material is not limited to the second division (i.e., the Prophets). There are books found in the Writings that are certainly prophetic in content. The Psalms contain a vast amount of prophetic material, and the Book of Daniel is arguably the preeminent book of prophecy in the O.T. Similarly, the books of the Law contain prophecy. The placement of books into the division known as The Prophets related to whether or not the writer of the book was recognized as occupying the office of a prophet in a formal sense, not whether or not the book contained prophecy. Indeed, Jesus indicated that all three divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures contained prophecy concerning Him (Luk24:44).

WHAT BIBLE DID JESUS USE? Based upon an Egyptian legend (i.e., the Letter of Aristeas), modern text critics of the Bible assert that the Hebrew scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament) were translated into Greek circa 285-250 BC. This Greek version of the O.T. has come to be known as the Septuagint¹ (abbreviated as LXX), since the legend purports that the translation was made by 70 (or 72) Jewish sages (6 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel). They further contend that the Bible Jesus and His disciples used was the LXX rather than the Scriptures in Hebrew. They base this contention primarily on two dubious allegations: 1) after the Jews returned from Babylon in the 4th century BC, they spoke Aramaic rather than Hebrew, and 2) many N.T. quotations of the O.T., including those made by Jesus, appear to be taken from the LXX.

To the contrary, internal evidence from the N.T. makes clear that Jesus and the Jews in 1st century Israel spoke Hebrew. The N.T. was written in Greek, but in a number of places in the Gospels translation of important words into Hebrew is given (e.g., Jn5:2; 19:13,17); no such translations into Aramaic occur. When Jesus spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus, He did so "in the Hebrew tongue" (Act26:14). Similarly, when the Apostle Paul wished to speak directly to Jews in a mixed audience, he is said to address them in "Hebrew" (cf. Act21:40; 22:2).

Furthermore, Jesus used a Hebrew Bible. Jesus Himself referred to the Scriptures as having the three-fold division of the Hebrew Bible (cf. Luk24:44; where the Psalms appear as the first book of the third division). Furthermore, by citing "Abel" and "Zechariah" as the first and last martyrs in the O.T. (Matt23:35), Jesus validated the order of the books in the Tanakh (cf. Gen4:8; 2Chron24:20-21). In contrast, the LXX is neither organized according to the three-fold division in Hebrew, nor do the order of its books end with Chronicles; in addition, the LXX contains more than a dozen additional books (i.e., the Apocrypha), none of which exist in Hebrew, none of which are quoted by any O.T. or N.T. book, which contain errors and doctrines that are inconsistent with that of the O.T. and N.T., and which have never been considered canonical by the Jews. Finally, Jesus asserted that every "jot" and "tittle" of "the law" (i.e., Torah) are essential (Matt5:18). The "jot" (Hebrew, *yod*) is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the "tittle" is the smallest part of a Hebrew letter that in some cases distinguishes one letter from another (see Figure 1)—but these literary allusions only have meaning if Jesus is referring to the Hebrew Bible, as they do not exist in Greek.



Figure 1. Hebrew letters *resh* (left) and *dalet* (right), distinguished only by a tittle.

Finally, the very close correspondence of many N.T. quotations of the O.T. to the text of the LXX is better explained as the LXX quoting from the N.T., rather than vice-versa. A clear example of this is seen by comparing Romans

¹ Septuagint is a Greek word that means 70.

3:10-18, which includes a quotation from Psalm 14:1-3, with its source in both the Hebrew Masoretic text and the Greek Septuagint; it is obvious that Psalm 14:3 in the Septuagint has been imported from Romans 3:13-18 (see TABLE 1). Though the Egyptian legend asserts a 3rd century BC production of the LXX, there is no extant manuscript of the LXX before the 4th century AD (at the earliest). What is known as the LXX today is the O.T. portion of Codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus (purported to date from the 4th century AD) and Codex Alexandrinus (purported to date from the 5th century AD). It is most likely that what is known as the Septuagint was actually produced after the N.T. in order to have a Greek version of the complete Bible, and that as part of its development N.T. Greek texts quoting the O.T. were inserted into the text of the LXX (and in some cases, inserted improperly as in Psalm 14:3).

In conclusion, the evidence from the N.T. is clear that 1st century Jews (including Jesus) spoke Hebrew, and that the Bible they used was the Hebrew Tanakh.