

The Hebrew Bible Amongst Jews and Christians

The language of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as its status as canon, plays a critical role for many students of Biblical Hebrew. First of all, the canonical status defines for many why they study the Hebrew Bible. Secondly, the language of this body of literature, being more than 99 percent Hebrew and less than 1 percent Aramaic, is a very important reason to learn Hebrew. In this newsletter, we will look at differences and similarities between Jewish and Christian perspectives of the Hebrew Bible. We will discuss terminology, Greek and Hebrew usage in history, the contents and the order of books in the Hebrew Bible.

Jews and Christians both consider the Hebrew Bible as an authoritative text. However, Judaism and Christianity also have distinct authoritative texts. It is in light of this fact that some of the conventional religious terminology receives meaning. In Christianity, the Hebrew Bible is often called the Old Testament, or Old Covenant. See 2 Cor 3:14 for example. This obviously is distinguished from the New Testament mentioned in 1 Cor 11:25. The Bible or Torah is often called covenant in biblical and post biblical literature. See for example Jer 31:30-32. Among the plethora of names for the Bible in Jewish tradition, *ketuvim* and *miqra* is especially telling, since they emphasize the written and read, in contrast to the Oral Torah (Mishnah, Talmud, etc...)

Now that we are more familiar with the terms for the Hebrew Bible, let's look at the word for Bible itself. Our word for *Bible* comes from Latin and Greek equivalents, but derives ultimately from the Hebrew term *soferim*, meaning the writings. Now that we have seen some of the terms, let's look at why Christians and Jews have a different Bible.

It is perhaps not completely surprising that Judaism and Christianity share their reverence for the Hebrew Bible. After all, both religions reflect surviving streams within the plurality of sects of first century Judaism. Judaism of today is an offshoot of the Pharisaic movement. This movement had two main centers, Palestine and Babylon. The religious literature that survived from this period is mostly Hebrew and Aramaic. These Palestinian and Babylonian communities used the Hebrew version of the Bible, later known as the Masoretic Text (MT). If you have a Hebrew text of the Bible, you will most likely have this text.

The sister religion of Judaism, Christianity, was not ethnically focused, but embraced people from all nations. Since Christianity quickly spread in the Greek speaking world, it is only logical that Christianity embraced the Greek Bible. Let's take a look at the Greek Bible. The Greek Bible is also known as the Septuagint (LXX), which was translated, according to tradition, by about 70 Jewish scholars. The Babylonian Talmud records that 72 elders independently translated the Torah without any differences. Whatever truth is stored in this tradition, it is clear that the Torah section of the LXX is of superior quality.

The majority of scholars think that the Torah was translated into Greek around the 3rd century BCE and the other books over the next two centuries. The LXX initially served to allow the many Greek speaking Diaspora Jews, like those in Alexandria in Egypt to also be able to read the Bible. However, a strong decline of the Jewish population in the Greek speaking world and the use of the LXX by Christians in the second century C.E., made the LXX slowly shift more and more to becoming a Christian Bible.

The LXX held within Christianity's inception a very prominent role, more so than the MT. In conclusion, if we are allowed to generalize history a bit, we can say that the predecessors of modern Judaism used the MT, while in Christianity a Greek

translation, the LXX played a more prominent role.

It is Judaism and Christianity's respective usage of the MT and LXX that is responsible for today's difference in book order and this is also reflected in English Bible translations. (The content is the same, the order is different.) A Jewish Bible translation, for example the JPS (Jewish Publication Society), typically has a different order of books than a Christian Bible, such as the KJV (King James Version).

In the Jewish Bible, there is a tripartite division of the Bible books: Law, Prophets and Writings. In the Christian Old Testament we find: Pentateuch, Historical Books, Poetry and Wisdom and Prophets. The exact order is outlined in the table below.

In this newsletter we looked to one aspect of the history of the Hebrew Bible, that is, its usage among Judaism and Christianity. We learned why Jews and Christians use different terms for the Bible. We also learned why the order of the books is different. Both divisions have a useful function. The Jewish division classifies broad genres, while the Christian version has a more historical approach. We also learned to appreciate small but important nuances; that is, the LXX is not per se a Christian version of the Bible, but was actually a Hellenistic (Greek) Jewish translation of the Bible, dating to the third century BCE. The LXX is one of the most valuable translations of the Hebrew Bible. However, it remains a translation. Reading the MT in Hebrew is the closest a student can get to the original. Knowing Biblical Hebrew is therefore imperative.