

## 1. THE HEBREW BIBLE

### The Jewish scriptural canon

The Hebrew Bible is called the *Tanakh*. This term, which came into use in the Middle Ages, is an acronym for the three parts that comprise it: the *Torah* (the Pentateuch), the *Nevi'im* (the prophetic books), and the *Ketuvim* (the Hagiographa). Other Hebrew names for the Bible are derived from the root *k-t-v* (to write) and *q-r-'* (to read) to emphasize the centrality of the written nature of the biblical text and to underscore the oral element that is absolutely constitutive in the study of the Jewish tradition.

The *Tanakh* contains divinely inspired texts that guide the religious practices and beliefs of the Jewish people.

The three sections of the *Tanakh* are:

a) The *Torah* (Pentateuch) which is comprised of five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy;

b) the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), which include the *Nevi'im rishonim* (the Former Prophets: Gioshua, Judges, Samuel I and II, Kings I e II) and the *Nevi'im Acharonim* (the Latter Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve Minor Prophets);

c) the *Ketuvim* (Hagiographa), which include books of wisdom known by the acronym *emet* - truth: Job ('*Yiov*'), Proverbs (*Mishlè*), Psalms (*Tehillim*), the five scrolls, which are still read on certain occasions during the year (see below): the Song of Songs on *Pesach*, Ruth on *Shavu'ot*, Lamentations on the fast of the 9th of Av, Ecclesiastes on *Sukkot*, Esther on *Purim*; historical books (Daniel, Ezra and Nechemià, Chronicles I and II). The canonisation of some of the books of the *Ketuvim* (Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Esther) were the subject of discussion among the rabbis of the *Mishna* and *Midrash*. It must be pointed out, however, that the term canon derives from New Testament studies; in rabbinic tradition, the expression used to indicate the sacredness of a text is "to make the hands unclean" (see, e.g., the *Mishnah* in *Yadayim* 3:5).

One issue that required great effort on the part of the rabbis was the accuracy of the biblical text. The settling of the text took place between the end of the Byzantine period and the beginning of the Islamic period, thanks to the work of the Masoretes, who were active in Israel and Babylonia. The model that prevailed in the Middle Ages and is still used today was that of the Tiberias School.

### The relationship of the Jews with the Bible

The Jewish people's relationship with their sacred texts is so deep and essential that mystics say that Israel and the Torah are one. The *Torah*, the Pentateuch, the first part

of the Bible, is kept in the synagogues, handwritten in the original text on parchment scrolls and richly decorated according to the various traditions. From the cabinet in which it is kept, it is solemnly taken out to be read publicly during liturgies, especially on Saturday mornings and holidays. The contents of the *Torah* are divided into weekly portions so that it is read in full and in order throughout the year. After the reading of the *Torah*, a passage from the Prophets is read whose theme is related to that of the *Torah* just read, or to a special day in the calendar.

The *Torah* is being studied, taught, and interpreted continuously. The study of *Torah* is one of the essential religious obligations of every Jew, from the time one is able to understand it until the last day of one's life. The *Torah* is studied in its original text with all the commentaries that have overlapped over the centuries and are printed in common editions around the original text. Typically, on each Sabbath, the rabbi will explain and comment on a passage from the *Torah* that has just been read, but this is only part of the study of the text.

Above all, the *Torah* is the source of conduct, the first text in which the precepts to be observed are set forth. Some precepts may be set forth in great detail in the *Torah*, others may be barely alluded to, and it is the role of the oral tradition to illustrate and answer any questions that may arise.

The prophetic books contain stories, moral guides, admonitions, hopes, and represent the soul and constant guidance of the people of Israel throughout its history. The Hagiographa contain texts of wisdom, but also texts of great spirituality, such as the Psalms, many of which are used in the daily liturgy.

Jews do not like the definition of the Bible as the Old Testament because, with all due respect, it seems to distance something that is instead experienced as always alive and relevant. The entire *Torah* is sacred, and all of its rules must be observed; many of the rules are related to purity and sacrificial norms associated with the existence of a Temple, and since the Temple was destroyed, the rules do not apply, but not because they have been abrogated, only suspended. Otherwise, no distinctions are made and everything is to be observed, the idea of selection being inconceivable. Obviously, Jews reject interpretations that make the Bible a proclamation of an event whose holiness they do not share.

### **The Hebrew Writings and the Christian Bible**

The Holy Scriptures of the Jewish people are a fundamental part of the Christian Bible. In fact, all the books that make up the *Tanakh* are also part of the Christian Bible, of which they form the Old Testament. The latter also includes seven books written before Christ, but which are not part of the Hebrew Bible: Judith, Tobiah, the two books of Maccabees, Sirach, Wisdom, Baruch. These texts are called "deuterocanonical" and belonged to the Bible of the Septuagint (LXX), a Greek-language version compiled in Alexandria between the 3rd and 1st centuries BC. It should also be mentioned that the contents of the Book of Esther and the Book of Daniel differ to some extent in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible.

The relationship between the Old and New Testaments is of great importance to the

Catholic Church, so much so that throughout its history it has not hesitated to define as gravely heretical a doctrine such as that of the Greek theologian Marcion (2nd century AD), who, by affirming a clear dualism between the God of the Old Testament and the Father revealed by Jesus in the New Testament, ended up excluding the Hebrew Scriptures from the Christian Bible.

From the very beginning, Christianity has held these books in high esteem, as St. Paul expresses in the Letter to the Romans: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.” (Rom 15:4). Furthermore, Jesus Himself says that “the Scriptures cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

In recent times, the Second Vatican Council also addressed the issue, stating that “The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable. (...) These same books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence.” (*Dei Verbum*, 14-15) For the Catholic Church, therefore, there is an inseparable unity between the two parts of the Bible. We are often reminded of the thought of Saint Augustine of Hippo, according to which “the New Testament is hidden in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New”<sup>1</sup>. The irreplaceable importance of the Old Testament is in fact accompanied, on the Christian side, by a Christological reading of it. This means that Christians read the Old Testament in the light of the dead and risen Christ and affirm that the Scriptures find their full fulfilment in him. It should be noted, however, that the concept of the fulfilment of Scripture is complex because it involves a threefold dimension: the fundamental dimension of continuity with the Old Testament revelation, the dimension of rupture, and the dimension of fulfilment. It is precisely for these reasons that Benedict XVI points out that “the Jewish understanding of the Bible can help Christians to understand and study the Scriptures”<sup>2</sup>.

### Bibliography

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1 a) *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, 2, 73: PL 34, 623.

2 Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 30 September 2010, n. 41.