

Lecture Three

Forms of Jewish Scripture

Scope: In the 1st century C.E., we catch a glimpse of the Jewish Bible as the central symbol of Jews throughout the world, yet also as diverse in its forms and in its interpretations as Judaism was itself diverse and even divided in its response to Hellenistic culture and Roman rule. Different groups of Jews disagreed on what books constituted Scripture. They read their texts in different languages: While the Hebrew text was read by many in Palestine, other Jews both in Palestine and in the Diaspora read Scripture in Greek. Distinct lines of biblical interpretations also developed in this period. An examination of the Bible at Qumran (in the Dead Sea Scrolls) reveals some of the complexity.

Outline

- I. Our knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures in the 1st century of the Common Era (C.E.) is based mainly on literary evidence that is itself based on those Scriptures.
 - A. Judaism in the 1st century is both distinctly unified and internally divided. From the outside, it appears as an extended family, a “second race” among the nations. From within, Judaism takes many and competing forms.
 - B. The term *Torah* can stand as a central symbol that unified Jews throughout the Mediterranean world.
 1. Torah signifies a shared set of texts that are read in worship and study, above all, the Law of Moses.
 2. Torah connotes as well a shared story found within those texts, a story that provides all Jews with a sense of identity among the nations.
 3. Torah means also a set of fundamental convictions, especially that God is One, that God has elected the people Israel, and that God and Israel are bound by covenant.
 4. Torah contains the commandments that spell out the demands of covenant on the side of the people, and Jews everywhere were linked by shared observance of circumcision, the Sabbath, and other moral and ritual obligations.

5. Torah also provides the basis for a wisdom, or philosophy of life, based on the covenant and commandments.
- C. Jews in the Mediterranean world of the 1st century C.E. were diverse and, sometimes, divided.
1. Geographically, more Jews lived in the Diaspora than in Palestine (*eretz Israel*).
 2. Linguistically, Jews in the Diaspora predominantly spoke Greek (in the west) or Aramaic (in the east), whereas in Palestine, Hebrew and Aramaic dominated, although Greek was widespread as well.
 3. Culturally, Jews in the Diaspora were a tiny minority among pagan neighbors, whereas in Israel, Jews were an oppressed majority.
 4. The most important divisive factors were ideological: Jews disagreed on how to respond to the aggressive cultural challenge posed by Greco-Roman culture and Roman imperial rule. In Palestine, Jewish sects (the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots) had political, as well as religious, differences.
- D. This combination of factors generated a large amount of literature in both Hebrew and Greek that forms the basis, together with archaeological information, of our knowledge.
- II. If Torah is a symbol of unity in 1st-century Judaism, it is also a source of contention among competing groups.
- A. There was not firm agreement on what actually constituted Torah—which writings were to be regarded as Scripture.
1. The Samaritans, centered in their temple at Shechem, and the Sadducees, centered in the national temple in Jerusalem, each recognized only the five books of Moses as authoritative and based their beliefs and practices on Torah in the narrowest sense.
 2. In Alexandria, the Hellenistic Jew Philo also seemed to focus almost exclusively on the Law of Moses in his extensive writings, although he was aware of the Prophets and other writings.
 3. At Qumran, the Essene sect recognized and commented extensively on both the Law and the Prophets but also

collected and wrote a number of apocryphal texts of their own.

4. The Pharisees seem to have had the most inclusive sense of Scripture, including the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, as well as their distinctive understanding of *Oral Torah* (continuing interpretation).
- B.** Diversity also appears in the version of Scripture used by Jews.
1. In the western Diaspora, the Hebrew text had been translated into Greek already by 250 B.C.E. This translation was regarded as divinely inspired by Hellenistic Jews, who exclusively used the LXX, perhaps little aware of the differences between the Greek and Hebrew.
 2. In Palestine, Hebrew seemed to have been exclusively used in synagogue worship and in study. The appearance of Aramaic *Targums* (highly interpretive translations of the Hebrew), however, suggests that Hebrew was not familiar to many worshipping Jews even in Israel.
- C.** Jews in the 1st century also interpreted their Scripture from distinctive perspectives.
1. Our knowledge on this point (as on others) is selective and based on the extant literature: We may suspect that the Zealots, for example, interpreted Torah from their perspective, but we don't have evidence of that.
 2. Philo of Alexandria read the LXX in the manner of a Greek philosopher, seeking moral instruction and interpreting difficult passages allegorically in order to find a deeper wisdom.
 3. Pharisees used *midrash* (from Hebrew *darash* = "seek") as a way of contemporizing ancient written commandments to new circumstances in accord with their commitment to a priestly life of purity.
 4. The Qumran sect interpreted the Hebrew text from the perspective of their sectarian identity as a community of the pure, formed and instructed by the Teacher of Righteousness, using *peshet* interpretation to apply all of Scripture to the life of their community.

- III.** The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran and subsequent archaeological and literary study is of foremost importance for the knowledge of the Hebrew Bible in the 1st century.
- A.** Among the compositions were many biblical manuscripts in Hebrew, the oldest extant witnesses to the text.
 - 1.** The numbers of copies of certain compositions suggest the importance they held for the community.
 - 2.** Comparing biblical compositions to the LXX and to later standard versions of the Hebrew (the Masoretic text) indicates a highly fluid textual situation.
 - B.** The sect's practice of collecting (e.g., the Book of Jubilees) and writing biblical apocrypha (e.g., the Genesis Apocryphon) suggests simultaneously the central position of Torah and its malleability.
 - C.** The same combination is found in Qumran's sectarian mode of interpretation: Torah is all important, but it is also read in light of contemporary experience.

Essential Reading:

Philo of Alexandria, *Allegorical Laws*.

Supplementary Reading:

M. Abegg, Jr., P. Flint, and E. Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English*.

K. H. Jobes and M. Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*.

Questions to Consider:

- 1.** To what extent could Philo of Alexandria and a member of the Qumran sect say that they had (and read) the “same Scriptures”?
- 2.** Given the degree of fluidity and diversity found in the 1st-century Jewish experience of Torah, how could it remain such a central and compelling symbol?