

Lecture Two

Making TaNaK

Scope: The story of the Bible begins with the slow, centuries-long gathering of Hebrew writings in ancient Israel. This lecture discusses the early stages of the formation of TaNaK, the Jewish Bible. The acronym identifies the three components of Torah (the five books of Moses), Neviim (the Prophets), and Ketuvim (the Writings). The literature of ancient Israel, written on scrolls, arose out of the circumstances and needs of the people at different stages of its life. Each composition provides a window to those historical situations. But the compositions, singly and together, also weave an impressively coherent sense of the people's story and of the God who creates the world and reveals through prophets how humans are to honor God by the way they live in God's world.

Outline

- I. The Hebrew Bible (TaNaK) is the literature of an ancient people that was composed over a long period of time in circumstances that are not entirely clear.
 - A. Convictions concerning the divine inspiration of the Bible are, in both Judaism and Christianity, entirely consistent with the human and historical origin of the actual compositions.
 1. Inspiration serves in both religious traditions as a statement concerning authority more than a theory of literary composition.
 2. Discovering the human origins is not at all easy and requires the piecing together of several kinds of evidence and a certain amount of controlled speculation.
 - B. Some general statements concerning the origins of the Hebrew Bible are widely acknowledged.
 1. Its contents came into being as the literature of a formerly nomadic people that inhabited the tiny strip of land between the ancient empires of Babylon (and Assyria) to the east and Egypt to the west.

2. The compositions were written over an extended period of time and reflect interaction with several stages of ancient Near Eastern culture.
 3. The original language of the Bible was Hebrew, a distinctive consonantal language with cognates in several other ancient Near Eastern languages; the exception is the second part of the Book of Daniel, which is composed in Aramaic, a dialect of Hebrew.
- C. The process by which biblical compositions came into being involved both oral and written practices.
1. Oral performance is most obvious in the prophetic literature and in the psalms, but it is likely that writing was also a feature in prophetic activity.
 2. The great written narratives may well also have begun as oral recitations in the manner of the folklore of other peoples.
- D. The creation of literature presupposes certain social settings and technical capabilities.
1. As in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, Israel developed a scribal class whose writing capabilities served both court and temple.
 2. The most obvious times when such activity could be carried out in conditions of reasonable stability were the period following the establishment of court and temple by Solomon and the period after the exile, when a more modest version of court and temple were reestablished.
- II. The most authoritative part of the Hebrew Bible is called Torah, or the five books of Moses (Pentateuch).
- A. Although religious tradition ascribes these five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) to the prophet and lawgiver Moses (c. 1250 B.C.E.), who led the people out of Egypt, scholars unanimously agree that their composition involved a complex process over a considerable period of time.
1. Nineteenth-century source criticism of the Pentateuch observed several features of the five books that called out for explanation (such as doublets and the use of different designations for God).

2. Although the precise delineation of the sources is debated, many scholars perceive four distinct sources: the Yahwist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomist, and the Priestly.
 3. Even more vigorously debated is the assignment of distinct periods of composition according to the supposed outlook of the sources, with the Yahwist and Elohist representing the more ancient voices (perhaps 10th century B.C.E.), the Deuteronomist representing a reform voice (6th century), and the Priestly outlook serving as editor of the whole.
- B.** The five books of Moses provide the grand narrative of the formation of Israel as a people and the terms of its covenant with God.
1. After the account of creation and the legends of the Fall, the stories of the patriarchs from Abraham to Joseph dominate Genesis (Breshit).
 2. Exodus (Shemot) describes the enslavement of Israel in Egypt, the call of Moses and the plagues that come upon Egypt, the deliverance of the people from bondage, and the giving of the Law through Moses, climaxing in the description of the tent for worship in the wilderness.
 3. Leviticus (Wayikra) continues the legislation given to the people through Moses, with particular attention given to the practices of worship, especially sacrifice.
 4. Numbers (Bamidbar) recounts the events of the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses, including the rebellion of the people and the mighty works of God.
 5. Deuteronomy (Devarim) consists of long discourses delivered to the people by Moses before entering the land of Canaan, summoning them to obedience and describing the blessings that came with obedience to the covenant and the curses that came with disobedience.

III. The Prophets (Neviim) are 21 writings that make up the second major portion of TaNaK.

- A.** The first portion of the Prophets is made up of six narrative books that continue the story of the people from the time of entering the land (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings); these books are also called the *Former Prophets*.

- B. The Jewish Bible counts as the *Latter Prophets* those spokespersons for God to the people; the term *Major Prophets* refers to the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.
 - C. The term *Minor Prophets* is given to a collection of 12 books, not because of their importance but because of their length (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi).
- IV. The 13 Writings (Ketuvim) make up the final and least internally organized portion of the Jewish Bible, making a total of 39 compositions.
- A. An ancient designation for five of these writings is *megillot* (“scrolls”): the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), and Esther.
 - B. A second loose grouping contains the Psalms, Proverbs, and Job, which can also be seen as wisdom literature.
 - C. The final group again takes up aspects of Jewish history: 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel.
- V. The most remarkable aspect of this variegated literature is that in each of its parts and as a whole, it imagines a world that is at once astonishing and coherent, a world that is in every respect created by and answerable to God.

Essential Reading:

Deuteronomy, Isaiah 1–11, Psalm 78.

Supplementary Reading:

M. D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*.

J. D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What factors might contribute to the shaping of such a consistent worldview in a literature composed over hundreds of years?
2. Why is Torah considered the most central and authoritative part of the Jewish Bible?