



Significant Texts and Writings

Language

The Jewish nation has spoken many different languages during its long history.

Biblical and Modern Hebrew belong to the Semitic family of languages. There is evidence of Semitic languages being used as far back as 2500 BCE. The most widely spoken Semitic languages today are Arabic and Hebrew, but there are other Semitic languages in use. These include Maltese; African languages such as Amharic, Tigrinya, and Tigre; a number of other languages and dialects used in the Middle East in countries such as Syria and Turkey; and other languages in the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa.

Historically, Semitic languages have played an important role in religious expression. These include Arabic in Islam, Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic in Judaism, Ge'ez in Ethiopian Christianity, as well as Syriac and Chaldean in Nestorian Christianity.

Biblical Hebrew was the language spoken by the ancient Jews during biblical times. Throughout history, Jewish people learned this biblical language in order to read the scriptures and pray. As for their daily lives, Yiddish (Ashkenazi Jews) and Ladino (Sephardic Jews) became the most prominent.

The establishment of the State of Israel and the destruction of East European Jewry essentially tipped the scales in favour of modern Hebrew. The Hebrew language underwent a process of revival: from a “dead language” of scriptures and prayer books, Hebrew was transformed into a dynamic, modern language. In the contemporary Jewish world, Hebrew is unchallenged in its claim to being the Jewish language, although it is mostly Israeli Jews who can actually use it. Outside of Israel, most Jews speak the language of the country that they reside in; however, Hebrew is the language used by most Jews for prayer and other religious observances and rites.

Key Writings/Scriptures

The Torah

The term *Torah* means instruction and can refer to many aspects of Jewish scriptures, practice, and history. Usually, the term *Torah* refers to the central religious texts of Judaism.

Judaic tradition teaches that the 5 books of ‘Laws’ (*Written Torah*) were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai along with an *Oral Torah* (“Laws” that were not laws of Judaism. The *Written Torah* is also known as the *Chumash*, *Pentateuch*, or Five Books of Moses.

Sometimes, the term *Torah* is narrowly used to refer to the first 5 books (*Pentateuch*) of the 24 books of the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) or Jewish Written Law. Christians commonly refer to the *Pentateuch* as being the Old Testament.

Though the English word Bible comes from the Latin word *biblia*, which was derived from the Koine Greek word *tà biblia* (*biblia*) or “the books”, the Greek word literally meant “paper” or “scroll” and eventually came to be used as the word for “book”.

In the Hebrew Bible, the *Torah* is referred to both as the *Torah of the Lord* and as the *Torah of Moses*, and is said to be given as an inheritance to the congregation of Jacob, the Jewish people. Its purpose seems to be to make Israel “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The *Torah* was and continues to be considered by Jews as the source of freedom, goodness, and life. Further, for practicing Jews, the *Torah* was and continues to be identified with both wisdom and love. The *Torah* is written on a scroll made from kosher animal parchment.

In *rabbinic* literature and practice, the word *Torah* describes a collection of religious texts that includes the *Written Torah* and the *Oral Torah*. The *Oral Torah* consists of a written recitation of the *Oral Torah* and interpretations and commentary which, in *rabbinic* tradition, have been handed down from generation to generation and are now recorded in the *Talmud* and *Midrash*.

The Tanach

The Hebrew Bible is commonly referred to by non-Jews, as the Old Testament but the appropriate term to use for the Hebrew scriptures is *Tanach*. This word is derived from the Hebrew letters of its three components:

Torah: The Books of Genesis (*Bereshit*), Exodus (*Shemot*), Leviticus (*Vayikrah*), Numbers (*Bamidbar*), and Deuteronomy (*Devarim*)

Nevi'im (Prophets): The Books of Joshua, Judges, I Samuel, II Samuel, I Kings, II Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habukkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (The last twelve are sometimes grouped together as *Trei Asar* [Twelve].)

Ketuvim (Writings): The Books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, I Chronicles, and II Chronicles

The Mishnah (The Oral Torah)

Moses received the *Mishnah* or *Oral Torah* along with the *Written Torah* on Mount Sinai. The *Oral Torah* was an important aspect of Jewish religious foundations. It was passed down in oral form from generation to generation until the destruction of the second temple.

The Jewish community of Palestine suffered horrendous losses during the Great Revolt (66–70 CE) and the Bar-Kokhba rebellion (132–135 CE). Well over a million Jews were killed in the two ill-fated uprisings, and the leading Jewish centres, along with thousands of their *rabbinical* scholars and students, were devastated.

This decline in the number of knowledgeable Jews seems to have been a decisive factor in *Rabbi* Judah the Prince's (leader of the Jews in Israel) decision around the year 200 CE to record in writing the *Oral Torah*. For centuries, Judaism's leading *rabbis* had resisted writing down the *Oral Torah*. Teaching the *Torah* orally, the *rabbis* knew, compelled students to maintain close relationships with teachers, and they considered teachers, not books, to be the best conveyors of the Jewish tradition. Nonetheless, with the deaths of so many teachers in the failed revolts, *Rabbi* Judah apparently feared that the *Oral Torah* would be forgotten unless it was written down.



Figure 9: The Tanakh

The *Mishnah* is the collection of *rabbinic* traditions written by *Rabbi* Judah at the beginning of the third century CE. The *Mishnah* supplements, complements, clarifies, and systematizes the commandments of the *Torah* (The *Written Torah*). The contents of the *Mishnah* are the product of an ongoing process of elaborating and explaining the foundations, the details, and the significance of the *Torah*'s commandments. The *Mishnah* has shaped most of the actual practice of the Jewish religion, including present-day practice.

The Talmud

During the centuries following *Rabbi Judah's* editing of the *Mishnah*, it was studied exhaustively by generation after generation of *rabbis*. Eventually, some of these *rabbis* wrote down their discussions and commentaries on the *Mishnah's* laws in a series of books known as the *Talmud*. The *rabbis* of Palestine edited their discussions of the *Mishnah* around the year 400 CE: their work became known as the *Palestinian Talmud* (in Hebrew, *Talmud Yerushalmi*, which literally means *Jerusalem Talmud*).

More than a century later, some of the leading Babylonian *rabbis* compiled another edition of the discussions on the *Mishnah*. By then, these deliberations had been going on some three hundred years. The Babylon edition was far more extensive than its Palestinian counterpart, so that the *Babylonian Talmud* (*Talmud Bavli*) became the most authoritative compilation of the Oral Law. When people speak of studying the *Talmud*, they almost invariably mean the *Bavli* rather than the *Yerushalmi*.

The *Talmud's* discussions are recorded in a consistent format. A law from the *Mishnah* is cited, which is followed by rabbinic deliberations on its meaning. The *Mishnah* and the *rabbinic* discussions (known as the *Gemara*) comprise the *Talmud*, although in Jewish life the terms *Gemara* and *Talmud* usually are used interchangeably.

Other Significant Jewish Religious Texts

In addition to the *Torah*, the *Mishnah*, and the *Talmud*, there are several other religious texts of significance.

Midrash

The *Midrash* is a large collection of *rabbinical* material derived primarily from sermons (the Hebrew word for sermon is *d'rash*). The most significant parts of the *Midrash* were compiled between the 4th and 6th centuries CE, but the *midrashic* form continues to the present day. *Midrash* follows traditional Jewish beliefs and forms and contains both *halakhic* (legal) and *haggadic* (tales/explanatory) content, although it is best known for the explanatory elements. *Midrash* contains legends, parables, stories, and creative insights that tend to be more accessible to the average person than the *Torah* and *Talmud*.

The *Targums* (The Aramaic Bibles)

Any translation of the Hebrew Bible may be called *Targum* in Hebrew; however, the term tends to be used especially for translation of the books of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic. After the Babylonian exile, most Jews spoke Aramaic as their first language, so translation of the Hebrew Bible became a necessity. Many of the *Targums* contained additional material such as interpretations or explanatory notes along with the translated scriptures.

The Aramaic translation of the Bible is a part of the Jewish traditional literature and is thought to have begun as early as the time of the Second Temple. *Targums* that have survived include all the books of the Hebrew Bible, with the exception of the books of Daniel and Ezra-Nehemiah, which were already partially written in Aramaic.

In *Rabbinical* Judaism, *Targum* had a place both in the synagogal liturgy and in biblical instruction. The reading of the Bible text was often combined with the *Targum* in the presence of the congregation assembled for public worship. This has a long history dating back to the time of the Second Temple.

The Targums are diverse as they were translated at different times and have more than one interpretive approach to the Hebrew Bible.

Zohar

The *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Splendour) is the central text of Kabbalah, the mystical branch of Judaism. The *Zohar* is not a single text. Rather, it is a group of books. It is a mystical commentary on the *Torah*, originally written in medieval Aramaic and medieval Hebrew. Its contents include mystical discussions on the nature of God; the creation and structure of the universe; the nature of souls; sin and redemption; good and evil; and related subjects.

The *Zohar* was published by a Jewish writer named Moses ben Shem-Tov de Leon and first appeared in Spain in the thirteenth century. The publisher attributed the work to a *rabbi* of the second century, Simeon ben Yohai. It is believed that, during a time of Roman persecution, *Rabbi* Simeon hid in a cave for 13 years, studying the *Torah* with his son Eliezar. It is during this time that he is said to have been inspired by God to write the *Zohar*.



Figure 10: Title page of first edition of the *Zohar*, Mantua, 1558

The *Zohar* has been somewhat divisive in the Jewish community since its introduction. At the time, many *rabbis* lauded it because it opposed religious formalism and stimulated people's imagination and emotion. For many, it helped reinvigorate their experience of prayer because, for some, prayer had become an external religious exercise and requirement, whereas prayer was supposed to be a means of transcending everyday affairs and placing oneself in union with God.

In contrast, many *rabbis* censured it because it promoted many superstitious beliefs and produced a band of mystical dreamers, whose over-stimulated imaginations led them to see a world filled with spirits, demons, and all kinds of good and bad influences. *Maimonides* and many classical *rabbis* viewed these beliefs as a contradiction of Judaism's principles of faith.

As well, the *Zohar's* mystic mode of explaining some commandments was extrapolated by its commentators to apply to all religious observances, and stimulated a strong tendency to substitute a mystic Judaism in the place of traditional *rabbinic* Judaism.

Over time, the negative impact of the *Zohar* on the Jewish community and faith reduced the enthusiasm that had been felt for the book in the Jewish community. However, in contemporary Judaism, the *Zohar* is still very important, especially to many Orthodox Jews and the Hasidim (Hasidic Jews).

Responsa

An additional set of Jewish religious writings is the *Responsa* (answers to specific questions on Jewish law). This is a vast collection of thousands of texts that began to be collected in the Middle Ages and are still being compiled today. One can consider the *Talmud* to be the book of laws and the *Responsa* to be the case law. *Responsa* were and are composed by respected *rabbis* who have been asked to address a specific question, and include a full description of the question or situation, references to the applicable *Talmudic* passages, the *rabbi's* answer, and the reasoning behind their opinion.

Examples of recent *Responsa* are those dealing with such topics as the *kashering* of dishwashers, cosmetic surgery, and artificial insemination. The Global Jewish Database (the Responsa Project) has compiled and made accessible electronically 343 books of *Responsa*.

The Books of Judaism Graphic

The image that follows provides an overview of the major religious texts of Judaism and their position with respect to the timeline of Jewish religious development and evolution.

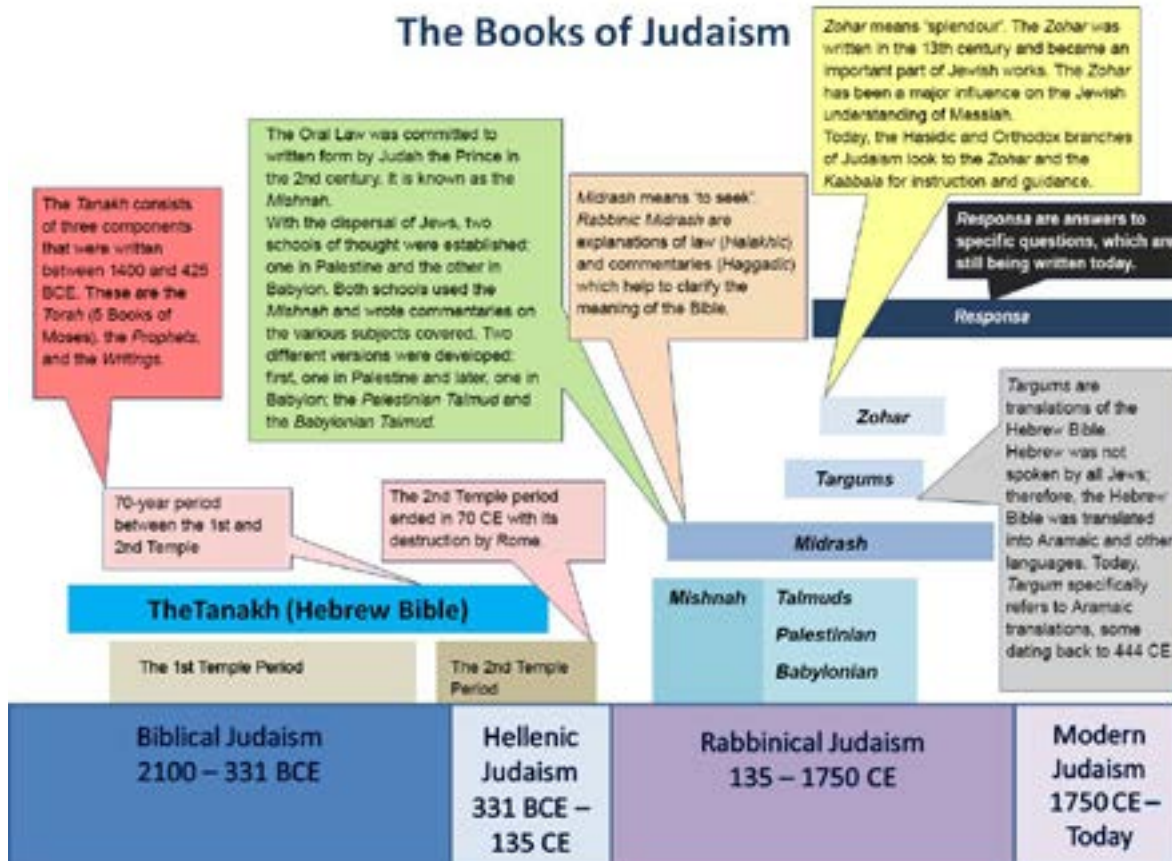


Figure 11: The Books of Judaism

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