

## **4 The Tanakh**

The word Tanakh is used to refer to the Jewish Scriptures. The word is an acronym formed by the initial letters of the three traditional subdivisions of the text;

1. Torah (meaning "teaching" or "law".) This consists of the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). The printed form of the Torah is called "the Chumash", meaning "five-part." The Torah is also known by its Greek name, "the Pentateuch," which similarly means "five scrolls."
2. Nevi'im (meaning "Prophets".) This division includes the books which, as a whole, cover the chronological era from the entrance of the Israelites into the Land until the Babylonian captivity of Judah (the "period of prophecy"). However, they exclude Chronicles, which covers the same period. The Nevi'im are often divided into the Earlier Prophets, which are generally historical, and the Later Prophets, which contain more exhortational prophecies. The Nevi'im consists of eight books - seven main books, counting the books of Samuel and Kings as one book each, plus the 12 small books that as a group are called the "Trei Asar" the Twelve Prophets (or by non-Jews the Minor Prophets).
3. Ketuvim (meaning "Writings,") are sometimes also known by the Greek title "Hagiographa." These encompass all the remaining books. They are sometimes also divided into such categories as the "wisdom books" of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs, the "poetry books" of Psalms, Lamentations and Song of Solomon, and the "historical books" of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles. The Ketuvim includes 11 books, counting Ezra and Nehemiah as one book and I and II Chronicles as a single book as well.

The Hebrew names of the books of the Torah are based on the first prominent word in each book. The English names are not translations of the Hebrew. Instead, they are based on Greek names created for the Septuagint which are, in turn, based on Rabbinic names describing the thematic content of each of the Books.

### *Alternative names for the Tanakh*

Although the term "the Masoretic text" is one which appeared much later than the Tanakh itself, the actual *text* of the collection of 24 books which is the Tanakh is identical to the Masoretic text, and so the two terms are often (incorrectly) used interchangeably. For the distinction between the two, see the article on the Masoretic text.

The three-part division reflected in the acronym Tanakh is well attested to in documents from the Second Temple period and in Rabbinic literature. During that period, however, "Tanakh" was not used as a word or term; rather, the proper title was Mikra (meaning "Reading" or "that which is read"), because the books were read publicly. "Mikra" is thus analogous to the Latin term Scriptus, meaning "that which is written" (as in "Scripture" or "The Holy Scriptures"). In ancient Hebrew and Aramaic the Tanakh was also referred to by the related term Kara/ K'ra.

Mikra continues to be used in Hebrew to this day alongside Tanakh to refer to the Hebrew scriptures. In modern spoken Hebrew both are used interchangeably.

### *Codification and Canonization of the books of Tanakh*

According to the Talmud (a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs and history), much of the contents the Tanakh were compiled by the Men of the Great Assembly, a task completed in 450 BC, and have remained unchanged since that date. Modern scholars are less certain, but believe that the process of canonization of the Tanakh became finalized between 200 BC and 200 AD. Both the Law (Torah) and the Prophets (Nevi'im) appear to have been codified by the time of the composition of the book of Sirach, c. 180 BC; but the Writings (Ketuvim) may not yet

have become an identified unit by this date.

Formal closure of the canon has often been ascribed to Rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. Heinrich Graetz proposed in 1871 that it was concluded at a Council of Jamnia (or Yavne in Hebrew), around about the year 100 AD. However, this view has fallen from favor since the 1960s, and it is now questioned whether such a "council" ever occurred – although it is clear that there was *some* sort of formal canonization (and a rejection of the Septuagint) around this period. For more information on this subject, see the article on the Septuagint and Council of Jamnia.

The importance of the divisions of the Tanakh can be seen by the words used by Christ Himself in the New Testament. Jesus repeatedly refers to “the Law and the Prophets”, meaning the Torah and the Nevi'im. Many scholars regard this as a clear indicator that the Ketuvim did not exist as a single identified unit while Jesus was speaking, and perhaps not even when the Gospels were being written (the latter half of the first century). There is certainly merit for this view.

However, it is also clear that Jesus considered other books canonical – in Luke 24:44 He refers to “the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms”. Shortly afterwards, the narrative says that He explained “the Scriptures”. The word “Scriptures” means what is written – although it is unclear if this is referring specifically to the Ketuvim as a group, or just to some extant writings in general.

#### *The Importance of an Oral Tradition to the Tanakh*

Rabbinical Judaism maintains that the Torah was transmitted side by side with an oral tradition. Many terms and definitions used in the written law are undefined within the Torah itself, and the reader is assumed to be familiar with the context and details. This fact is presented as evidence to the antiquity of the oral tradition. These rabbinic works, collectively known as "the oral law", include the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the two Talmuds (Babylonian and Jerusalem), Kabbalistic and the early Midrash compilations.

In addition, not only was the meaning of various words unclear in the original Hebrew without an oral tradition, but the actual pronunciation was also in doubt! It was not until the development of the Masoretic text that a formalized system was developed and made freely available. See the article on the Masoretic text for more information.

#### *Implications of the Ordering of the Tanakh*

The Tanakh ends with the Ketuvim, which themselves end with the book of Chronicles. The last words, therefore, of the Jewish Bible are those of Cyrus the Persian telling the Jewish exiles to return to “the city” (Jerusalem) and rebuild it. Thus, it can be fairly said that the last words of the Jewish Bible are an instruction to return to the land of their forefathers and build it up. A large number of Jews cite this text as one of the major factors behind the political movement known as Zionism.