

CHAPTER ONE

The Books of the Older Testament

The word ‘Bible’ comes from the Greek word *biblia*, meaning ‘books’. The Bible is in fact a small library of books. Christians call it ‘The Bible’, meaning ‘The Book’ because it is the inspired record of the religious experiences of the people of ancient Israel and Judah culminating in the religious experience of Jesus and his disciples in the first century AD (*Anno Domini*: ‘Year of the Lord’). The Bible is made up of two parts, customarily called by Christians the Old (‘Older’) Testament and the New (‘Newer’) Testament. ‘Testament’, as in the expression ‘last will and testament’, means a personally guaranteed declaration of will. The word ‘testament’ is used because those who preserved these writings saw in them a revelation of God and of God’s presence and action in their lives, as well as an expression of God’s will revealing to them how they were to live so as to be open to God’s life-giving presence and action.

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections. Pride of place is given to the *Tôrāh* (Genesis and the four books of Moses: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). These five books are sometimes referred to as ‘The Pentateuch’, from the Greek word for ‘five scrolls’. *Tôrāh* is frequently translated ‘Law’ in English, with the danger of limiting its meaning. It is better translated ‘Instruction’, from the Hebrew verb *yārāh*. ‘The Way’ may be an even better translation, as the Torah shows us the way we are to respond to God (this is the sense covered by ‘Law’). More importantly it shows the way God is present and active in the history of his people. We will examine the Torah in Chapter Eight, followed by Deuteronomy in Chapter Nine, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers in Chapter Ten, and Genesis in Chapter Eleven.

The second grouping is the Prophets (in Hebrew the *Nevi’im*). The ‘Former Prophets’ comprise the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. We will examine these in Chapter Nine when we look at the work of the Deuteronomists. The ‘Latter Prophets’ are prophets whose words have come down to us in the scrolls that carry their name. We will be examining these in their historical setting: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah in Chapter Thirteen; Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Jeremiah in Chapter Fourteen; Ezekiel, Isaiah 40-55, Haggai, Zechariah and Isaiah 56-66 in Chapter Fifteen; and Obadiah, Zechariah 9-14, Joel, Malachi and Jonah in Chapter Sixteen.

The third grouping is called the Writings (in Hebrew the *Kethuvim*). We will examine these also in their historical setting: Lamentations in Chapter Fifteen; Ezra, Nehemiah, the Song of Songs, and Ruth in Chapter Sixteen; Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Job, Esther and Chronicles in Chapter Seventeen; and Daniel in Chapter Eighteen.

The Hebrew word for ‘Bible’ is ‘TⁿN^aK’ from the first letter of the three sections. The earliest witness we have to this division is in the Book of Sirach at the beginning of the second century BC:

How different the one who devotes himself to the study of the law of the Most High! He seeks out the wisdom of all the ancients, and is concerned with prophecies.

– Sirach 38:34 – 39:1

The division is even clearer in the Greek version of Sirach, translated by the author's grandson and published in Egypt towards the end of the second century BC. In the Foreword we read:

My grandfather, Jesus, devoted himself for a long time to the study of the Law and the Prophets, and the other Writings of our ancestors.

There are a number of Writings in the Older Testament that are not included in the T^hN^aK, but were part of the Septuagint, the Bible used by Greek-speaking Jews and inherited by the Christian Church. We will look at Tobit in Chapter Seventeen, and Sirach, Baruch, Maccabees, Judith and Wisdom in Chapter Eighteen.