

On the historical background of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible):

Who wrote it, when and why?

Ralph Lewis, M.D.

[This essay was written as an appendix to an early draft of the book *Finding Purpose in a Godless World*, by Dr. Ralph Lewis. The appendix is an elaboration of Chapter 10 of the book, pertaining particularly to a chapter section subtitled: “Historical Evidence for Who Actually Wrote the Bible, When, and Why”. Most of this appendix was written in 2010-2012, so there may be some updated archaeological findings not reflected herein (some newer information was added to the Tables in 2018). The final book was published in 2018, without any appendices.]

See endnote^a re: sources for this essay.

Which parts of the Hebrew Bible may be regarded as a corroborated historical chronicle?

The original scriptures, in the case of the Judeo-Christian canon, are the Tanakh. The Tanakh is comprised of the Torah, the books of the Prophets, and what are referred to as the Writings (The word Tanakh is a Hebrew acronym for Torah + Prophets + Writings). In their various components, these scriptures can be understood as being a mix of mythology, allegory, legend and folklore, which were all most likely originally orally transmitted. Some of the content, mainly the later stories in some of the Books of

the Prophets, is actual history, albeit often embellished and subjective. The historical events can be corroborated by records of other ancient peoples, or by archaeology. Some of the Tanakh content is a codification of law and of systems of ritualistic worship.

As an historical account, the Bible only begins to be corroborated by archaeology and by independent sources as an historical record around roughly 900 BCE^b. This is almost a century after the reigns of David and Solomon would have occurred, and at least four centuries after the Exodus story and the purported genocidal conquest of the land of Canaan under Joshua. David's and Solomon's reigns are just prior to this threshold of historical corroboration. They probably existed, but the extent of their kingdoms remains doubtful. For some of the biblical stories earlier than that period there may be a kernel of historicity.

Whether such iconic biblical stories as the Patriarchs, the enslavement and exodus from Egypt, the conquest of Canaan, and the purported grand Israelite kingdom of David and Solomon are ever corroborated archaeologically is not of fundamental relevance to the claim of Divine Revelation of the biblical scriptures. While some of the particular details are debated between archaeologists (this is elaborated below), the evidence to date, if anything, contradicts most of these early biblical stories.

The still earlier stories in Genesis, such as the story of Noah and the flood, are best appreciated and respected as mythology and allegory, as of course is the Creation Myth. As a general rule, as might be expected, the more historically distant the events portrayed in the biblical stories, the more mythological they can be regarded.

Biblical chronology (See Table 1 at end of article)

In order to understand biblical history, it is first and foremost essential to have a clear sense of chronology. If the above-mentioned pivotal biblical stories had actually taken place, then the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) would have lived in the 19th or 18th centuries BCE. The Slavery in Egypt would presumably have been from about the 18th to 15th or 14th centuries BCE. The Exodus from Egypt led by Moses and the conquest of Canaan led by Joshua would have had to have occurred sometime between the 15th and 13th centuries BCE. The kingdoms of David and Solomon would have been in the early 10th century BCE.

The evidence mainly supports only the later biblical stories as having been based on actual historical events: mainly those contained in some of the later Books of the Prophets. Those stories were probably actually written around the same time as they took place—stories set in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah circa 9th to 6th centuries BCE.

Origins of the Israelites

Regarding the origins of the Israelite people, an hypothesis now widely accepted by archaeologists suggests that rather than conquering the land from the indigenous Canaanites as the biblical Book of Joshua tells us, the tribes in Canaan who came to identify themselves around the 13th century BCE as Israelites, were themselves originally Canaanites—part of a demographic split that may have been part of a regional

phenomenon known as the Bronze Age Collapse of the Ancient Near East.

Archaeological evidence sharply contradicts the story of Joshua—the story that the Israelites were an invading people who entered from the desert and destroyed Canaanite cities such as Jericho.

That a distinct group known as Israelites came into existence in Canaan in the 13th century BCE is less disputed: Regional surveys have found more than 300 small hilltop villages appearing in the central hill country north and south of Jerusalem and in lower Galilee in the 13th and 12th centuries BCE, with distinctive features differentiating them from other Canaanite villages, including an absence of pig bones. While there may be other explanations for this, a prohibition on eating pig may have been an early cultural / religious differentiator from other Canaanites. Much later this became incorporated as doctrine into the religious scriptures, which would only have been written many centuries later. The Israelites also had a distinctive, characteristic design of their houses. It is thought by most archaeologists that these may have been early Israelite villages.

There is also corroborative evidence that a distinct people known as Israelites did exist in the late 13th century BCE—the Egyptian Merneptah Stele c.1208 BCE, boasting of a military campaign by Pharaoh Merneptah, son of Ramesses II, to subdue Canaan, mentions in passing a people called the Israelites as one of many peoples living in Canaan who were defeated by Merneptah, and presumed by him to be destroyed: "Israel is laid waste and his seed is not".

Egypt controlled or dominated Canaan for much of the period of approximately 1500 BCE to about 1100 BCE (the period during which, according to the Bible, the

Israelites supposedly left Egypt and conquered Canaan). Remains of Egyptian garrisons stationed in Canaan during this period can be viewed in modern Israel. But Egyptian control was weakened at times, necessitating campaigns to subdue the region and bring it back under Egyptian control. After about the 12th century BCE, Egypt increasingly lost its control over its vassal states in Canaan. Around the same time, the Canaanite city states themselves, together with several other Levantine civilizations, appear to have broken down, in the general collapse of civilizations referred to as the Bronze Age collapse. This collapse is thought to have been multifactorial in its causes.

So, the proto-Israelites are thought by modern archaeologists to have been Canaanite groups who lived in the hill country beyond the political control of the Egyptian-dominated Canaanite city states. They may have come to regard themselves as a distinct people separate from the rest of the Canaanites. They developed their own customs and religious cult, and came to view their gods to be in conflict with the Canaanite gods. Their monotheism seems to have been a gradual, faltering development over many centuries, eventually enshrined in their much later sacred scriptures.

Israelite kingdoms

Several centuries after their first appearance in the 13th century BCE, the Israelite tribes had formed two kingdoms in the lands that today mainly comprise the Palestinian West Bank: a northern, more developed kingdom of Israel, centered around Samaria, and a southern kingdom of Judah, centered around Jerusalem. These two kingdoms appear

to have been medium sized powers in the region, threatened by their more powerful neighbors—among others: Egypt in the southwest, which was on the decline, Assyria in the northeast, which was on the ascendancy, Philistine city states in the coastal west, and later the rising neo-Babylonian empire in the East. There is good evidence for these two Israelite kingdoms having existed by the 9th century BCE.

The biblical story that the two kingdoms had begun as a single grand Israelite kingdom under David and Solomon in the early 10th century BCE, splitting after Solomon's death, is less certain. The evidence for this is mixed, and is still being debated among archaeologists. It is known that the later dynasty of the kingdom of Judah was referred to as the house of David, even by their enemies—this is corroborated by an Assyrian stele found in 1993 at Tel Dan in Israel boasting of an Assyrian defeat of a later Judahite king of the “House of David”, dating from about 840 BCE. But nothing is known yet objectively about David himself or his kingdom. Some archaeologists think it may have been just a chiefdom. There has been debate over whether a large ancient building recently excavated in Jerusalem dates from the time of David. Perhaps it may have been a palace or administrative building from David's time, but other archaeologists such as Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University^{1, 2} date it to a later time, and argue that there is no definitive evidence of large scale buildings in Jerusalem from David's time. There is also suggestive but disputed evidence for other buildings and copper mining industries in the region purportedly being associated with Solomon in the 10th century BCE.

As stated earlier, while these kinds of archaeological debates are very interesting, even if some of the relatively older biblical stories are able to be

corroborated as historical, this still does not have a bearing on the claim of Divine Revelation or Divine Inspiration of the scriptures. It does not change the understanding of the scriptures as having been written by parochial human authors. It would be of value and interest for the shared cultural-historical heritage that the Bible represents (both secular and religious) if it were possible to validate its historical chronicling a little more—such as would be achieved by finding incontrovertible evidence for the kingdoms of David and Solomon.

What is validated is the existence of the two Israelite kingdoms in the 9th (less confidently: 10th) to the 6th centuries BCE. The northern kingdom of Israel came to be ruled in the 9th century BCE by the Omride dynasty, and appears to have been a far more developed and powerful kingdom than the southern kingdom of Judah (ruled by the Davidic dynasty). This changed when the northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria in 722 BCE and many refugees likely fled to Judah, the population of Judah consequently increasing significantly.

The historical context for the writing of the various scriptures that would later become the Hebrew Bible

Most of the books of the Hebrew Bible are written from the perspective of writers living in Judah. Much of the writing and codifying of the various components of what would later become the Hebrew Bible, known as the Tanakh,^c (see also Table 2) appears to have taken place in the period between the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, and the neo-Babylonian conquest of the southern kingdom of

Judah and destruction of the first Jerusalem Temple, in 586 BCE. There are many anachronistic details in the purportedly earlier-written stories in the Bible that can be clearly demonstrated to be chronologically specific to frames of reference from this particular time period. These include settlement patterns, and demographic, cultural, economic or technological references. Finkelstein and Silberman provide detailed archaeological examples of this ^{1, 2}.

The very oldest elements that became incorporated into the larger content of the scriptures would have predated this period, but even these strands would have been written centuries later than traditional beliefs place the writing of the Torah as a whole. These older strands had most likely begun as tribal folklore, in the form of oral tradition, before they were written down as part of a more general development of literacy in the region^d. The earliest strands of the Tanakh content were unlikely to have been written much earlier than the 9th century BCE. According to most evidence available so far, the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet and writing system, which was adapted from Phoenician, dates to the 10th century BCE.

The main process of compilation of the scriptures, then, most likely took place between the late 8th and early 6th centuries BCE in the kingdom of Judah, during a critical phase of that kingdom's development and its struggles for survival. The scriptures would appear to have served an agenda of forging a national identity and a national narrative, and of resisting regional influences of the powerful neighboring empires. The idolatrous practices of these neighbouring peoples held strong cultural sway locally within the still heterogeneous tribal mix of peoples who had come to identify themselves as the Israelite nation.

The scripture writers during this period were likely a mix of priests, prophets, poets and scribes, some of whom would have been commissioned by kings with royal agendas, as these kingdoms came to be governed by increasingly developed central administrations. These rulers would have been trying to consolidate their power, reduce competing cultural influences and strengthen a sense of nationhood. The reign of two Judahite kings is known to be of particular significance in the writing and compilation of the scriptures: Hezekiah and Josiah (late 8th and 7th centuries BCE). A long-established and widely accepted analysis among biblical history scholars is that differing styles of writing and differing concepts of God within the Five Books of Moses, and repetitions of the same stories with contradictory versions, point to at least four different authors (or sets of authors) across a few centuries, for the Torah portion of the Tanakh.^e

All of this of course patently contradicts the Torah's account of itself as having been dictated directly to Moses by God on Mount Sinai following the Exodus from Egypt and before the people of Israel entered Canaan (see the chronology provided earlier). The other portions of the Tanakh (books of the Prophets and the other Writings) are accepted even by traditional believers to have had various different human authors (who are traditionally believed to have been writing with Divine Inspiration) over many centuries, though traditional views would put the first of the books of the Prophets as having been written earlier than they now appear to have been.

Editing, synthesizing and canonizing the scriptures

The process of redacting, that is "copying and pasting", and editing, of the patchwork of scriptures was most probably completed after the Babylonian exile (6th century BCE) and during the period of return of some of the exiles. Their return was made possible by the Zoroastrian Persian king Cyrus the Great, who defeated the neo-Babylonians in 539 BCE and was very tolerant of local religions. The destruction of the Temple, the exile, and the mythology of other contemporary civilizations (neo-Babylonian, Greek etc.), can all be shown to have had a major influence on the themes of the purportedly earlier-written biblical stories. Ezra the scribe, one of the returning exiles who features in the Bible, is thought by some scholars to have overseen the final redaction. Other scholars place the final editing later in the two century Persian period, or in the still later Hellenistic or Hasmonean periods of Judean history^f.

It was probably during or after the Babylonian exile that the religion of the people of Judah came to be known as Judaism, and finally shed the last of its polytheistic and idolatrous origins and influences, to take shape as the first truly monotheistic religion, codified by its sacred scriptures. But Judaism was still to evolve a lot more over a long period of time.

By the time of the oldest known translation of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh)—the Greek Septuagint^g, in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, and by the time of the writing of the oldest physically surviving scrolls of the Tanakh scriptures—the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE^h, the Tanakh had probably for the most part already been canonizedⁱ.

Two millennia of interpretation (exegesis) of the original scriptures:

Much of Jewish (and also Christian and Islamic) religious history in the last two millennia has involved attempts at trying to make sense of, and reinterpreting, the already-ancient original scriptures (the Tanakh). Much of this exegesis / hermeneutics (=interpretation of biblical texts) involved searching for, extracting and emphasizing themes of compassion and ethics from scriptures that are frequently, at best, baffling or obscure and, at worst, morally troubling, or simply inconsistent and contradictory. This was all done on the faith-based assumption that the Torah is the direct word of God and that its every word is therefore intentional and infallible, surely laden with hidden meaning¹.

In the case of Judaism, this exegesis first took the form of the Talmud, codified by rabbinic writings from previously oral interpretative tradition, beginning after the destruction of the second Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. The Talmud consists of the Mishnah (completed c.200 CE) and Gemorah (completed c. 500 CE), and has two versions, namely the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. At that time there was a thriving Jewish diaspora in Babylon dating back to the destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE.

Orthodox Jewish tradition maintains that the oral interpretations of the Torah, on which the Talmud is based and which the Talmud expands, was itself handed down word for word, from teacher to student, all the way from Moses to the Talmudic rabbis. The traditional belief is that the Oral Law, as it is referred, was dictated to Moses by God on Mount Sinai, as an accompaniment to the Written Law (the Torah), in order to

make sense of the Torah. This interpretative tradition recognises that the Torah scriptures, which were already ancient in Roman and post-Roman times when interpretations were being written and codified as the Talmud, would otherwise be obscure, contradictory, and containing omissions. Parts of the original scriptures were even morally reprehensible to the more “modern” sentiments and logical minds of the rabbinic scholars of Talmudic times.

The introduction to the widely used Stone Edition publication of the Torah⁸, by editor Rabbi Nosson Scherman, explains the Oral Law as follows:

The Torah was accompanied by an authoritative tradition that explained the meaning of obscure passages and provided the rules and methods of accurately interpreting the text. Even a cursory reading of the Torah proves that such a tradition had to exist, that there is much more to the Torah than its written text.

Examples:

- The Torah prescribes that one who assaults his fellow must pay ‘an eye for an eye’ (Exodus 21:24), yet never in Jewish history was physical punishment meted out for an assault. The verse was always understood to require monetary compensation. Surely Moses and his successors did not take it upon themselves to change the “plain” meaning of God’s word.

- Moses instructed the Jews to perform kosher slaughter, ‘as I have commanded you’ (Deuteronomy 12:21)—yet nowhere in the written text of the Torah do we find even one of the intricate and demanding rules of kosher slaughter. Where had he commanded them?

Countless similar illustrations can be given. The implication of them all is clear beyond a doubt: there is a companion to the Written Torah, an Oral Law without which the Written Torah can be twisted and misinterpreted beyond recognition, as indeed it has been by the ignorant down through the centuries.

This belief that both the Torah and the Oral Law are the direct word of God, as opposed to being a human collective project, has become a matter of dogma that separates Orthodox from Reform Judaism^k. Rabbi Scherman explains the basis of the orthodox Jewish zealotry in his introduction to the Stone Edition Torah:

The Torah is the essence of the universe. As a young man, Rabbi Meir—who was to become one of the foremost sages of the period of the Mishna [the first writings of the Talmud—see above] —was a scribe. The great sage Rabbi Yishmael cautioned him, ‘My son, be careful in your work, for your work is heavenly. If you delete even one letter or add even one letter, you may destroy the whole world!’ (Eruvin 13a).

Throughout history, Jews have maintained the absolute integrity of their Torah scrolls, zealously avoiding any change, even of a letter that would not change the meaning of a word. They knew that their Torah was not merely a ‘sacred book’, it was the word of God, and as such it had to remain unchanged.

The Talmud goes further. One who denies that the Rabbinic tradition, what is commonly called the Oral Law, was given by God to Moses is castigated as someone who ‘despises the word of God’ (Sanhedrin 99a), and Rambam¹ labels such a person a heretic (Hilchos Teshuvah 3:8).”

Having said that, the Talmudic tradition of interpretation and reinterpretation of the Oral Law is based on debate, always presenting at least two points of view, sometimes juxtaposing viewpoints from different eras, in the form of a scholarly argument across the ages. It is often left up to the student to draw his own conclusions. Learning is very highly valued in Jewish religious tradition. Since the completion of the Talmud, through medieval times to modern times there have been many more great Jewish thinkers, and interesting movements / sects that have produced commentaries of great significance on both the original Tanakh and the Talmud. Among the many examples of such movements, one that has attracted considerable interest beyond the Jewish community is Kabbalah, the esoteric Jewish mysticism that began to develop in medieval times.

There has been a parallel process of scholarly interpretative tradition in Christianity and Islam, since their own beginnings in the 1st and 7th centuries respectively, with their Hebrew Bible / Old Testament derivations. See Karen

Armstrong's books³⁻⁵ for a more full discussion of these Christian and Islamic efforts at interpretation of scripture.

In my own opinion, these efforts at reinterpreting the ancient scriptures have produced worthwhile, profound humanistic insights and ethics. These have been the product of great and wise human minds through the ages. In every generation, there are many people who manage to achieve tremendously creative, wise insights into the human condition and the world. The religious assumption, of course, is that such insights are the result of direct or indirect Divine inspiration, rather than "just" human creativity. The mistaken assumption is that such insights are *discovered* through the process of studying and interpreting the sacred scriptures laden with hidden, embedded truths, whereas in fact these insights are those of the scholar himself/herself, simply *projecting* his/her own ideas into the text. This is a well-recognized psychological phenomenon.

Up until the Enlightenment of the 18th century, which arose largely as a result of the scientific revolution, religion was the overwhelmingly dominant intellectual and philosophical paradigm. Scholarly learning and even literacy were not a possibility for most people outside of religious education. Therefore most philosophical and psychological insights prior to the Enlightenment, including ideas about morality, purpose and meaning, were developed within a religious framework. We need to accept this and understand the historical context in which all those thinkers lived, valuing their contributions and learning from their wisdom as part of our collective intellectual heritage. Even after the Enlightenment, old assumptions persisted about questions of morality, purpose and meaning being the domain of religion rather than natural science.

Unfortunately, mixed in with all the very worthwhile religious insights that have been produced through this interpretative tradition over the last two millennia, is also much dogma which, just like the original scriptures, could be considered by many to be objectionable, obsessional or just plain esoteric. The heritage is a “mixed bag.”

Table 1: Approximate historical timeline of some key events in the history of the Hebrew Bible and its interpretation

Date	Event	Mythological or historical?
19th or 18th centuries BCE	Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (if they had existed)	Mostly or entirely mythology
18th to 15th or 14th centuries BCE	Slavery in Egypt (if it had happened)	Almost entirely mythology
Sometime between the 15th and 13th centuries BCE	<p>Exodus from Egypt, revelation of the Torah (including the Ten Commandments), to Moses on Mount Sinai, and conquest of Canaan led by Joshua (if all this had happened).</p> <p>The majority of archaeologists agree that there is no evidence that the Exodus occurred in any form resembling the biblical story, and there is plenty of evidence contradicting it. (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Exodus#Historicity for a summary). The exodus might have been seeded in a much different event involving a different group of people in different circumstances—possibly the Hyksos. The story may have been handed down orally over centuries and progressively altered in the process, eventually being written in its present form by the authors of the Bible. There are also alternative theories regarding the origin of the story, e.g. see: https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/did-the-exodus-happen-and-why-does-it-matter/ for an informed critique of such theories.</p> <p>Regarding the revelation of the Torah, see the later section in this table highlighted in red, for the most likely timing of the writing of the Torah (8th to 6th centuries BCE).</p>	Mythology, with seeds of historicity

	(continued:) The story about the Israelites under Joshua conquering Canaan is contradicted by archaeological findings of the patterns and timing of settlement building and destruction, in the parts of Canaan referred to in the biblical story.	
Approximately 14th century BCE to 11th century BCE	"Judges" of Israel	Partly mythological, partly historical.
15th century BCE to late 12th century BCE	Egyptian New Kingdom control / domination of Canaan (strength of control fluctuated). Note how this historical fact flatly contradicts any purported Israelite exodus from Egypt into supposedly non-Egyptian Canaan, and any purported conquest of Canaan by the Israelites. You can visit archaeological excavations of Egyptian garrisons in Israel that date from exactly the period when the Israelites are purported to have left Egypt and conquered Canaan. Egyptian control of Canaan may have ended around 1,100 BCE. For a good, easy-to-read review, see: https://www.archaeology.org/issues/262-1707/features/5627-jaffa-egypt-canaan-colony	Historical
c.1208 BCE	Earliest actual corroboration of existence of Israelite tribe (Egyptian pharaoh reasserting control over Canaan lists the Israelites among many tribes in Canaan decimated or subjugated). See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_ancient_Israel_and_Judah and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah_Stele	Historical
early 10th century BCE	Kings David and Solomon, possible united kingdom of Israel	Partly mythological, partly historical.
Late 10th to early 6th centuries BCE	Historical (actual) kingdoms of Israel and Judah	Historical
722 BCE	Destruction of northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians	Historical
8 th to 6 th centuries BCE	Much of the Torah (traditionally believed to have been dictated by God to Moses on Mount Sinai circa 14 th or 13 th centuries BCE) was likely written in Judah during the 8 th to 6 th centuries BCE, by multiple authors and in disconnected stages. Multiple lines of evidence point to this, including many specific frames of reference in the purportedly earlier-written stories, which only existed at this later time. Parts may have been written still later than this. Several books of the Prophets, including the earlier ones, would also have been written during this period (traditional beliefs agree that the later books of the prophets were written at this time).	Historical (exact dates uncertain)
586 BCE	Destruction of southern kingdom of Judah (and of the first Temple of Solomon) by the neo-Babylonians; Babylonian exile begins.	Historical
539 BCE	Defeat of the neo-Babylonians by the Zoroastrian Persian king Cyrus the Great, followed by the return of some exiles to Judah.	Historical
539-332 BCE	Persian rule of Judah	Historical
332 -141 BCE	Hellenistic rule of Judea (Greek adaptation of the name Judah), beginning with Alexander the Great conquering Persia, and continuing through the Ptolemaic and Seleucid rule of Judea.	Historical
5 th to 1 st centuries BCE	The Tanakh (including the Torah) was probably redacted / edited during the Persian, Hellenistic and possibly Hasmonean eras.	Historical (exact dates uncertain)
141- 40 BCE	Hasmonean Jewish dynasty in Judea, following the Maccabean revolt against Hellenistic rule, in 167-160 BCE.	Historical

2 nd century BCE to 1 st century CE	The Tanakh may have been canonized in the Hasmonean era (or possibly later—1 st or even 2 nd century CE).	Historical (exact dates uncertain)
2 nd century BCE to 1 st century CE	Dead Sea scrolls date from around this time. The scrolls demonstrate that not much has changed in the Tanakh content since that time.	Historical
63 BCE	Roman control of Judea begins, later becoming a Roman province.	Historical
b/w 30-33 CE	Crucifixion of Jesus, if this event was historical	Possibly historical
66-110 CE	Gospels written, later becoming the foundation of the New Testament.	Partly hearsay / legend, partly historical.
70CE	Destruction of the second Jerusalem Temple (of Herod) by the Romans	Historical
135 CE	Roman suppression of the Bar Kochba revolt. Judea renamed Syria Palaestina.	Historical
325 CE	First Council of Nicaea convened by Constantine I produces the first uniform Christian doctrine	Historical
1 st century CE -500 CE	The Rabbinic era and compilation of the Talmud (interpretation of the Torah / Tanhakh), consisting of the Mishnah (completed c.200 CE) and Gemorah (completed c. 500 CE).	Historical
622 CE	The Hegira (migration of Muhammad from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina))	Historical

Table 2: Books of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament (Tanakh – acronym for T-N-K)

Components of the Tanakh:	Consisting of:	Covering which period?	Mythological or historical?
T orah (Five Books of Moses, also known as the Pentateuch)	Consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	Covering the period from the Creation of the world to the death of Moses.	Almost all mythology
N eviim (Books of the Prophets)	Consists of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.	Covering the period from the entrance of the Israelites into the Land of Israel (Canaan) until the Babylonian captivity of Judah (also known as the "period of prophecy").	The first books are mostly mythological, the later books (which were probably written contemporaneous to the events they recount) are historical but embellished.
K etuvim (Writings)	Miscellany of books including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, etc.	N/A	N/A (miscellaneous collection)

Notes

^a This appendix is a synthesis from my own readings of many different sources over the years. It reflects generally accepted history, as can be found in a detailed reading of a public, openly editable reference like Wikipedia.

For more specific scholarly references on the subject, the reader is referred to these references: ^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5} listed in the Bibliography following these Notes. These books contain a large amount of detailed historical evidence and analysis, from which I have drawn in synthesizing the summary provided in this essay. Finkelstein and Silberman's thesis is just one of many fascinating archaeological theses on the history of the Hebrew Bible. Archaeologists differ on and argue some of the details, particularly the question of the kingdom of David and Solomon, a time period that fits chronologically at the threshold of where the biblical stories begin to become more corroborated by archaeology. I discuss David and Solomon in this essay, attempting to steer a neutral position between Finkelstein's and some other archaeologists' positions.

Armstrong, in her thorough, scholarly books, also provides a detailed discussion of the Christian New Testament and the Muslim Qur'an, which I do not cover in this essay. The Hebrew Bible of course forms the foundation of the New Testament and Qur'an.

Richard Friedman is another biblical history scholar who has introduced the subject of who wrote the bible to a wider audience ^{6,7}.

^b Note regarding dates: Academic scholars generally use the term B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) instead of B.C. (Before Christ), and C.E. (Common Era) instead of A.D. (Anno Domini—Year of Our Lord).

^c The Tanakh is the complete canonized Hebrew Bible, which also more or less constitutes the Christian Old Testament. As mentioned earlier, the word Tanakh is an acronym. The acronym is T-N-K. It refers to the three broad parts comprising it: Torah + Neviim (Prophets) + Ketuvim (Writings) (see Table 2). The Torah component of the Tanakh consists of the Five Books of Moses (Pentateuch): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. As a purported chronicle of history, it spans the period

from Creation of the Universe to the death of Moses, supposedly somewhere between the 15th and 13th centuries BCE.

The books of the Prophets (Nevi'im in Hebrew) span the period of Israelite history from Joshua (the leader who followed Moses and conquered Canaan, according to the story), through the Israelite kingdoms of the 10th to 6th centuries BCE, until the Babylonian exile and the subsequent return from exile under Persian rule, in the late 6th century BCE.

The books referred to collectively as Writings (Ketuvim in Hebrew) include a miscellany of writings, including the book of Esther, which tells a story of the Jews in Persia, possibly set in the 5th century BCE. The Tanakh as a whole is referred to as the Hebrew Bible. Some stories, such as that of the Maccabees, whose revolt against Hellenistic rule is celebrated in the Jewish holiday of Channukah, never made it into the Tanakh. The historical events from which that story is derived occurred in the 2nd century BCE.

^d There are many parallels to the Greek Homeric epics, in this process, its timing and its multi-authorship over an extended period of time.

^e See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_hypothesis and <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-who-wrote-the-torah-1.5318582> for a simple summary.

^f The Persian period lasted from Cyrus's defeat of the neo-Babylonian empire in 539 BCE until Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persians in the 330's BCE. The Hellenistic period followed, until the Maccabean revolt in 167 BCE, which ushered in the Hasmonean dynasty of Judean independence. That came to an end with the Roman conquest of Judea by General Pompey in 63 BCE (see Table 1).

^g The Septuagint was a composite work produced over a span of time, probably written for the purposes of the Greek-speaking Jewish Diaspora community of Alexandria, in Ptolemaic Egypt. The text later became the basis for the Christian Old Testament.

^h The Dead Sea Scrolls are attributed to the Essenes sect of Qumran, near the Dead Sea, spanning the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE. The Essenes considered the Jerusalem priesthood authorities corrupt and lived reclusively in all-male communes, away from Judean society. They hid their scrolls in jars in desert caves overlooking the Dead Sea, probably at the time of Roman attempts to suppress Jewish rebellions in Judea. The scrolls were spectacularly discovered in the 1940s and 1950s.

Their discovery confirmed the antiquity of the Tanakh, as they were more than a millennium older than the oldest surviving texts prior to their discovery.

ⁱ To be canonized means to be declared holy and sanctioned by ecclesiastical authority, with certain texts declared part of the set of scriptures (and ascribed sacred significance) and other texts excluded from such status.

^j Recall that according to traditional belief, the Torah was revealed directly to Moses by God on Mount Sinai. Whereas the other parts of the Tanakh (books of the Prophets and other books of the “Writings”) were, even according to traditional belief, written later by a variety of people—by Divine-inspiration, according to the belief.

Incidentally, when recalling the Mount Sinai story, most people probably picture Moses receiving only the Ten Commandments. These are just one small, though important, part of the Torah, which contains 613 commandments in all, and a whole lot of stories and chronicles. People remember the image of Moses descending the mountain carrying the two iconic stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments. But according to traditional doctrine, the Torah in its entirety was revealed to him during the forty days and nights that he was up there. Rabbinic interpretations differ on whether Moses wrote all of the Torah scrolls on the mountain or in the years that followed - still true to God’s every word and letter...

^k On the question of the Torah itself, even Reform Judaism holds that the scriptures were divinely inspired. But it rejects the literal belief of direct verbal revelation to Moses, and is open to the historical evidence of multiple authors and editors spanning centuries. Reform Judaism regards the Oral Law and its subsequent interpretations as completely open to debate.

^l a name that refers to the great medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides

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