

The Origins of the Idea of Scripture

The Bible – is the set of sacred texts of a particular faith community: Christians

- It may seem obvious to us that any faith community will want to collect and codify sacred texts, but historically speaking, this is by no means a necessity in religion
- We expect religious groups to create a collection of religious texts that teach the central tenants of their religion chiefly because Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the three dominant religions of the West, all did this

Ancient Hebrew Religion

- Does not begin with a Scripture – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob follow no sacred texts
- Moses initiates sacred writing by recording God’s covenant treaty with Israel

Ex 24.3-4 (RSV) – *Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do. And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD.*

- Moses almost certainly doesn’t write the whole Pentateuch as we know it
 - E.g. he dies at the end of it

Deut 34.5-7 (RSV) – *So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD, and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Bethpeor; but no man knows the place of his burial to this day. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.*

- This initial writing is very important for the idea of Scripture, since it is said to be the “word of God,” even to the extent that part of it is written down by God
 - This is likely the ultimate origin of the concept of “divinely inspired” writing

Ex 24.12 (RSV) – *The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tables of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction."*

Ex 31.18 (RSV) – *And he gave to Moses, when he had made an end of speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, the two tables of the testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.*

Ex 32.15-16 (RSV) *And Moses turned, and went down from the mountain with the two tables of the testimony in his hands, tables that were written on both sides; on the one side and on the other were they written. And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables.*

Tabernacle and First Temple Hebrew Religion (c. 1200 – 588 BC)

- Largely not text based – some religious professionals such as priests and prophets have access to collections of ancient writings
 - But the average believer is illiterate

- The public reading of the Law is supposed to occur once every seven years

Deut 31.9-13 (RSV) – *And Moses wrote this law, and gave it to the priests the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, "At the end of every seven years, at the set time of the year of release, at the feast of booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess."*

- Priests (cf. Lev 10.11) and parents are supposed to diligently teach the treaty commandments

Deut 6.4-7 (RSV) – *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise."*

Deut 6.20-25 *"When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes; and he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land which he swore to give to our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.'"*

- Royalty are also supposed to be literate and intimately familiar with the Law

Deut 17.18-20 (RSV) – *And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, from that which is in charge of the Levitical priests; and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them; that his heart may not be lifted up above his brethren, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left.*

- But First Temple religion is primarily sacramental, not textual
 - Thus, it is characterized by sacrifices, feasts, anointings, blood sprinklings, washings, etc.
 - These things are a living out of various commandments from the Pentateuch

- But they are, more importantly, direct participations in divine grace
 - So you have “the oil of consecration” to sanctify holy utensils (Ex 30, 40)
 - Blood, which “purified” the altar and the priests’ vestments (cf. Lev 8)
 - Sin offerings – sacrifice brings about God’s forgiveness (cf. Lev 4)
 - Washings – to change objects or persons from “unclean” to “clean”
- First Temple religion is focused around ideas of clean/unclean, holy/common, and righteous/sinful
- And First Temple religion is local – most all Hebrews live in a relatively small area and have access to sacramental ministries of the priestly class – Israel is about the size of New Jersey

Writing in the First Temple Period

- During the First Temple period, Israelites become increasingly literate – this is especially true of government officials, priests, and certain prophets
- Many books are written in various genres
 - Official Court Histories – “Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel/Judah”
 - Histories – Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, possibly “The Book of Jashar” (referenced in Joshua and 2 Samuel)
 - Liturgical Texts – most of the Psalms
 - Wisdom Texts – much of Proverbs, possibly Ecclesiastes and Job
 - Books of Poetry – Song of Songs
 - Prophetic Oracles – Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Nahum, Micah, etc.
- The Pentateuch is largely put into its present form – the text is likely still somewhat fluid

Exilic and Second Temple Religion

- The Babylonian Exile of Israel (c. 586) forced major changes upon Israel’s religious system
 - The Babylonians destroyed the Temple and impeded sacramental worship
 - There is a temporary end to sacrifices and feasts
 - They also scattered the people, now they’re not in a New-Jersey-sized area, they’re all over the place – Babylon, Egypt, etc.
- A way in which Israelites compensated for this was to become more “textual” in their religion
 - They don’t have the Temple and the sacrifices, but they can still read about them, pray, keep what commandments they are able, and hope that God will accept their effort and forgive them
 - At some point around or shortly after the Exile, the synagogue is born
 - “Synagogue” means “assembly” – it’s people getting together to pray corporately – but now gathered around holy words, not a holy place
- After the Persian conquest of Babylon (539), the Jews are permitted to return to Judah, rebuild their Temple, and re-institute the sacramental Temple worship
 - But not all Jews go – the legacy of the exile is the beginning of what is called the Jewish “diaspora” (i.e. “dispersion”) – Jews stay in Egypt and Babylon, but also move to Asia Minor, Greece, North Africa, and, eventually, Rome

- And those who do go are changed: they are more textual
- There is a theological understanding that the Exile occurred due to breaking the Law – common people feel more of a need to know and obey the Law
 - This generates demand for synagogues and a class who come to be known as “rabbis” – local interpreters of the Law
 - Synagogues begin to develop daily patterns of prayer and reading patterns – a cycle of services and a lectionary
 - They also begin to make extensive liturgical use of the Psalms
- At this point, the text of the Law becomes more fixed – willfully altering it is now sinful
 - It is still much more variable than the texts of the New Testament ever were (i.e. Masoretic Texts vs. the Septuagint vs. the Dead Sea Scrolls vs. Samaritan Torah)
- Additionally, many Jews begin to consider certain other ancient books to be divinely inspired and worthy of reading in the synagogue – e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah
 - So there is a gradual expansion in what is practically being read in the synagogues and the generic concept of “the Scriptures” is born
 - Gk. αἱ γραφαί – lit. “the writings” – an amorphous concept – the old, holy writings
 - By the time of the New Testament, this language of “Scripture” (meaning the Law + various other Hebrew/Jewish religious books) is ubiquitous in synagogue Judaism