Jewish Concepts of Scripture
A Comparative Introduction

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There, beyond the house, on the horizon, the lofty mountains, wearing their secret as a gray veil, live their mute lives, and beneath the floor of the house the dust lives its hidden life, its unique and solitary life, along with all that is hidden in it — seeds, roots, springs . . .

An expression — uncertainty, just so — is poured over the surface of its dark stones — and after all, that is almost faith.

— Zeldah, “The Old House,” in Shirei Zeldah (Tel Aviv: Haqqibbutz Hame’uchad, 1985), 9

translation by Benjamin D. Sommer
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Chapter 1

Introduction

_SCRIPTURES IN JEWISH TRADITION, AND TRADITIONS AS JEWISH SCRIPTURE_

_Benjamin D. Sommer_

On one level, there is a simple answer to the question “What is scripture for the Jews?” For roughly the past two thousand years, Jews have had a canon of twenty-four books that form the Jewish Bible, starting with Genesis and ending with Chronicles. Some Jewish groups up until about two thousand years ago accepted additional books as scripture, but by the end of the first century CE the canon used by Jews today was more or less universally accepted by all Jews. In this respect, Jews differ from Christians, since to this day there are books regarded by Orthodox Christians and Catholics as scripture that Protestants either reject or regard as less than fully scriptural. The anthology containing these twenty-four books is known to Jews by several names: Kitvei Ha-qodesh (“sacred texts”), Miqra (“Reading”), and Tanakh (an acronym for the three sections of the Jewish canon: Torah, Nevi’im, and Ketuvim).

On a deeper level, however, Jews of different times, places, and sects would answer the question “What is scripture?” in profoundly different ways. However much they agree on what books and even what precise words, consonants, and vowels constitute scripture, they have a wide range of views regarding the nature and purpose of these texts. The chapters in this volume attempt to answer the questions, How have various Jewish thinkers and movements conceptualized scripture? What is scripture for? What type of information does one get from it—historical, scientific, theological, moral, or something else? Is one primarily supposed to get information or guidance from it, or does it have some other purpose altogether?
For example, are copying it, decorating it, or marching around a sacred space with it commendable ways to show reverence to God? By chanting it, can one acquire merit or perhaps alter the Godhead or even perform magic? Answering these questions involves not so much studying how various Jews have read scripture (that is, examining the interpretive methods Jews have used to derive meaning from it) but asking prior questions: Why do they read it, or perform rituals with it, in the first place? For what reasons have Jews turned to this anthology?

The varied answers to these questions in the chapters that follow will speak for themselves. Before turning to them, however, it is useful to consider an overview of certain core ideas regarding scripture that almost all Jewish groups have assumed for the past two thousand years. We will see that these ideas differentiate Jewish conceptions of scripture from Christian ones in fundamental ways. To be sure, all twenty-four books of Jewish scripture are part of the Christian Bible in its various forms. Nonetheless, in many respects these texts function so differently in the two traditions that one can rightly say that the books in question are not the same books at all but entirely different works that happen to have the same words.

**The Primacy of Torah**

We should begin by noting that the twenty-four books of the Jewish canon are not all equal. The first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, often referred to in Hebrew as the Torah or the *Humash* and in English as the Five Books of Moses or the Pentateuch) are by far the most important, the most authoritative, and the most familiar to Jews. The remaining books are traditionally divided into two groups, the *Nevi’im*, or Prophets (a category that includes not only prophetic books such as Isaiah and Jeremiah but historical works such as 1–2 Samuel), and the *Ketuvim*, or Writings (sometimes called the Hagiographa). On a practical level, however, it would be more helpful to say that the Jewish Bible has two parts: First and foremost, there is the Torah—the *T* in the acronym *Tanakh*. Also, there is the rest of the Bible—the *Nakh* of the acronym; in fact, one does sometimes hear the term *Nakh* used among Jews to refer to “the part of the Bible coming after the Torah.” Only the Torah is chanted in its entirety in the course of synagogue worship (usually, over the course of a year); only a fraction of the remaining material is chanted in the synagogue. Jewish schools tend to give much more attention to the Torah than they give to the
Nakh. While Jewish beliefs flow from and to some degree claim to be based on the whole Tanakh, Jewish law—the core of Jewish practice and identity—claims to be based on the Torah alone.

**Scripture and Tradition**

One can justly wonder whether it is accurate to equate “scripture” in Judaism solely with the Tanakh. The historian of religion Graham William writes in his very useful article on scripture in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* that the term “scripture” designates “texts that are revered as especially sacred and authoritative in . . . religious traditions,” and he goes on to describe a number of characteristic roles and attributes of scriptures in religious traditions from around the world.5 As one thinks about Graham’s definition from the point of view of Judaism, one quickly realizes (as Graham himself notes)6 that the classical works of rabbinic literature—that is, the Mishna, the Talmuds, and the midrashim7—fit the definition almost as well as the Bible, and in some ways even better. For example, Graham writes that “the written scriptural text symbolizes or embodies religious authority in many traditions (often replacing the living authority of a religious founder such as Muhammad or the Buddha).”8 This sentence applies to both the Bible and rabbinic literature in Judaism; more specifically, we might say that the Bible symbolizes religious authority, while rabbinic literature embodies it, for on a practical level Jewish religious authorities seeking directives regarding Jewish law and ritual turn not to the Bible but to rabbinic texts. Similarly, Graham points to the importance of scripture both in public ritual (where it may be recited aloud or it may serve as a ritual object) and in private study (which shapes devotional and spiritual life). It is true that the Torah and, to a lesser degree, passages from the Prophets and the Writings play roles in public ritual in a way that rabbinic texts do not: they are chanted in synagogue worship according to highly formalized rules, for instance—and in this respect, the Bible is more typically scriptural than rabbinic literature is. Nonetheless, in many forms of Judaism (especially in the culture of ultra-Orthodoxy), studying as a devotional act focuses on the Talmud and not on the Bible9—and in this respect, the Talmud is more scriptural for many Jews than the Bible is. “Every text that achieves scriptural status in a religious community elicits extensive popular and scholarly exegesis and study of its contents,” Graham points out, and this exegesis tends to stress what Graham calls the “unicity” of the scripture, its wholeness and its lack
of self-contradiction. Here again, rabbinic literature fits the description just as much as the Bible does; whole literatures emerged in medieval and modern Judaism that comment on the Bible and the Talmud, and these literatures often stress the unity of the texts they interpret, focusing on harmonizing what appear to be contradictions between different parts of the biblical or talmudic whole. In the case of the Babylonian Talmud, a whole literature of commentaries, known as Tosafot, arose whose main concern is to emphasize this harmony of the whole talmudic corpus. Graham asserts that “a text is only 'scripture' insofar as a group of persons perceives it to be sacred or holy, powerful and meaningful, possessed of an exalted authority, and in some fashion transcendent of, and hence distinct from, other speech and writing.” This sentence fits the Mishnah and also, for many Jews, the Zohar, the central work of Jewish mysticism; but it is even truer of the Tanakh, or at least of the Torah (indeed, the Zohar itself makes claims about the exalted, transcendent, and ontologically distinct nature of the Torah that it does not make about itself).

One senses, then, that in Judaism scripture is not an either/or category. Biblical books and some postbiblical texts are scriptural, but in different ways and to different extents. Within the Tanakh, the Torah is more scriptural than the Prophets and Writings are. Within rabbinic literature, the Babylonian Talmud is more scriptural than the Jerusalem Talmud is, and some, but not all, Jews accept the Zohar as having what Graham identifies as scriptural attributes. One can even argue—and some classical Jewish thinkers have argued—that in many ways some works of rabbinic literature are more canonical than the biblical Prophets and Writings are. Thus, for Judaism, the whole category of scripture is more fluid than it is in Christianity (especially in Protestant Christianity). In this regard, Judaism has much more in common with, say, Hinduism or Buddhism. In a magisterial work titled What Is Scripture? (whose probing analyses underlie the whole project of the book you are now reading), the historian of religions Wilfred Cantwell Smith shows that a “theoretically somewhat informal scripture” exists in Hinduism, an amorphous or polymorphous set of texts that are variously sacred, authoritative, transcendent, and/or influential. Much the same can be said of the manifold scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism and even of the more restricted, but still polymorphous, scriptures of Theravada Buddhism. Precisely the same situation exists in Judaism. Pausing to examine the ways that several types of literature (biblical, rabbinic, and otherwise) are variously sacred, authoritative, transcendent, and/or influential will be worth our while.
The modern Jewish thinker Moshe Halbertal distinguishes between two types of canon, which he calls **normative** and **formative**. Texts that are canonical in the **normative** sense are obeyed and followed; they provide the group loyal to the text with guides to behavior and belief. Texts that are canonical in the **formative** sense are “taught, read, transmitted and interpreted. . . . They provide a society or a profession with a shared vocabulary.” For Jews, both the Bible and rabbinic literature function as canon in the formative sense. Both are studied, taught, transmitted, and interpreted, and consequently both help to form Jewish identity. Halbertal suggests in passing that the Bible is canonical in the normative sense, but I think that in practice this is not the case. In Judaism, the Bible is taught and read, transmitted and interpreted, but it is not the location of legal norms that are followed on a practical level. When one wants to know whether a pot is kosher or whether a business transaction is acceptable or what time the Passover Seder must begin, one does not open up a Bible. One turns instead to works of rabbinic literature. Crucial beliefs regarding messianism, resurrection, and the nature of God are also articulated in rabbinic and postrabbinic texts rather than in the Bible. Judaism’s normative canon is found primarily within rabbinic literature rather than in the Bible.

In short, one can make a very strong argument that the religious category “scripture” applies in Judaism to both the Bible and rabbinic literature, even though the latter has usually been thought of as belonging in the extrascriptural category that theologians and scholars of religion refer to as “tradition.” For Jews, however, the categories of “scripture” and “tradition” overlap; the very distinction between them is a Protestant one, and its application to Judaism can lead to misunderstanding. Many Jewish texts apply the Hebrew term **torah** to both the Bible and rabbinic literature. As Steven Fraade explains in his chapter in this volume, rabbinic texts use the term “Written Torah” to refer to the Bible and “Oral Torah” to refer to works of rabbinic literature. Both, according to classical rabbinic thought, were revealed at Sinai. The classical rabbis often stress the unity of these two Torahs, effectively denying that there is an ontologically significant difference between them at all.

All this raises the question, if this volume is concerned with Jewish conceptions of scripture, should it limit itself to describing how various Jewish thinkers and movements view the Bible? Perhaps in our discussions we should include rabbinic literature under the rubric “scripture”; some works of Jewish philosophy and mysticism might come under this rubric as well. A strong argument can be made that in focusing on the Bible, this volume
imports a Protestant Christian notion of scripture into Judaism and thus misrepresents the tradition it is attempting to explicate.

Nonetheless, several arguments, both theoretical and practical, support the decision to limit this volume’s discussion to Jewish conceptions of what might—without redundancy—be termed “biblical scripture.” First, for all the emphasis in some rabbinic texts on the close relationship and underlying unity of the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, Jewish tradition does distinguish between them. As a ritual object, the Written Torah has a status that the Oral Torah lacks. Scrolls of Written Torah used in synagogue worship (especially scrolls of the Pentateuch, but also of the book of Esther and in some synagogues of other works from the Writings and the Prophets as well) serve as rule-bound loci of holiness in a way that editions of rabbinic texts do not. Jewish law regulates and ritualizes the chanting of biblical texts in liturgy, but it does not do so for rabbinic texts. (Here we should recall that Judaism is a religion of law, and thus the highest honor Judaism bestows on a person or thing is to subject it to rules. That biblical texts are rule bound to a far greater degree than rabbinic ones is therefore significant.) On a more theoretical level, Jewish thinkers and movements have invested considerable time and effort into conceptualizing both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, but they do so in different ways; and thus it makes sense to focus our discussions on one or the other. A book that attempted to treat conceptions of the Bible as scripture as well as conceptions of rabbinic literature as scripture would either be too long or too shallow. The chapters that follow focus therefore on the Bible, but the reader will always need to keep in mind the scriptural characteristics of some post-biblical teachings in traditional Judaism.21

The Term “Scripture”

The English term “scripture” is misleading in a discussion of Judaism for two reasons. First, this term focuses our attention on the Bible as a written document and may lead us to forget that the Bible was both a written and an oral/aural text for most of Jewish history.22 To be sure, the Bible is known in rabbinic literature as the Written Torah, and rabbis often cite biblical verses with the phrase kakatuv, “as it is written.” But one of the most common terms for the Bible in Hebrew, miqra, comes from the verb qara, which means not only “read” but “read aloud, call”; similarly, biblical verses in rabbinic literature are often cited with the phrase shene’emar, “as
it is said.” For centuries, most Jews knew the Bible primarily from hearing it chanted. Many Jews memorized large parts of it (and here it is useful to recall that the Hebrew word for memorizing “by heart,” ‘al peh, literally means memorizing “by mouth”). The technology through which one comes to know information shapes how we use that information, and thus it is important to recall the extent to which the Bible was as much an aural/oral document for Jews throughout the ages as a written one. When scripture was mostly memorized, recited, and chanted, it functioned in one set of ways, and people searched it for certain types of information or guidance. When it became more widely available in handwritten copies and, ultimately, in printed editions, changes occurred in the ways it was interpreted and the sorts of information people tried to get from it. The chapters in this volume by Sommer and Harris describe a move from an ancient approach to the Bible as a collection of verses to medieval and modern views of the Bible as a collection of stories, poems, and legal corpora; the rabbis of the ancient period read the Bible atomistically, while later scholars tended to read it more holistically. Many factors contributed to this change, but the greater availability of written texts played a particularly important role.

The term “scripture” is misleading in another way: for much of Jewish history, the plural form “scriptures” would be more appropriate than the singular. In the modern West, we tend to think of the Bible as a single entity. Typically, one owns a Bible in one volume. But in antiquity, this was not the case; individual biblical books were written on individual scrolls. Thus, the conceptual category of a unified scripture was less prominent. (This situation probably played some role in engendering Judaism’s two-tiered conception of the Tanakh, in which Torah is most sacred and Nakh less so.) One might have expected this situation to change with the invention in the first century CE of the codex, a one-volume format that could contain the whole Bible, or with the rise of printing in Europe in the fifteenth century. Even then, however, the situation stayed largely the same. Jews continued to use individual scrolls of the Pentateuch for liturgical purposes; indeed, Jews still use these scrolls for liturgical reading in synagogue. For study, they used multivolume editions that usually included only part of the Bible, along with rabbinic commentaries; many Jews use these volumes for study to this day. In the majority of cases, these editions contained the Pentateuch or, somewhat less frequently, the Pentateuch along with those selections from the Prophets used in synagogue lectionary. These simple facts had profound effects on the way Jews conceptualized the Bible
until fairly recently. For contemporary Jews, the idea that one might have a conception of “the Bible” seems natural: “the Bible” is a category we think with, since “the Bible” is a volume many of us own. But religious Jews prior to the twentieth century rarely owned a Bible. Rather, they owned multivolume collections that contained both biblical texts and rabbinic commentary; or they did not own any books at all but heard selections from the Bible chanted from scrolls and explicated by preachers at a synagogue. Thus, they were less inclined to think of “the Bible” as a category, though they were not entirely unfamiliar with it either.

Several factors fortified the notion of the Bible (as opposed to “scriptures”) as an important category for modern Jews. These included, first of all, the rise of Zionism, which emphasized the Bible instead of the Talmud as the central text of the Jewish people. Thus, for example, Israeli schoolchildren and new recruits to the Israeli military are normally given a small, one-volume Tanakh—an important cultural artifact that conveys certain values even if the student or soldier rarely opens it. Another factor, at least for central European and North American Jews (and Jews elsewhere influenced by them), was greater contact with Protestants, for whom scripture was a central category of religious thought. We should recall that the increasing prevalence of the one-volume Bible and, with it, the greater prominence of the concept of “scripture” as opposed to “scriptures” in Judaism are very recent developments in Jewish history.

Theologies of Scripture versus Conceptions of Scripture

This book is meant to complement another volume published by NYU Press, *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, edited by Justin Holcomb. The differences between the books, which begin with the title, are instructive, because they reflect some essential differences between Judaism and Christianity. First, Judaism is not only a religion but in wider senses a culture, and the Jews are not only a faith community but an ethnicity. One can be a Jew and an atheist in a way that one cannot be a Christian and an atheist. (Jewish law, especially as established by Maimonides, regards an atheistic Jew as a sinner, but in Jewish law such a Jew remains a Jew.) As a result, this volume cannot limit itself to discussions of theologies of scripture. The Bible plays roles not only in Jewish religious thought and practice but throughout all realms of Jewish culture. Secular Jews (and especially secular Zionists) have found the Bible more useful,
more relevant, more malleable, and more interesting than they have found rabbincic literature and other Jewish religious writings. On a practical level, the Bible has an even more important place in secular Judaism than it has in religious Judaism—hence the need for chapters by Yair Zakovitch and Yael Feldman on the place of the Bible in Israeli culture and Israeli literature. (Had space permitted, chapters on the Bible in Yiddish literature and in American Jewish culture would have been appropriate additions to this volume. Given Feldman’s focus on Israeli fiction, a separate chapter on the fascinating roles the Bible plays in Israeli poetry might have been written as well, but space did not allow this.)

Second, the discipline of theology does not have the same place in Judaism that it has in Christianity, while the genre of commentary does not have the same importance in Christianity that it has in Judaism. Both types of literature are known in each religion, but commentators play for Jews the central role that theologians play for Christians. Jewish children start learning Rashi—not Maimonides—as early as third grade; adults, laypeople and scholars alike, study both, but they are rather more likely to study the commentaries penned by the former than the philosophical works of the latter. When religious Jews do study Maimonides, they are more likely to study his legal works, which points to another central literature in Judaism: halakhic texts, including both legal codes and responses to specific questions addressed to legal authorities over the centuries. Thus, my statement regarding the role of theologians might be rephrased: for Jewish communities, commentators and legal authorities play a central role that theologians rarely achieve. We saw previously that the Jewish thinker Moshe Halbertal discusses “formative canon”—that is, the curricula that shape Jewish lives not only within the walls of educational institutions but far beyond them as well. The formative canon of Jews for the past two thousand years has involved commentaries on the Bible and on rabbincic literature; it has involved legal texts; but to the extent that it has included theological and philosophical works, their influence has been more mediated, and their place in curricula has been less robust.

Consequently, unlike the volume that Holcomb edited, this volume does not limit itself to theologians. It attends to biblical scholars and interpreters, ancient, medieval, and modern: Azzan Yadin-Israel discusses the interpretive schools of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael; Meira Polliack and Robert Harris discuss medieval commentators; Baruch Schwartz, Job Jindo, and Marc Brettler discuss various modern Jewish biblical scholars. (In Schwartz’s case, the discussion of how Jewish scholars in the past two
centuries responded to modern theories about the Pentateuch not only lays out several schools of modern Jewish thought but clarifies core attitudes to the Pentateuch among premodern Jews as well.) This volume does include discussions of some theologians, but it is noteworthy that most of them were biblical commentators and/or translators as well. This is the case for Nahmanides, whom Aaron Hughes discusses, for Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, whom Jonathan Cohen examines, and for Mordechai Breuer, whom Shalom Carmy analyzes; this also applies to some of the mystics whom Moshe Idel discusses in his chapter. (Similarly, Yehezkel Kaufmann, whom Jindo discusses, might be considered a Jewish thinker or theologian as much as a biblical critic.) Maimonides, the subject of James Diamond’s chapter, is the only thinker who could not in some sense be considered a biblical commentator. Yet even Maimonides devotes close to a third of his philosophical magnum opus, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, to explaining the nature of biblical language and metaphor. Mindful of W. C. Smith’s thesis that scripture is a human activity, often manifesting itself through ritual, I also commissioned Elsie Stern’s chapter on the conception of scripture that emerges from the Jewish lectionary cycle (a conception, Stern reminds us, that has enjoyed the most widespread purchase among actual Jews throughout history). Some ritual uses of scripture are also discussed in Idel’s chapter.

The list of topics that appeared in the preceding two paragraphs will raise a question among many readers: why these thinkers and movements and not other, equally important and influential ones? There is no doubt that this volume is impoverished by its many absences. There are dozens of commentators, ancient, medieval, and modern, to whom space might have been devoted. Among the philosophers and theologians, many of great interest are missing: Saadia Gaon on one end of the historical spectrum, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Emmanuel Levinas on the other. Conceptions of scripture in nonrabbinic forms of ancient Judaism, such as the community responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls, were vastly different from what has been surveyed here, and their absence is keenly felt. Several modern biblical scholars have taught us that scripture existed before Scripture, torah before the Torah: already in the biblical period itself, long before the Bible was canonized and indeed before many biblical books had been edited into the forms in which we know them, some texts were already regarded as sacred and authoritative. These included, for example, sayings of the prophets that were later edited into the prophetic books we
know and law codes attributed to Moses that later became parts of the Pentateuch. Thus, even before there was a Bible, there was scripture in ancient Israel; one might say that texts regarded as holy in the preexilic biblical period gradually became the Bible in the postexilic biblical period and the early postbiblical period. Consequently, chapters on ancient Israelite conceptions of scripture would have added much to this volume. Had we but space enough, and time, we could have added more chapters, but the resulting volume would have been impossible to publish. So this smaller volume will have to suffice. Turning its pages, readers will not find everything in it; but the fact that finishing its work is impossible should not dissuade one from beginning it.

NOTES

1. To count twenty-four books, one needs to recall that Jewish tradition regards twelve short prophetic books (beginning with Hosea and ending with Malachi) as a single unit, known as Trei Asar (the Twelve); so, too, Ezra-Nehemiah are a single book, as are First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, and First and Second Chronicles.

2. In a few manuscripts, the order of these books differs slightly; for example, in the oldest manuscript of the Masoretic text, the Aleppo Codex, Chronicles appears before Psalms rather than at the end of the canon. This fact hardly overturns my observation that there has been unanimity among Jews regarding the canon’s contents over the past two millennia.

3. Specifically, most Protestants do not accept certain Jewish books from the late Second Temple period as part of their scripture; they often term these books “the Apocrypha.” Catholics and Orthodox Christians, however, do accept these books as scriptural (and thus do not traditionally refer to them as Apocrypha). These books have not been part of Jewish scripture for around two thousand years, but many of them were probably regarded as scriptural by some Jewish groups in the late Second Temple period.

4. In English, Jews generally refer to the anthology as “the Bible.” Contrary to what some people assume, they do not typically refer to it as “the Hebrew Bible”; that term is a neutral, nondenominational one used in academic settings to refer to the anthology in question, instead of using the specifically Christian term “the Old Testament” or the specifically Jewish term “the Bible.”

6. See ibid., 134a–b, and cf. 141b. See also the discussion of Talmud as “para-
scripture” in Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*
(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 204–6.

7. For brief definitions of these terms (and of similar terms that occur through-
out this volume), see the Glossary at the end of the book.


9. On the relative place of Bible and Talmud in Jewish curricula through the
ages, see the helpful summary in Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon,
Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 98–100,
with extensive references to primary and secondary sources. This book is crucial
reading for anyone interested in Jewish conceptions of scripture.


11. Ibid., 134b.

12. For references to such thinkers, see Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, 48
vols., in Hebrew (Jerusalem: Beit Torah Shelemah, 1979), 19.277 §108. See further
my discussion of this issue in “Unity and Plurality in Jewish Canons: The Case
of the Oral and Written Torahs,” in *One Scripture or Many? Perspectives Historical,
Theological and Philosophical*, ed. Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser

134a–b, 141b.


16. Some groups focus more on one, and some more on others. The Bible is a
much more important part of the formative canon for secular Israeli Jews; rabbinic
literature, and especially the Babylonian Talmud, is a more important part of the
formative canon for ultra-Orthodox Jews.

17. To be sure, traditional Jewish thinkers have linked these beliefs and prac-
tices to the Bible through exegesis, but one would not be able to note their presence
there without the rabbinic commentaries.

18. In many ways, “scripture” in Judaism (and in Catholicism) is a subset of
the larger category of “tradition,” or in any event tradition is conceptually and his-
torically prior to scripture rather than, as many people assume, vice versa. See my
remarks in “Unity and Plurality,” 109–11, esp. n. 3, and 124–25, esp. n. 46.

19. Note that at this point we have seen three distinct uses of the term “Torah”
in this chapter, all of them frequently found in Jewish literature:

- “Torah” (especially, “the Torah”) can refer to the first and most important
  part of the Jewish Bible, the Five Books of Moses.
- The “Written Torah” refers to all twenty-four books of the Jewish Bible.
- “Oral Torah” refers to works of rabbinic literature. The boundaries of
  this sort of Torah are fluid and ever expanding; clearly, the Mishna and
Talmuds and classical midrashim are part of it, but so are some (though not all) comments made by both students and teachers during classes held at a yeshiva or a synagogue just yesterday, and today, and tomorrow.

A fourth use, also common in Jewish circles, should also be noted:

- “Torah” (but not “the Torah”) can mean all Jewish learning in all times, whether written down or not.

It is worth pausing to ask which meaning a classical Jewish text intends when it uses the term “Torah.” In some cases, the answer to this question is not entirely clear—a circumstance which further supports the notion that Jewish scriptures represent the sort of polymorphous, theoretically informal scripture that W. C. Smith describes in Hinduism.


21. There are exceptions to what I have said here about the scriptural nature of rabbinc tradition in Judaism, especially in the Judaism of the Sadducees, the Karaites, and perhaps also the Dead Sea Scrolls. On the Karaites, see chapter 6 in this volume by Meira Polliack.


23. The invention of the printing press (a relatively recent event, from the point of view of Judaism’s long history) had a profound effect on the ways people related to the Bible and conceptualized it. The availability of the Bible in easily searched and retrieved digital formats today is likely to have a significant effect on Jewish and Christian notions of scripture in the future, indeed in the very near future.


25. See Herbert Zafren, “Bible Editions, Bible Study and the Early History of Hebrew Printing,” Eretz Israel 16 (1982): 240–51. Zafren’s listing of early printed editions shows that only about 15 of the 142 Hebrew editions of biblical texts and commentaries printed between 1469 and 1528 contained the full Tanakh. The way these early Hebrew printers responded to the market’s demand shows that above all Jews wanted editions of the Pentateuch and Pentateuchal commentaries; to a lesser extent, they wanted other biblical texts chanted in synagogue; and to some degree they also wanted copies of the Psalter. Printings of all other biblical texts seem to have been the early equivalent of hardcover books purveyed by a European academic press. Zafren’s study covers the first century of printed Bibles; my impression is that similar tendencies endured until the twentieth century, when Zionism and other factors encouraged the proliferation of small one-volume editions of the whole Tanakh—though a visit to a traditional Hebrew bookstore will show
that to this day multivolume editions with commentary, most often consisting of
the Pentateuch alone (or Pentateuch with prophetic lectionaries), remain exceed-
ingly common.

26. See chapter 16 by Yael Feldman and chapter 17 by Yair Zakovitch in this
volume on the centrality of the Bible in Zionist and Israeli identity.

27. To be sure, all religions are in some sense cultures, but in the case of Juda-
ism, nonreligious aspects of the culture are unusually prominent.

28. For such a discussion, see Chana Kronfeld, On the Margins of Modernism:
Decentering Literary Dynamics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996),
114–40 (originally published in Prooftexts 5 [1985]: 129–40), as well as Ruth Kar-
tun-Blum, Profane Scriptures: Reflections on the Dialogue with the Bible in Modern

29. See note 15.


31. I think of James Barr, John Barton, Alexander Rofé, Yair Zakovitch, Avig-
dor Shinan, and Michael Fishbane. These scholars followed up insights from their
predecessors, especially Yehezkel Kaufmann and Isac Leo Seeligmann.
Glossary

**aggadah**: A rabbinic term referring to nonlegal teachings from the Bible or subsequent Jewish literature, especially narrative or didactic material. All rabbinic teachings are classified as either halakhah or aggadah. In English, one finds the adjective **aggadic**, referring to teachings of the aggadah.

**amora'im**: See rabbis, classical

**derash**: See peshat and derash.

**derashah** (pl.: **derashot**): A rabbinic homily or sermon.

**halakhah**: A rabbinic term referring to legal teachings from the Bible or subsequent Jewish literature. All rabbinic teachings are classified as either halakhah or aggadah. In English, one finds the adjective **halakhic**, which means “pertaining to teachings of halakhah.”

**Hebrew Bible**: A term used by modern academic scholars to refer to the anthology known to Christians as “the Old Testament” and to Jews as “the Bible” (or, in Hebrew, Mikra or Tanakh).

**Hunash**: See Pentateuch.

**kabbalah** (or **qabbalah**): Jewish ritual practices and esoteric teachings from the twelfth century CE and later, pertaining especially to ten manifestations of God (or powers emanating from God) that enter into the created world. Each of these ten embodies or reflects a particular aspect of God, such as Wisdom, Justice, Mercy, or Royalty. (Literally, the Hebrew term means “tradition” or, more precisely, “reception, that which is received.”)

**Karaites** (or Qaraïtes): A group of nonrabbinic Jews who emerged beginning in the late ninth century CE. The Karaites reject rabbinic tradition, claiming to base their beliefs and practices exclusively on the Bible itself. Jews who are not Karaites are called **Rabbanites**.

**Masoretic Text** (often abbreviated **MT**): The received biblical text in Jewish tradition, accepted by both Karaïte and Rabbanite Jews. The MT contains consonants and vowels, as well as cantillation marks (that is,
musical/syntactic symbols for each word of the Bible, which both show how a sentence is structured and provide the musical notes to be used when chanting biblical texts in synagogue). The MT with its vowels and musical notations crystallized in the ninth and tenth centuries CE; the consonantal text used by the MT crystallized in the second century CE, though consonantal texts of the MT type are known from the Dead Sea Scrolls and thus date back to the second century BCE and perhaps further. Biblical scrolls used in synagogue worship are written only with the consonants; printed editions (and, earlier, manuscripts) used for study contain the MT with its vowels and cantillation. The term Masoretic comes from the Hebrew word Masorah (literally, “tradition”).

**midrash** (pl.: midrashim): A rabbinic interpretation of a biblical passage or verse; also, a collection of such interpretations. Classical midrashim were produced by the classical rabbis during the first millennium CE and to some degree the beginning of the second millennium CE.

**Mikra** (or Miqra): A standard Hebrew term for the Bible or scripture.

**Mishnah**: Codification of rabbinic law edited in the third century CE, consisting of six main sections that are further divided into sixty-three tractates, covering civil, criminal, and ritual law. The Mishnah is a centerpiece of rabbinic curriculum and culture to this day. All subsequent discussions of rabbinic law are based on it. See also Talmud(s).

**Old Testament**: A term used by Christians to refer to the first part of the Christian biblical canon, which for Protestant Christians is identical to the Tanakh/Mikra and for Catholic and Orthodox Christians contains all the books found in the Tanakh/Mikra as well as several other Second Temple-period Jewish books not accepted as canonical by Jews and Protestants. Only in modern Western culture, with its idolization of youth, would one think that the word “Old” implies some insult to Jewish scripture; in fact “Old” in the term “Old Testament” means “venerable,” not “antiquated.” Nonetheless, some contemporary Christians avoid the term, instead speaking of a “First Testament” or a “Prime Testament” or using the religiously neutral term “Hebrew Bible.”

**Pentateuch**: A Greek term referring to the first part of the Jewish biblical canon, that is, the Five Books of Moses (known in Hebrew as the Torah and also as the Huminash).

**peshat and derash**: Both terms mean “interpretation” (that is, “interpretation of the Bible”). In classical rabbinic texts from the time of the Talmud and midrashim (i.e., in rabbinic texts dating to the first millennium CE), these terms are generally used as synonyms. Since the twelfth
or thirteenth century CE, under the influence of the great French Jewish commentators Rashi and Rashbam, the terms have come to be used to refer to two distinct types of interpretation: *Peshat* refers to interpretations that attend to the immediate textual context of a biblical passage, interpret the Bible using the normal rules of human language, and often focus on questions of style, usage, and Hebrew grammar. *Derash* refers to those rabbinic interpretations that, regarding biblical language as essentially different from normal, human language, find many layers of meaning in biblical texts, focus heavily on single verses (or small groups of verses) rather than larger textual units, often interpret a verse in one book by relating it to verses from other biblical books, and concentrate on practical moral or religious lessons that can be derived from a biblical text. In the sense in which Rashbam uses the terms, *peshat* and *derash* are both legitimate modes of interpretation (though Jewish law is always based on *derash* and does not follow the interpretation one arrives at by using a *peshat* method of reading); they never conflict or contradict each other, because they exist at parallel, nonintersecting linguistic or exegetical planes.

*peshat*: See *peshat* and *derash*.

**Rabbanite**: As opposed to Karaite, a Jew who accepts rabbinic tradition.

**rabbinic literature**: Usually refers to the literature of the classical rabbis: the *Mishnah*, the *Talmuds*, the *midrashim*, and other texts produced in Hebrew and Aramaic by the classical rabbis during the first millennium CE. Sometimes the term is also used to refer to later literature that grows out of, interprets, or is based on these first-millennium works, such as commentaries on the Bible and on the *Mishnah*, *Talmuds*, and *midrashim* (e.g., the commentaries of Rashi or ibn Ezra), codifications of Jewish law, and responses to specific questions of Jewish law written by leading rabbinic authorities.

**rabbis, classical**: The term “rabi” continues to be used today, but when scholars of Judaism refer to “the Rabbis” or “the Rabbinic Period,” they generally mean what we might call the “classical rabbis,” the rabbis whose discussions and teachings are found in the *Mishnah*, the *Talmuds*, and the *midrashim*. The classical rabbis are divided into two main periods: the *tanna’im* (dating to the first through mid-third centuries CE) are the rabbis who produced the *Mishnah*; the *amora’im* (dating from the mid-third through the sixth centuries CE) are the rabbis who produced the *Talmuds*. Both groups are frequently quoted in midrashic collections.

**Talmud(s)**: The central document of rabbinic culture from the mid-first
millennium to this day. There are two Talmuds, one edited into its current form in the Land of Israel in the fifth century CE (usually called the Jerusalem Talmud or the Palestinian Talmud), the other edited into its current form in Mesopotamia in the sixth century CE (the Babylonian Talmud). Both consist of two parts. The earlier part is the Mishnah; the later part, known as the Gemara, contains a series of discussions, debates, elaborations, and interpretations of the Mishnah. The same Mishnah is found in both the Talmuds (minor textual variants notwithstanding); the two Gemaras are completely different works, though some passages appear in both.

Tanakh: A Hebrew term for the Bible. It is an acronym formed from the three parts of the Jewish biblical canon: Torah (the Five Books of Moses), Nevi'im (Prophets, including both historical books and the writings of the classical prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings, consisting of a variety of historical, narrative, and poetic works).

tanna’im: See rabbis, classical.

Tetragrammaton: The four-letter personal name of God in the Bible, often transliterated as “YHWH” in English or rendered as “the LORD” in English translations of the Bible. In Jewish tradition for the past two millennium, it is not pronounced aloud, and as a result, scholars are not absolutely positive what the vowels were—but they are almost positive that an a came after the Y and an e after the w.

torah: Literally means “teaching” or “guidance” and is often used in the sense of “law.” As a proper noun, it can refer to several specific works or bodies of literature:

- Torah (especially, “the Torah”) refers to the Five Books of Moses or Pentateuch, the first part of the Jewish biblical canon.
- Written Torah refers in rabbinic literature to the whole Bible or Tanakh.
- Oral Torah refers in rabbinic literature to authoritative or sacred teachings not found in the Bible but also revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai, or teachings based on or growing out of that revelation. It includes all the classic works of rabbinic literature (the Mishnah, the Talmuds, the midrashim) and also many, but not all, post-Talmudic teachings, many of which were never reduced to writing.
- Torah can also refer to the Written and Oral Torahs together—in other words, to all authoritative and sacred Jewish teaching.

YHWH: See Tetragrammaton.
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