

INTRODUCTION TO THE  
**HEBREW  
BIBLE**

THIRD EDITION



JOHN J. COLLINS

# Introduction to the Hebrew Bible



Introduction  
to the Hebrew Bible  
AND DEUTERO-CANONICAL BOOKS

THIRD EDITION

JOHN J. COLLINS

Fortress Press  
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## INTRODUCTION TO THE HEBREW BIBLE, THIRD EDITION

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# Preface

This book is written out of the experience of teaching introductory courses on the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible at several different institutions over thirty years. The students in these courses have included Catholic seminarians (at Mundelein Seminary and the University of Notre Dame), undergraduates (at DePaul, Notre Dame, and the University of Chicago), master of divinity students of all denominations (at Chicago and Yale), and master of arts students who, like the undergraduates, might have a religious commitment, or might not. They have been predominantly Christian, but have also included good numbers of Jews and Unitarians (especially at Chicago). Most of these students came to the courses with some knowledge of the Bible, but some were unencumbered by any previous knowledge of the subject. This introductory textbook is written to meet the needs of any or all such students. It presupposes a certain level of literacy, and some previous acquaintance with the Bible would definitely be helpful. It is intended, however, as a book for those who are beginning serious study rather than for experts. It is meant to be ecumenical, in the sense that it does not seek to impose any particular theological perspective, but to provide information and raise questions that should be relevant to any student, regardless of faith commitment. The information is largely drawn from the history, archaeology, and literature of the ancient Near East. The questions are primarily ethical, and reflect the fact that people of different faith commitments continue to read these texts as Scripture in the modern world.

The introduction is historical-critical in the sense that it emphasizes that the biblical text is the product of a particular time and place and is rooted in the culture of the ancient Near East. Since much of the Old Testament tells an ostensibly historical story, questions of historical accuracy must be addressed. In part, this is a matter of correlating the biblical account with evidence derived from archaeology and other historical sources. But it also leads to a discussion of the genre of the biblical text. The history-like appearance of biblical narrative should not be confused with historiography in the modern sense. Our best guide to the genre of biblical narrative is the corpus of literature from the ancient Near East that has been recovered over the last two hundred years.

This introduction, however, is not only historical in orientation. The primary importance of the Old Testament as Scripture lies in its ethical implications. In some cases, biblical material is ethically inspiring—the story of liberation from slavery in Egypt, the Ten Commandments, the preaching of the prophets on social justice. In other cases, however, it is repellent to modern sensibilities. The command to slaughter the Canaanites is the showcase example, but there are numerous issues relating to slaves, women, homosexuality, and the death penalty that are, at the very least, controversial in a modern context. In any of these cases, whether congenial to modern sensibilities or not, this introduction tries to use the biblical text as a springboard for raising issues of enduring importance. The text is not a source of answers on these issues, but rather a

source of questions. Most students initially see the text through a filter of traditional interpretations. It is important to appreciate how these traditional interpretations arose, but also to ask how far they are grounded in the biblical text and whether other interpretations are possible.

Since this book is intended for students, I have tried to avoid entanglement in scholarly controversies. For this reason, there are no footnotes. Instead, each chapter is followed by suggestions for further reading. These suggestions point the student especially to commentaries and reference works that they can use as resources. Inevitably, the bibliographies are highly selective and consist primarily of books that I have found useful. Many other items could be listed with equal validity, but I hope that these suggestions will provide students with a reliable place to start. Since they are intended primarily for American students, they are limited to items that are available in English.

A large part of this book was written in 2000–2001, when I enjoyed a sabbatical year by courtesy of the Luce Foundation and Yale University. I am grateful to the Luce Foundation for its financial support and for the stimulation of two conferences with other Luce fellows. I am especially grateful to Richard Wood, then dean of Yale Divinity School, for making it possible for me to have a sabbatical in my first year at Yale.

I am also indebted to Samuel Adams, my graduate assistant in the production of this book, to Tony Finitis, Patricia Ahearne-Kroll, John Ahn, and Matt Neujahr, who served as teaching assistants in my introductory course at Yale and gave me valuable feedback, and to the staff at Fortress, especially K. C. Hanson and Jessica Thoreson, who saw the book through the production process.

The book is dedicated to the students of Yale Divinity School.

# Preface to the Second Edition

This revised second edition has updated bibliographies and is presented in a different format from the original.

I have made only minor changes to the text. I have moved the discussion of the book of Jonah from chapter 26 (the Hebrew Short Story) to chapter 20 (Postexilic Prophecy). I have separated out introductory comments on the Deuteronomistic History, Prophecy and the Writings. I have revised my analysis of the flood in chapter 2. Numerous smaller changes are scattered throughout the book.

I would like to thank Joel Baden and Ron Hendel for their comments and suggestions.

I am especially grateful to Neil Elliott and the staff at Fortress for shepherding this revision through the publication process.



# Preface to the Third Edition

The changes to this new third edition are largely visual, since the content is virtually unchanged from the second edition. In this edition, the format is now presented in a one-column design, which allows for more flexibility in the placement and size of the images in the volume. A number of new images have been introduced, while some of the images in the second edition have been replaced.

This third edition also features a new map design emphasizing greater readability, and a number of new maps have been added. A significant new feature of this edition is the addition of a full index.

# Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium
Bib Int	Biblical Interpretation
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CC	Continental Commentaries
CEJL	Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature
CHANE	Culture and History of the Ancient Near East
ConBOT	Coniectanea biblica (Old Testament series)
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplement Series
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series

LXX	Septuagint (Greek version)
MT	Masoretic text
NCB	New Century Bible
<i>NIB</i>	<i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
<i>OEANE</i>	<i>Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East</i> . Edited by E. M. Meyers. 5 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997
OTL	Old Testament Library
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	SBL Dissertation Series
SBLEJL	SBL Early Jewish Literature Series
SBLMS	SBL Monograph Series
SBLWAW	SBL Writings from the Ancient World
VTE	Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament

# Introduction

**The following pages will introduce the different canons of the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament, considerations regarding the text of the Bible, questions about the Bible and history, and methods of biblical scholarship.**

## **WHAT ARE THE HEBREW BIBLE AND OLD TESTAMENT?**

The writings that make up the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament are by any reckoning among the most influential writings in Western history. In part, their influence may be ascribed to their literary quality, which establishes them as enduring classics—think, for example, of the depiction of the human predicament in the book of Job. But not all books of the Bible are literary classics, nor does their importance depend on their literary merit. The place of the Bible in Western culture derives from the fact that these books are regarded as sacred Scripture by Jews and Christians and are consequently viewed as authoritative in a way that other literary classics are not. The idea of sacred Scripture, however, is by no means a clear one, and it is taken to mean very different things by different people. Some conservative Christians regard the Bible as the inspired word of God, verbally inerrant in all its details. At the liberal end of the spectrum, others regard it only as a witness to the foundational stages of Western religion.

It is often the case that people who hold passionate beliefs about the nature of the Bible are surprisingly unfamiliar with its content. Before we can begin to discuss what it might mean to regard the Bible as Scripture, there is much that we need to know about it of a more mundane nature. This material includes the content of the biblical text, the history of its composition, the literary genres in which it is written, and the problems and ambiguities that attend its interpretation. It is the purpose of this book to provide such introductory knowledge. If the Bible is Scripture, then the idea of Scripture must be formed in the light of what we actually find in the biblical text.

## THE DIFFERENT CANONS OF SCRIPTURE

The Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament are not quite the same thing.

The Hebrew Bible is a collection of twenty-four books in three divisions: the Law (*Torah*), the Prophets (*Nebi'im*), and the Writings (*Ketubim*), sometimes referred to by the acronym *Tanak*.

The Torah consists of five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (traditionally, the books of Moses).

The Prophets are divided into the four books of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are each counted as one book) and the four books of the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve; the Twelve Minor Prophets [Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi] are counted as one book).

The Writings consist of eleven books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs (or Canticles), Ruth, Lamentations, Qoheleth (or Ecclesiastes), Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (as one book), and Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles as one book).

The *Christian Old Testament* is so called in contrast to the New Testament, with the implication that the Old Testament is in some sense superseded by the New. Christianity has always wrestled with the theological significance of the Old Testament. In the second century C.E., Marcion taught that Christians should reject the Old Testament completely, but he was branded a heretic. The Old Testament has remained an integral part of the Christian canon of Scripture. There are significant differences, however, within the Christian churches as to the books that make up the Old Testament.

The *Protestant Old Testament* has the same content as the Hebrew Bible but arranges the books differently. The first five books are the same but are usually called the Pentateuch rather than the Torah. Samuel, Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles are each counted as two books, and the Minor Prophets as twelve, yielding a total of thirty-nine books. The Former Prophets are regarded as historical books and grouped with Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Daniel is counted as a prophetic book. The (Latter) Prophets are moved to the end of the collection, so as to point forward to the New Testament.

The *Roman Catholic canon* contains several books that are not in the Hebrew Bible or the Protestant Old Testament: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (or the Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach = Ben Sira), Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah (= Baruch 6), 1 and 2 Maccabees. Furthermore, the books of Daniel and Esther contain passages that are not found in the Hebrew Bible. In the case of Daniel, these are the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, which are inserted in Daniel 3, and the stories of Susanna and Bel and the Dragon.

The Greek Orthodox Church has a still larger canon, including 1 Esdras (which reproduces the substance of the book of Ezra and parts of 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah), Psalm 151, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 3 Maccabees. A fourth book of Maccabees is included in Greek Bibles but is regarded as an appendix to the canon, while another book, 2 Esdras, is included as an appendix in the Latin Vulgate. These books are called Apocrypha (literally, “hidden away”) in Protestant terminology. Catholics often refer to

them as “deuterocanonical” or “secondarily canonical” books, in recognition of the fact that they are not found in the Hebrew Bible.

Some Eastern Christian churches have still more extensive canons of Scripture. The books of *Jubilees* and *1 Enoch* attained canonical status in the Ethiopian church.

### Why Are There Different Canons of Scripture?

By “canon” we mean here simply the list of books included in the various Bibles. Strictly speaking, “canon” means “rule” or “measuring stick.” The word was used in the plural by librarians and scholars in ancient Alexandria in the Hellenistic period (third and second centuries B.C.E.) with reference to literary classics, such as the Greek tragedies, and in Christian theology it came to be used in the singular for the Scriptures as “the rule of faith,” from the fourth century C.E. on. In its theological use, canon is a Christian concept, and it is anachronistic in the context of ancient Judaism or even of earliest Christianity. In common parlance, however, “canon” has come to mean simply the corpus of Scriptures, which, as we have seen, varies among the Christian churches.

The differences between the various canons can be traced back to the differences between the Scriptures that became the Hebrew Bible and the larger collection that circulated in Greek. The Hebrew Bible took shape over several hundred years and attained its final form only in the first century C.E. The Torah was the earliest part to crystallize. It is often associated with the work of Ezra in the fifth century B.C.E. It may have been substantially complete a century before that, at the end of the Babylonian exile (586–539 B.C.E.), but there may have also been some additions or modifications after the time of Ezra. The Hebrew collection of the Prophets seems to have been formed before the second century B.C.E. We find references to the Torah and the Prophets as authoritative Scriptures in the second century B.C.E., in the book of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) and again in the Dead Sea Scrolls (in a document known as 4QMMT). The book of Daniel, which was composed about 164 B.C.E., did not find a place among the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, and this has often been taken as an indication that the collection of the Prophets was already fixed at the time of its composition. The preface to the book of Ben Sira also mentions other writings that were regarded as authoritative. There does not, however, seem to have been any definitive list of these writings before the first century C.E. Most references to the Jewish Scriptures in the writings of this period (including references in the New Testament) speak only of “the Law and the Prophets.” The Psalms are sometimes added as a third category. The Dead Sea Scrolls include a Psalms Scroll that has additional psalms, and this would seem to indicate that the canonical collection of psalms had not yet been fixed. The first references to a fixed number of authoritative Hebrew writings are found toward the end of the first century C.E. The Jewish historian Josephus gives the number as twenty-two, while the Jewish apocalypse of *4 Ezra* (contained in 2 Esdras 3–14) speaks of twenty-four. It is possible, however, that both had the same books in mind but that Josephus combined some books (perhaps Judges-Ruth and Jeremiah-Lamentations) that were counted separately in *4 Ezra*.

The fixing of the Hebrew canon is often associated with the so-called Council of Jamnia, the discussions of an authoritative group of rabbis in the period after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. It is misleading, however, to speak of a “Council of Jamnia,” since

---

## CANONS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT

The Hebrew Bible	Protestant Old Testament	
<b>Torah:</b>	<b>Pentateuch:</b>	<b>Prophets</b>
Genesis	Genesis	Isaiah
Exodus	Exodus	Jeremiah
Leviticus	Leviticus	Lamentations
Numbers	Numbers	Ezekiel
Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Daniel
		Hosea            Nahum
<b>Prophets (Former):</b>	<b>Historical Books</b>	Joel              Habakkuk
Joshua	Joshua	Amos            Zephaniah
Judges	Judges	Obadiah        Haggai
Samuel (1 and 2)	Ruth	Jonah            Zechariah
Kings (1 and 2)	1 Samuel	Micah            Malachi
	2 Samuel	
<b>Prophets (Latter):</b>	1 Kings	<b>Apocrypha</b>
Isaiah	2 Kings	1 Esdras
Jeremiah	1 Chronicles	2 Esdras
Ezekiel	2 Chronicles	Tobit
Minor Prophets ("The Twelve"): Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi	Ezra	Judith
	Nehemiah	Additions to Esther
	Esther	Wisdom of Solomon
		Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Sirach)
	<b>Poetry/Wisdom</b>	Baruch
	Job	Letter of Jeremiah
	Psalms	Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Young Men
	Proverbs	Susanna
	Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth)	Bel and the Dragon
	Song of Solomon (Songs)	Prayer of Manasseh
		1 Maccabees
		2 Maccabees
<b>Writings:</b>		
Psalms		
Proverbs		
Job		
Song of Songs		
Ruth		
Lamentations		
Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)		
Esther		
Daniel		
Ezra-Nehemiah		
Chronicles (1 and 2)		

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## CANONS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT

### Roman Catholic Old Testament

#### **Pentateuch**

Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy

#### **Historical Books**

Joshua  
Judges  
Ruth  
1 Samuel  
2 Samuel  
1 Kings  
2 Kings  
1 Chronicles  
2 Chronicles  
Ezra (Greek and Russian Orthodox  
Bibles also include 1 Esdras, and  
Russian Orthodox includes 2  
Esdras)  
Nehemiah  
Tobit  
Judith  
Esther (with additions)  
1 Maccabees  
2 Maccabees  
(Greek and Russian  
Orthodox Bibles include  
3 Maccabees)

#### **Poetry/Wisdom**

Job  
Psalms (Greek and Russian Orthodox  
Bibles include Psalm 151 and Prayer  
of Manasseh)  
Proverbs  
Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth)  
Song of Solomon (Songs)  
Wisdom of Solomon  
Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Sirach)

#### **Prophets**

Isaiah  
Jeremiah  
Lamentations  
Baruch (includes Letter of Jeremiah)  
Ezekiel  
Daniel (with additions)  
Hosea  
Joel  
Amos  
Obadiah  
Jonah  
Micah  
Nahum  
Habakkuk  
Zephaniah  
Haggai  
Zechariah  
Malachi



it suggests a meeting like the great ecumenical councils of the Christian church in later centuries. Before the fall of Jerusalem, Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai established an academy in the coastal city of Jamnia, and this academy assumed a leadership role after the fall. Its discussions, however, had the character of a school or court rather than of a church council. We know that the rabbis debated whether some books (Qoheleth and Song of Songs) “make the hands unclean” (that is, whether they are holy books and should be included among the Scriptures). There seems, however, to have been further discussions of this kind at a later time, and there is no evidence that the rabbis proclaimed a formal list of Scriptures. Nonetheless, it is at this time (70–100 c.e.) that we first find references to a fixed number of authoritative books. It may be that the list adopted consisted of the books that were accepted by the Pharisees already before the fall of Jerusalem.

It is important to recognize that the books that were included in the Hebrew Bible were only a small selection from the religious writings that were current in Judaism around the turn of the era. A larger selection was preserved in the Greek Scriptures that were taken over by the early Christians, but had been already developed in Jewish communities outside the land of Israel, especially in Alexandria in Egypt. According to legend, the Torah had been translated into Greek at the request of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, king of Egypt, in the first half of the third century b.c.e., by seventy-two elders. (The story is told in the *Letter of Aristeas*, a Greek composition from the second century b.c.e.) The translation became known as the Septuagint or LXX (Septuagint means “seventy”). The name was eventually extended to cover the whole collection of Greek Scriptures. These included translations of some books that were written in Hebrew but were not included in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., the book of Ben Sira, 1 Maccabees) and also some books that never existed in Hebrew but were composed in Greek (2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon). There has been some debate as to whether the Jews of Alexandria had a larger collection of Scriptures than the Jews in the land of Israel. But there is no evidence that there ever existed a distinct Alexandrian canon. Rather, the Jews of Alexandria did not set a limit to the number of the sacred writings, as the rabbis did after the fall of Jerusalem. The Jewish community in Alexandria was virtually wiped out in the early second century c.e. Christians who took over the Greek Scriptures of the Jews, then, inherited a larger and more fluid collection than the Hebrew Bible. Centuries later, there is still considerable variation among the lists of Old Testament books cited by the church fathers.

When Jerome translated the Bible into Latin about 400 c.e., he was troubled by the discrepancies between the Hebrew and Greek Bibles. He advocated the superiority of the Hebrew (*Hebraica veritas*, “the Hebrew truth”) and based his translation on it. He also translated the books that were not found in the Hebrew but accorded them lesser status. His translation (the Vulgate) was very influential, but nonetheless the Christian church continued to accept the larger Greek canon down through the Middle Ages. At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther advocated a return to the Hebrew canon, although he also translated the Apocrypha. In reaction to Luther, the Catholic Church defined its larger canon at the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century.

It should be apparent from this discussion that the list of books that make up the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament emerged gradually over time. The list

was (and to some degree still is) a subject of dispute. The various canons were eventually determined by the decisions of religious communities. Christian theology has often drawn a sharp line between Scripture and tradition, but in fact Scripture itself is a product of tradition. Its content and shape have been matters of debate and are subject to the decisions of religious authorities in the various religious traditions.

## THE TEXT OF THE BIBLE

Not only did the list of books that make up the Bible take shape gradually over time, but so did the words that make up the biblical text. Modern English translations of the Bible are based on the printed editions of the Hebrew Bible and the principal ancient translations (especially Greek and Latin). These printed editions are themselves based on ancient manuscripts. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the most important manuscripts date from the tenth and eleventh centuries c.e., almost a thousand years after the canon, or list of contents, of the Hebrew Bible was fixed. The text found in these manuscripts is known as the Masoretic text, or MT. The name comes from an Aramaic word meaning to transmit or hand down. The Masoretes were the transmitters of the text. What is called the Masoretic text, however, is the form of the text that was established by the Ben Asher family of Masoretes in Tiberias in Galilee. This text is found in the Aleppo Codex, which dates from the early tenth century c.e.

The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in caves in these cliffs and in other nearby sites in Israel.



This codex was kept for centuries by the Jewish community in Aleppo in Syria. About a quarter of it, including the Torah, was lost in a fire in 1948. It is now in Jerusalem. The Pentateuch is preserved in a tenth-century codex from Cairo. Codex Leningrad BI9A from the eleventh century is the single most complete source of all the biblical books in the Ben Asher tradition. It is known to have been corrected according to a Ben Asher manuscript. The Cairo Codex of the Prophets dates from 896 c.e., and a few other manuscripts are from the tenth century. These manuscripts are our oldest witnesses to the vowels of most of the Hebrew text. In antiquity, Hebrew was written without vowels. The Masoretes introduced the vowels as pointing or marks above and below the letters, as part of their effort to fix the text exactly. There are fragments of vocalized texts from the sixth or perhaps the fifth century c.e. Besides the Tiberian tradition of vocalization, represented by the Ben Asher family, there was also Babylonian tradition, associated with the family of Ben Naphtali. The first printed Hebrew Bibles appeared in the late fifteenth century c.e.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in caves near Qumran south of Jericho, beginning in 1947, brought to light manuscripts of biblical books more than a thousand years older than the Aleppo Codex. Every biblical book except Esther is attested in the Scrolls, but many of the manuscripts are very fragmentary. (A small fragment of Nehemiah only came to light in the 1990s). These manuscripts, of course, do not have the Masoretic pointing to indicate the vowels; that system was only developed centuries later. But they throw very important light on the history of the consonantal text.

Isaiah Scroll, part of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran.



Fragments of about two hundred biblical scrolls were found in the caves near Qumran. Most of the fragments are small, but the great Isaiah Scroll, 1QIsaa, contains the whole book. This scroll dates from about 100 B.C.E.; the oldest biblical scrolls from Qumran are as old as the third century B.C.E. Most of the scrolls contained only one biblical book, but three Torah scrolls contained two consecutive books. The Twelve Minor Prophets were contained in one scroll. Many of these texts are in substantial agreement with the text copied by the Masoretes a thousand years later. But the Scrolls also contain other forms of biblical texts. Several biblical texts, including an important copy of the book of Exodus (4QpaleoExodm), are closer to the form of the text preserved in the Samaritan tradition. (The Samaritan text is often longer than the MT, because it adds sentences or phrases based on other parallel biblical passages, or adds a statement to indicate the fulfillment of a command that has been described.) Moreover, the text of some other biblical books is very similar to that presupposed in the ancient Greek translation (LXX).

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, our oldest copies of Old Testament texts were found in Greek translations. There are fragments of Greek biblical manuscripts from the second century B.C.E. on. The oldest complete manuscripts date from the fourth century C.E. These are Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. Another important manuscript, Codex Alexandrinus, dates from the fifth century. These manuscripts are known as uncials and are written in Greek capital letters.

The Greek translations of biblical books were generally very literal and reflected the Hebrew text closely. Nonetheless, in many cases the LXX differed significantly from the MT. For example, the books of Jeremiah and Job are much shorter in the Greek than in the Hebrew. The order of chapters in Jeremiah also differs from that of the MT. In I Samuel 16–18, the story of David and Goliath is much shorter in the LXX. In Daniel 4–6 the LXX has a very different text from that found in the MT. New light was shed on some of these cases by the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Scrolls contain Hebrew texts of Jeremiah that are very close to what is presupposed in the LXX. (Other copies of Jeremiah at Qumran agree with the MT; both forms of the text were in circulation.) It now seems likely that the differences between the Greek and the Hebrew texts were not due to the translators but reflect the fact that the Greek was based on a shorter Hebrew text. This is also true in I Samuel 16–18 and in a number of other cases. Not all differences between the LXX and the MT are illuminated by the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Scrolls do not contain a short text of Job or a deviant text of Daniel 4–6 such as that found in the LXX. Nonetheless, the assumption must now be that the Greek translators faithfully reflect the Hebrew they had before them. This means that there were different forms of the Hebrew text in circulation in the third, second, and first centuries B.C.E. Indeed, different forms of the text of some books are preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In some cases, the LXX may preserve an older form of the text than the MT. For example, the shorter form of Jeremiah is likely to be older than the form preserved in the Hebrew Bible.

What this discussion shows is that it makes little sense to speak of verbal inerrancy or the like in connection with the biblical text. In many cases we cannot be sure what the exact words of the Bible should be. Indeed, it is open to question whether we should speak of *the* biblical text at all; in some cases, we may have to accept the fact that we have more