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Unit 1: The Shape of the Hebrew Bible

SESSIONS: 1–6

Session 1: What on Earth is the Hebrew Bible?

Key Question

What experiences from your life have shaped your view of the cosmos?
How has that affected you or those in your context? What are common experiences people have with the Hebrew Bible? What are some ways to move through any challenges you might have?

Session Quote

“Are we imposing a set of questions that are foreign to what the authors are trying to communicate? Do we need to set our cultural agendas aside to just listen?”

Notes

One of the most fundamental questions which has faced theology and the Church in every age... is whether or not Christianity also needs an Old Testament. Is the Old Testament to be thrown away as obsolete, or preserved as a relic from days of yore, or treasured as a classic and read by scholars, or used occasionally as a change from the New Testament, or kept in a box in case it should be needed some day? Or is the Old Testament an essential part of the Christian Bible, with continuing validity alongside the New Testament? — D.L. BAKER, TWO TESTAMENTS, ONE BIBLE: A STUDY OF THE THEOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS; CITED IN T. DESMOND ALEXANDER, “ROYAL EXPECTATIONS IN GENESIS THROUGH KINGS: THEIR IMPORTANCE FOR BIBLICAL THEOLOGY” TYNDALE BULLETIN 49/2 (1998): 191-192

Notice that Jesus refers to the Hebrew scriptures as a two-part (“Torah...and prophets”) or three-part (“Torah...prophets...the Psalms”) collection. Jesus is not alone in this. He is expressing the most common way the Bible was referred to in Jewish culture from this period.

Also, when we look at how Jesus and the apostles actually interpret and appeal to the Hebrew Bible, they see it as a repository of patterns, or in Greek types (τύπος).

Romans 5:14

*Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a **type/pattern** of Him who was to come.*

1 Corinthians 10:1-6

*For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.... Now these things happened to them as a **type/pattern**, and **they were written for our instruction**, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.*

1 Peter 3:20-21

*who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. A **matching type/pattern** to that is baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,*

These passages help us set an agenda for this class:

- We are going to take a deep dive into the writing, collection, and composition of the Hebrew Bible.
- We are going to recover a way of reading these texts that matches the contours of their design intentions.

Session 3: The Ancient Shape of the Scriptures

Key Question

What are some of the main differences between the TaNaK arrangement and the Christian Old Testament? Could a different arrangement change the meaning of a text?

Session Quote

"The most reasonable case to be made is that there is an intentional compositional ordering and organization here. You notice certain things when you read it from this perspective, and you notice different things when it's organized in a different way."

Luke 24:25-27

*[Jesus] said to [the disciples], "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And **beginning with Moses and all the Prophets**, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*

- Abel was murdered by Cain in Genesis 4, and Zechariah son of Jehoiadah was murdered by Joash in 2 Chronicles 24, which corresponds to the TaNaK order.
- Prologue to the Wisdom of Ben Sirah: “Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law [= Torah], and the Prophets [= Nevi'im], and the others that follow them [= Ketuvim]... So my grandfather Yeshua devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other scrolls of our Ancestors.”
- Dead Sea Scrolls (4QMMT): “The scrolls of Moses, the words of the prophets, and of David.”
- Philo of Alexandria (De Vita Contempletiva, 25): “The laws and the oracles given by inspiration through the prophets and the Psalms, and the other scrolls whereby knowledge and piety are increased and completed.”

Session 4: “Seams” Between Texts in the Dead Sea Scroll

Key Question

How does viewing the Scriptures as a series of scrolls rather than a bound book impact how you understand it?

Session Quote

“Here’s why these scrolls are so important: they actually preserve for us the technology of scroll making in the very period of the pre-Christian movement and of what the Bible would’ve looked like in Jesus’ synagogue.”

The Editorial Design of the TaNaK

SESSION 4 FIGURE: The Editorial Design of the TaNaK



Session 5: The Prophet to Come: The “Seams” of the Torah and Prophets

Key Question

The “seams” of the TaNaK describe the kind of leader humanity really needs. What do the Torah and Prophets say this person is like?

Session Quote

“Someone is registering a note of hope and waiting for a future figure here at the end of the Torah.”

The Editorial Design of the TaNaK

SESSION 4 FIGURE: The Editorial Design of the TaNaK



The three-part shape of the Hebrew Bible isn’t simply a matter of arrangement. Rather, the books themselves have been designed to fit into this particular shape. If you look at the editorial seams of the major sections (remember, the book technology was papyrus or leather scrolls), you’ll find intentional design clues at the beginning and ending of these sections.

Seam #1: The final sentences of the Torah and opening sentences of the Prophets:

- Deuteronomy 34:10-12: Anticipation of a coming Moses-like prophet who was promised but never came
- Joshua 1:1-9: God’s appointed leader, Joshua, who will lead the people into the promised land, must meditate on the Torah day and night to find success.

Seam #2: The final sentences of the Prophets and the opening sentences of the Ketuvim

- Malachi 4:4-6: Anticipation of a coming Elijah-like prophet who will call the people back to the Torah and restore the hearts of Israel before the Day of the Lord.

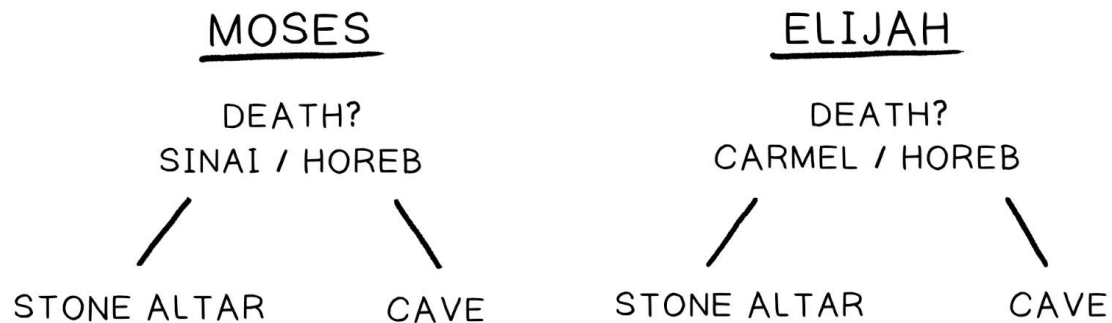
- Psalm 1-2: The righteous one who will be vindicated in the final judgment, is one who meditates on the Torah day and night to find success (Psalm 1). This righteous one is the future messianic king from the line of David, who is appointed by God to rule the nations and overcome evil once and for all (Psalm 2).

The Point: The Hebrew Bible is meditation literature (Joshua 1, Psalm 1) that is designed to foster...

1. A lifetime practice of reading and pondering the meaning of these texts.
2. Future hope in the promised prophet who will herald the arrival of the day of the Lord and the messianic kingdom (Deuteronomy 34, Malachi 4)
3. A covenantal way of life that creates a counter-culture to the prevailing world-systems (Joshua 1, Psalm 1).

Illustration: Session 5

SEAMS: THE TORAH & LATTER PROPHETS



Session 6 : The Prophet to Come: Psalms 1 and 2

Key Question

We've been talking about how the "seams" of the TaNaK describe the kind of leader humanity really needs. What do Psalms 1 and 2 add to that portrait?

Session Quote

"The Christian tradition has found it hard to maintain something biblical authors view as a unity, namely that when God's Spirit is at work, what it means is that humans are at work, who are so in tune with God's will that it's a marvel to behold. What we tend to do is separate and say that if God is at work, it's at the expense of human involvement. But that's never the way the Spirit works."

Notes

Tim continues to cover the seams of the TaNaK in this session. Refer to session 5 notes.

The Origins of the Hebrew Bible: Two Perspectives

Where did this remarkable collection of scrolls come from? Why were they written in the first place, and then collected and formed into an organized whole?

An Important Premise: The Inspiration of Scripture

Descriptions of the Bible's origins found within the Bible consistently describe its origins in a joint-partnership between humans and God's guiding presence through the Holy Spirit.

2 Timothy 3:16

"All Scripture is God-breathed..." = Greek theopneustos (θεόπνευστος), a compound word from: theos - "God" + pneustos = "spirit/breath"

2 Peter 1:19-21

[19] "and we have the reliable prophetic word, to which you would do well to pay attention, as to a lamp shining in a place of gloomy darkness, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, [20] knowing this firstly important thing, that no prophecy of Scripture comes of one's own interpretation. [21] For prophecy was never brought by the purpose of a human, but being carried by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God."

In both of these texts, the apostles reflect on how the Scriptures are not merely the result of human purpose and activity. Rather, the Bible is the product of a human-divine partnership, neither one cancelling out the other.