Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures

An Aperture Study from Bedford Road Baptist Church

Why "The Hebrew Scriptures"?

It is very common (virtually universal) among Christians to refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as "the Old Testament." There is plenty of historical precedent for this, and the term has been in use for over a thousand years. In recent years, this usage has come under scrutiny for a number of reasons:

1. Most medieval "Old Testament" copies include books that are not considered biblical texts (the pseudepigrapha or apocrypha). These books exist only in Greek. The biblical texts Jesus and the apostles studied and cited were in Hebrew.
2. It tends to be taken to mean the "old" has been replaced by the "new." In popular culture, people think that the "Old Testament" no longer matters, and it can be treated lightly.
3. The name derives from a misappropriation and misapplication of Hebrews 8. "Testament" (*testamentum*) is the Latin translation of the Greek word *diathēkē*, meaning "covenant." The usage in Hebrew has nothing to do with Scriptural texts.
4. The Hebrew character of these books is extremely important to understanding them. All of them were not only written in Hebrew, but by Hebrews. Judaism, as it existed even in Jesus's day, was an innovation born of historical forces that did not exist when most of the Hebrew Scriptures were written.
5. The Hebrew Scriptures were the Bible of Jesus and the apostles, who spoke and worshiped in Hebrew, even though the apostles wrote in Greek.
6. The singular "testament," does not convey the diversity of the many texts, which spanned a number of settings and literary genres.

Although the terms "Old Testament" and "Hebrew Scriptures" are used interchangeably in most contexts, it is vital that we understand that these *are* divinely inspired Scriptures. They deserve to be read with the same respect that the New Testament or Christian Scriptures are read.

In our particular study, we are attempting to read our "Old Testament" in the world *before* the New Testament was written. We need to understand that these works existed in a world *before* Christianity, and we also need to accept that the authors did not have in their minds that a later canon would come along to help interpret the texts they were inspired to write. This is a difficult

perspective to adopt, and yet it is vital to understanding the Hebrew Scriptures *in their original context and for their original audiences*.

The Hebrew Language

Hebrew is quite different from English. For one thing, the language has its roots in the Northwest Semitic language family, which diverged from other Semitic languages more than 3,000 years ago. English is an Indo-European language, written left-to-right in the familiar Roman alphabet. Hebrew has *no* linguistic relationship to English and is written right-to-left in a completely different alphabet.

1. Perhaps the most distinct thing about the language is that, like all Semitic languages, it uses three-letter root, and that can be changed to become almost any part of speech. For example, *melek* means "king." *Malkah* means "queen," but *mamlhakah* means "kingdom," and *melukah* means "kingship."
2. Hebrew is quite poetic in its structures, with lots of idioms and figures of speech. Translating it into English can sometimes be a challenge. For example, there is a particular way that Hebrew doubles a cognate word to add emphasis that sounds really awkward in English.
3. The Hebrew writing system is consonantal, meaning the language did not originally write vowels. Vowel points were added to the biblical texts in late antiquity, and the system currently uses is called the *masorah*.
4. The earliest known Hebrew text is the Gezer Calendar, a short scribal exercise inscribed on stone using what is called "paleo-Hebrew." This was the original writing system, probably developed in the Sinai by Semitic workers, based partially on the Egyptian writing systems.
5. The script used today was developed in Late Antiquity. It has been used continuously since around 800 AD. It is still written without vowels, but a scribal school called the Masoretes developed a system of marking vowels, accents, and cantillation (singing notes). These appear as dots and lines around the letters.

א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ ,ך
Alef	Bet	Gimel	Dalet	He	Waw	Zayin	Ḥet	Tet	Yod	Kof
ל	מ	נ ,ן	ס	ע	פ ,ף	צ ,ץ	ק	ר	שׁ	ת
Lamed	Mim	Nun	Sameḥ	Ayin	Pe	Tzade	Qof	Reš	Sin/Šin	Tov

Perhaps the best way to understand the differences between Hebrew and English is to see a familiar passage. Here is Psalm 23 in Hebrew, transliteration, and English. (Hebrew is written right-to-left.)

Hebrew	Transliteration	English

יְהוָה רֹעִי
לֹא אֶחְסָר׃
	¹YHWH rʿî
	    loʾ ʾeḥsar
		¹The LORD is my shepherd;
		    I shall not want.

²בִּנְאוֹת דֶּשֶׁא יַרְבִּיצֵנִי
עַל־מֵי מְנֻחוֹת יְנַהֲלֵנִי׃
³נַפְשִׁי יְשׁוֹבֵב יַנְחֵנִי
בְמַעְגְּלֵי־צֶדֶק
לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ׃
	²binʾôt dešeʾ yerbîzenî
	ʿl-mî menuḥôt yenalenî
	Napšî yišôbeb yanḥenî
	Bemaʿglêy-tzedeq
	    Lemaʿan šemô.
		²He makes me lie down in green pastures.
		 He leads me beside still waters.
		³He restores my soul.
		 He leads me in paths of righteousness
		    for his name's sake.

⁴גַּם כִּי־אֵלֵךְ
בְּגֵיא צַלְמָוֶת
לֹא־אִירָא רָע
כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי
שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתֶּךָ
הֵמָּה יְנַחֲמֻנִי׃
	Gam kî-ʾala-ak
	    Begêʾ tzalmawet
	Loʾ-ʾîraʾ raʿ
	    Kî-ʾatah ʿimadî
	Šibteak ûmišʿanteak
	    Hemah yanihamunî
		⁴Even though I walk through
		    the valley of the shadow of death,
		I will fear no evil,
		    for you are with me;
		your rod and your staff,
		    they comfort me.

⁵תַּעֲרֹךְ לְפָנַי שֻׁלְחָן
נֶגֶד צֹרְרָי
דִּשַּׁנְתָּ בַשֶּׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי
כּוֹסִי רְוָיָה׃
	Taʿeroak lepanay šulḥan
	    Neyed zorray
	Dišanta basemen roʾši
	    Kôsî rewaîah
		⁵You prepare a table before me
		    in the presence of my enemies; you
		anoint my head with oil;
		    my cup overflows.

⁶אַךְ טוֹב וָחֶסֶד
יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּי
וְשַׁבְתִּי
בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאֹרֶךְ יָמִים׃
	ʾarak tôv waḥesed
	    Yidpûnî kil-yemî ḥayay
	Wešabtî
	    Bebêt-YHWH leʾoreak yamîm
		⁶Surely goodness and mercy
		    shall follow me all the days of my life,
		and I shall dwell
		    in the house of the LORD forever.

Notice how much shorter the Hebrew lines are. This is because Hebrew relies upon context for things like verb tense and there are almost no adverbs. Relationships are marked with particles like ו, which stands for a number of conjunctions (and, but, when, therefore, etc.) and את, which marks direct objects and other objective forms. Pronouns are generally just suffixes on the ends of words. You can see how different it is from English. No one in this class is expected to read Hebrew, but it is good to understand that the language is very different from English, and so translations can sometimes miss things.

From the Iron Age Levant to Your Corner Bookstore

How does a series of books written in southwest Asia as long as 3,000 years ago wind up in an array of English (among hundreds of languages) translation you can buy at any bookstore?

The Great Chain of Reading and Intertexuality

How do we know that the Hebrew Scriptures existed at all? Most mainstream scholars believe the majority of the Hebrew Bible was composed fairly late, which allows them to treat them as somewhat fanciful and not necessarily historical. This view is called *minimalism*, because it minimizes the value of the biblical text. On the other end of the spectrum are *maximalists* who believe that the biblical text is historically accurate and reliable.

How do we evaluate whether the Hebrew Scriptures are historical and accurate? One way is through analyzing *intertextuality*. Logically, if a late work references another work, we assume that other work came first, and not the other way around. The Tolkien scholar Gergely Nagy coined the term "great chain of reading" to describe the way a work is dependent upon other works.[1] This is a particular type of intertextuality which considers the influences upon a work which may or may not be available to you now.

Let's consider one of the last books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Malachi. This book was probably written around 400 BC, at the end of the period of the Hebrew Scriptures. As you read through Malachi in isolation, you get the feeling that Malachi has a great chain of reading in his mind. He has other literary works which he is alluding to because he assumes his audience knows these works as well.

- He opens with a reference to the relationship of the two sons of Isaac, Jacob and Esau (1:-5).
- There is a discussion of polluted food being offered as sacrifices on the altar (1:6-8).
- Possibly, he alludes to the so-called kingship psalms (1:14).
- The covenant YHWH has made with Israel becomes important.
- The creation of the world by the one God is important to his argument for God's faithfulness (2:10).
- It is clear that the Torah or Law is well-known (3:6).
- Most famously, he refers to Elijah as the forerunner of the Messiah (4:5).

There are undoubtedly more intertextual references in Malachi, because the entire work is dependent upon his readers having a knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. You simply can't understand Malachi without knowing he comes from that matrix of literature. What is important is not that Malachi references the Scriptures but that he has a particular interpretation of them. He sees himself

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[1] Yes, you read that correctly. Nagy is a scholar of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. What most people do not know is that Tolkien was a well-regarded and influential philologist and medievalist. Tolkien's own expertise was on the development of medieval literary works like "Beowulf." He wrote fiction often to work through cruces in the scholarship of his field, so believe it or not, the name Gandalf comes from the Icelandic Sagas, and both Ent and Orc come from Beowulf.

in the line of succession of previous writers who *also* revered these Hebrew Scriptures. We can then work backward to the authors he alludes to, see their own chain of reading, and work backward from there as well.

What becomes evident is that late writers like Malachi, the author of Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the historians who wrote 1-2 Chronicles relied heavily upon an already existing literary corpus. If we call these authors the "late" authors, we might refer to that corpus as the "middle" or "classical" Hebrew Scriptures. They include things like the Psalms, the books of Samuel and Kings, as well as the prophets and the Book of Deuteronomy. These works in turn make intertextual references to earlier works, like the books of Genesis, Exodus-Numbers, Joshua and Judges.[2] There is not just a thematic dependence but the sense in which these works sit in the background of subsequent authors' work. This means that the works these late writers had in their possession were (1) already composed and (2) widely accepted in the culture.

The same kind of argument can be made from books known to be earlier in origin. As a broad example, the Hebrew Scriptures of all periods make clear allusions to the creation epic of Genesis 1-2. This would indicate that the epic existed *prior* to composition of the books.

There is no way to be absolute about something like a great chain of reading. We cannot use it to date a text or to definitely prove that another text existed. It is instead a subjective assertion that the text *feels* like it sits in a great intertextual context. The reason we cannot definitively *prove anything* has to do with the next section addressing the way we received the text.

Composition

It is often surprising to people that the Hebrew Scriptures are not a single book. They came together as an united text well after their initial composition. The process of these texts moving from origination to canonization spans a great deal of time, with the texts passing through a number of stages.

Stage 1: Origination

First, the biblical texts had to come from somewhere. In most cases, we simply don't know the exact origin of the text. We can conjecture based on the contextual and linguistic components of the text but remember that even the latest Hebrew text is over 2,000 years old. Certainly, texts like the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2 may date to before the existence of Hebrew itself. It is likely they were composed in a protolanguage, which is long since gone without a single witness. The oldest

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[2] Some works exist sort of outside of the chain of reading, like much of the wisdom literature like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Esther is another work like that.

portions of the Scriptures that we can confidently speak about are poems which have distinctive syntax and vocabulary. Let's consider one of them known as "The Song of Deborah" which appears in Judges 5. If you read this song, you will notice that it is structured in the following way:

Introduction (5:2-3)

> March to Battle/cosmogonic myth (5:4-5)

>> Historical setting: human heroes and enemies (5:6-13)

>>> Catalogue of Israelite warriors (5:14-18)

>> Battle/mythic allusions (5:19-22)

>>> Human heroes (5:23-30)

Conclusion (5:31)[3]

This structure is common in oral poetry, because it allows the presenter to follow a pattern in recitation. Within each section, there are self-contained units which again aid in memorization and recitation. Here are the introduction and conclusion of the poem. If you recite the text and get used to the rhythm of the sounds, you realize how easy it would be to memorize it and recite it.

It seems likely that passages like this and Moses's song in Exodus 15 date from what is known as the *archaic Hebrew* period. So little is known about this period of Hebrew that many of the words are confusing. For example, the opening line uses a word (*pe-raʿ*) that must have changed meaning over time. It comes from a root that means to hang loose, and it seems to be applied to one's hair. It may have been that the commanders of armies in this period wore their hair long, denoting their prowess, since it was common practice to cut the hair of vanquished enemies.[4] It is fairly clear that the song uses this word to denote a leader, especially since it is then used as a verb.[5] Another issue is the word translated as "carpets" or "blankets" in verse 10 (*mad*). By the time of the David narrative, it denoted some kind of armor (1 Sam 17:38; 2 Sam 20:8) but the meaning here is really unclear. It

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[3] This structure is adapted from Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 78.

[4] This, by the way, may also be the root of the Nazarite vow concerning the cutting of hair (Num 6:5), and it may also tie into the narrative of Samson (Judg 13:3).

[5] In English, a line like "the leaders led" sounds redundant, but in Hebrew this kind of cognate repetition makes the meaning more emphatic. The line emphasizes the unity of the Hebrew people in this moment, and it may offer insight into the disunity and autonomy which usually existed.

may actually denote a type of utilitarian garment, not a lot unlike the Scottish *brat* or *plaid*, which Scottish shepherds wore during the day and then used as a blanket at night. How much does this imagery alter your conception of ancient Israel? Instead of the typical Bedouin style clothing seen in picture Bibles, the Israelites may have been led by long-haired men in long robes, riding donkeys through the hill country to battle the Canaanites in the plains.

The song was most likely composed *before* the narrative version of the events it relates (Judg 4:1-24). This narrative uses different terms, and it relates specifics not found in the song, like the identification of the opponent as the kingdom of Hazor (Judg 4:2). No one can know *when* the two were brought together, but they may hint at the idea that songs like this served more as way markers for the recitation of the fuller version. On the other hand, the song could serve as the framework for the larger prose version.

In verses 10-11, there may be a description of the oral performance of the song and those like it. The itinerant performers apparently traveled to "watering places" (*mašʾab*) where they would then "repeat" (*tanah*) the events with some kind of accompaniment (*ḥaẓaẓ*). This kind of recitation seems to be quite common in societies that are primarily oral, and they served to provide the people of the region with a shared narrative, a past they all accepted as their own which in turn would inform their future actions.

Stage 2: Circulation and Textualization

Countless oral and literary works may have been created and lost throughout the ancient world. This would especially be true during tumultuous times. For example, the city-state of Ugarit had a vast literary tradition, but when the city was destroyed in the late twelfth century BC, that tradition came to an abrupt end. Nothing was known about the Ugaritic language or its literary works until the city was rediscovered in 1928. The archaeologist Yigal Yadin maintained until his death that there must have been a vast library at the Bronze Age city of Hazor, but to date only a small handful of fragments have been found.

Much of the Hebrew Scriptures sit on the border of orality and textuality. What this means is that the written texts represent things which were often composed orally for recitation. In order for a story like this to be preserved, it had to be repeated and passed on until it could be written down. The written copy then would need to be copied and passed on, perhaps with the
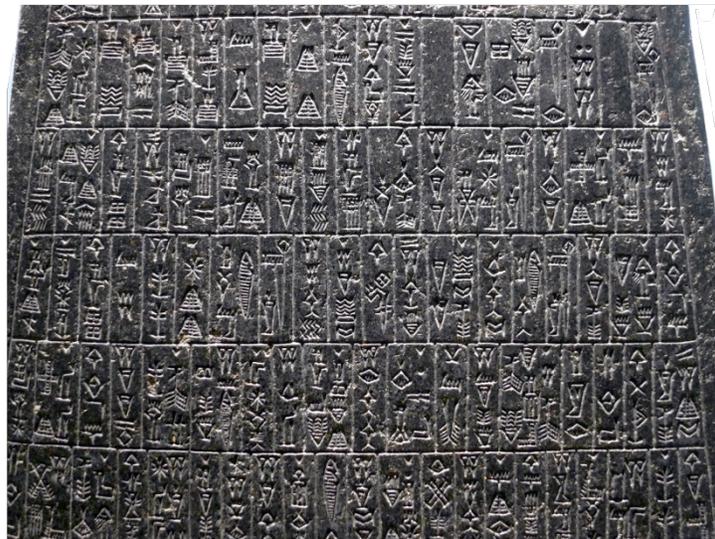
The Obelisk of Manishtushu (c. 2250 BC)

oral version at first and then probably as a primarily written text. Certain conditions must exist for this to happen. First, there must be sufficient *interest* in the material. Second, there must be sufficient *infrastructure*, meaning writing technology and individuals capable of using it.

This is where the Hebrew Scriptures differ from the works that came before them. Previous texts were textualized using ideogrammatic writing systems like Egyptian or complex syllabic systems like Akkadian. These required a highly trained scribal class in order to pass texts along. Akkadian was written in a style that came from pressing reeds into clay to make wedge-shapes, a method known as **cuneiform.** Classical Akkadian had seventy signs that represented consonant-vowel combinations, which could be used to represent the language. In addition, there were a number of loaned signs from earlier languages like Sumerian which were incorporated to distinguish between words that might have the same sound but different meaning. The scribe was a professional, usually trained from childhood. As a result, the production of texts was largely the work of state-sponsorship. It was rare for a private person to have texts pertaining to anything but business and trade, the equivalent of a modern drawer of receipts and bills.

Northwest Semitic languages like Hebrew were written with a completely new innovation, the alphabet. The origins of the alphabet are unclear, but it appears that NWS-speaking people working for the Egyptians developed it from the Egyptian hieratic script, sometime in the fifteenth or fourteenth centuries BC. This alphabet had no more than 30 signs, and each sign had a definite pronunciation. Since there were no written vowels, writing was a matter of arranging the consonants *as you heard the words*. Even more importantly, the signs were configurations of inked lines rather than wedges or ideograms. The scholar Richard Hess argues that you could acquire a functional knowledge of the alphabetic system in a matter of weeks. The signs were linked to objects with the same initial sounds. For example, the letter *beth* was also the sign for house, which is *beth* or *bit* in all NWS languages. All you needed to do was basic phonics. It was a homegrown idea.

Along with the alphabet came new media for preserving writing. Cuneiform had to be inscribed into clay or stone with a reed or stylus. A proficient scribe could work quickly, but the average person would have labored over these things. This new alphabetic script could be written on anything by practically anyone. There are inscriptions on parts of pots (ostraca), scribbled on steps in houses, sketched on rocks, and inscribed in plaster. Most importantly, however, you could mix up ink using charcoal or plant resins, snap off a reed from any plant and write on sheets of papyrus, which was made by pressing together the wide leaves of the papyrus plant. Sheep and goat skin could also be tanned and used as a medium, although it did not take ink well.

"There is evidence that throughout Iron Age 2, and extending back to Iron Age 1 (c. 1200–1000 BCE), every region and every level of society had its writers and readers, and that they left thousands of inscriptions for archaeologists and others to identify."[6]

Writing appears to have been an extremely important aspect of the revelation of the LORD to the people of Israel. Consider these passages from the Scriptures:

- **Deuteronomy 27:1-3** – The inscription of the text on plaster stelae would seem to indicate a general literacy, or at the very least, literary awareness among the people of Israel.
- **Isaiah 8:1** – Here, Isaiah the prophet is depicted as having both the skill and the resources to make an inscription (either papyrus or plaster, the text is unclear) for people to read
- **Jeremiah 36:4** – Jeremiah *dictated* texts to his scribe Baruch. This was common in the courts, but that is because scribes often had to write the original *and* be able to translate it into the languages in use at court. (It was common for scribes to know 3-6 languages.)

The emphasis on the written aspect of language in these texts is hardly surprising given the long tradition of literary religion that is Christianity and Judaism. The need to convert oral story to written text *prior* to seventh century BC. From about 1200 to 800 BC, the Hebrews were able to live relatively autonomously. What incursions they dealt with were local matters—Canaanite armies on the coast, migrating raiders from the south, the appearance of the Philistines. Written texts appear in the seventh century BC, but it is reasonable they were developed before this tumultuous period.

Stage 3: Transmission

The truth is that scholars know *nothing* about the Hebrew Scriptures as a collection prior to around 200 BC, the date of the earliest manuscripts found at Qumran, in the desert near the Dead Sea. From around that time until about AD 150, there was a community or communities in this region who collected and copied biblical and extrabiblical texts. These texts are known as the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). (You can learn more about the texts and view many of these texts at https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/.)

Before the discovery of the DSS, the oldest known manuscripts of the biblical texts were from the medieval period. The two oldest complete texts are Codex Leningradensis (AD 1008) and the Aleppo Codex (AD 930), although there are many older partial manuscripts such as the London Manuscript, Codex Cairensis, and the Ben Asher manuscripts. The Aleppo Codex in particular is of

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[6] Richard S. Hess, "Writing about Writing: Abecedaries and Evidence for Literacy in Ancient Israel," *Vetus Testamentum* 56.3 (2006): 345; William M. Schniedwind, "Orality and Literacy in Ancient Israel," *Religious Studies Review* 26.4 (2000): 331.

interest, since it is the first *absolutely secure* date for a Jewish canon. In the eleventh century CE, the Jewish sage Maimonides declared that particular codex to be "the" text for Jews.

Do we know how the biblical texts were transmitted in the time *before* the DSS? The truth is that we simply do not know. We do not know *when* or *how* the books began to be gathered together, or how they were treated until that point. There are hints about the state of affairs at the time of Jesus:

- The Scriptures were being read as part of synagogue worship (Luke 4:16–17; Acts 13:15).
- It was commonly accepted that the three divisions of the Jewish canon were already established (Matt 5:17; Luke 24:44).

Beyond these broad categories, there seems not to have been an effort to standardize the text of the biblical books. There are additional hints from the variations in the texts found at Qumran. Thus, when the DSS biblical texts were analyzed, there were at least four strands of transmission:

- Proto-Masoretic – texts that bear a resemblance to the Aleppo Codex and the currently accepted "standard" text.
- Proto-Septuagintal – texts that more closely resemble what must underlie the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which is called the Septuagint (abbreviated as LXX).[7]
- Proto-Samaritan – texts that seem to precede the Samaritan Torah, the idiosyncratic version of the text employed by the religious sect of the Samaritans.

The Paleo-Hebrew text of the Great Isaiah Scroll

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[7] There are *no* Jewish copies of LXX in existence. All copies were made by Christians, and as such, they include a number of books now known as the Apocrypha or Pseudepigrapha. These works do not exist in Hebrew, and they are not referenced by the rabbis either, meaning there is a good chance they were Christian innovations.

- Extinct/Sectarian traditions – there are a few readings in DSS which do not have a modern successor and represent what may have been aberrations or now-extinct lineages of transmission.

What all these strands have in common is the vast majority of texts and their arrangement. The Hebrew texts themselves are largely the same, with variations appearing within the text. Put another way, by the time texts were being gathered at Qumran, Judaism as a whole had decided what books belonged in the canon and which did not, even if they never made a public statement to this effect.

With the evidence available to us, we can be *reasonably confident* that the text of the Hebrew Scriptures that we have today is the same as that which Jesus used. It must be stated, however, that the evidence is largely late (except the DSS) and hardly overwhelming.

How Did the Early Church Read the Hebrew Scriptures?

To this point, we have considered the Hebrew Scriptures in terms of their actual existence, without recourse to the theological. As Christians, it is important that we consider the testimony of Jesus and the apostles.

- Jesus repeatedly explicitly cites "the law and the prophets" (Matt 5:17, 7:12, 11:13, 22:40; Luke 16:16, 16:31), and once refers to "the law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). This appears to be a reference to the canonical ordering of the Hebrew Scriptures. He also refers to them specifically in their written form (Matt 26:56).
- In the sermon on the mount, Jesus specifically distinguishes between the written words of Moses and the interpretations of the Pharisees (Matt 5:17–43). This sets him apart from those who adhered to rabbinical authority or "oral law" as the inspired companion of the written text.
- The gospel writers cite both the law and the prophets as authoritative in their account of Jesus as the Christ (Matt 1:2, 2:5 8:17, 12:17, 13:35, 27:9; Luke 1:70, 4:27, 18:31; 24:25; John 1:23, 1:45, 6:45, 12:38).
- The apostles not only cite the Hebrew Scriptures, but also make it clear that the Hebrew Scriptures were treated as divinely inspired by the early church (2 Tim 3:14–17; 2 Pet 1:19–21).

It is safe to say that the apostolic church believed strongly in the Hebrew Scriptures. There are over 300 direct quotes of the Hebrew Scriptures in the New Testament, and there are an almost uncountable number of allusions to them. Paul builds his doctrinal arguments almost exclusively from the Hebrew Scriptures in his epistles, and although there are allusions to extrabiblical books, they are utterly outnumbered.