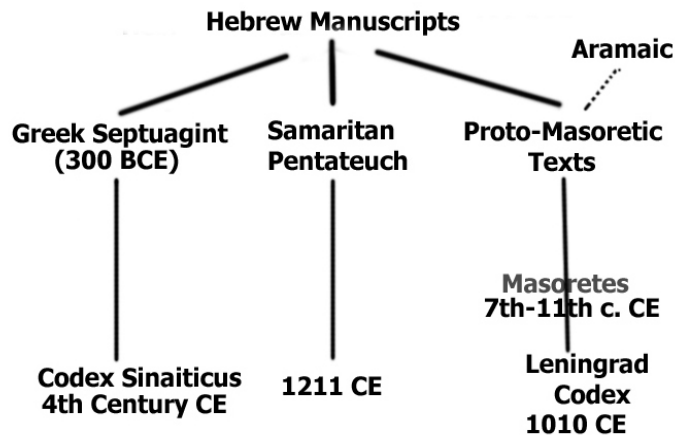


Bible Manuscripts



The Samaritan Pentateuch

We know that the earliest edition of the Bible consists of only the *Torah* or the *Pentateuch*. Up to about 400 BCE these books are the only contents of the Jewish Bible. We know this for a fact due to an accident of history. The Samaritan sect broke away from orthodox Judaism around 400BC. To this day, the Samaritans recognized only the Pentateuch as sacred scripture. In 400 BCE the Samaritan sect broke away from the Jews and retained only the Pentateuch for their scripture. The earliest Samaritan manuscript available now is from 1211 CE.

The Septuagint

The Jews of the *diaspora*, who fled Judah after the fall of Jerusalem 586BC, were widely distributed throughout the Mediterranean and the middle east. A significant segment of these had chosen Alexandria in Egypt as their home. By the fourth century BC the Jews there had largely lost much of their capability to communicate in or understand their original tongue, Hebrew. They adopted the language of the area, which was Greek. The need to understand their religious roots was strong and so the Hebrew Bible (then consisting only of the *Torah*) was translated into Greek. This translation was called the *Septuagint*.

The story is that King Ptolemy of Egypt wanted a translation of the Jewish Law and the high priest chose as translators six elders from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. These seventy two scholars were then sent to Alexandria where they worked for seventy two days on the island of Pharos translating the Bible. At the end of seventy two days, seventy two voices shouted "Amen!" and seventy two translations were completed. When they compared their translations with each other they found complete agreement among them, proving that the work was done under God's inspiration. From their number, came the word *Septuaginto*, which is Latin for seventy.

This reads like a myth and it may be a myth. It was possibly not even written during the reign of King Ptolemy. Most scholars believe that it was written around 100BC by a Jewish apologist in Alexandria. Probably the only truth we can derive from the letter was that the Torah was translated into Greek for the benefit of Greek speaking Jews during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus during the third century BC. For the rest of the Greek Old Testament, henceforth together with the Pentateuch called the Septuagint, internal evidence suggests that it was the work of many different translators working in many different places at different times.

It is important to note that the Septuagint was *the* Bible to the early Christians and to the authors of the New Testament. It was to the Septuagint that the gospel writers look for prophecies and allusions to the coming of Jesus Christ.

The arrangement of the Christian Old Testament is taken from the Septuagint, which differs substantially from the Hebrew Bible. The arrangement of books led naturally to the questions of canonicity. The books today referred to as the Apocrypha are included in the Septuagint but omitted from the Hebrew Bible.

The Proto-Masoretic Text

These texts are called Proto-Masoretic because they were the texts with which the Masoretes worked later. The Masoretes were groups of scribes working between the 7th and 11th centuries CE. They added the vowel markings and divided the text into paragraphs and verse and also worked to make the text consistent. The result became the Masoretic text (MT) and the basis of the Hebrew Bible. Although the earliest extant manuscript of the Masoretic text today is very late (925-1000 CE), all the evidence we have, based on fragments that predates this oldest manuscript, point to the fact that the text remain practically unaltered in meaning over the long period of time. Standard translations of the English Bible from the Hebrew are still based on the Masoretic text.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

In 1947 scrolls were discovered that came from caves associated with the ruined buildings belonging to a Jewish religious community that was destroyed by the Romans during the first century AD. The Dead Sea Scrolls include fragments representing every book in the Old Testament except the book of Esther. The scrolls were the first pre-Masoretic text in Hebrew ever discovered. Some readings in the scrolls were more closely related to the Septuagint version, others were closer to the Masoretic, while still others differ from both the Septuagint and the Masoretic. The Essenes had access to many of the manuscripts of that day and were a thousand years closer to many of the original Hebrew manuscripts than anything available before their discovery.

