

# Jewish Theological Writings

This article is an outline introduction to the major lines of Jewish theological literature. You should also study these other topics:

TOPIC: JEWISH LITERATURE <sup>1</sup>

TOPIC: THE APOCRYPHA

Wikipedia has excellent articles on most of the concepts listed here and is an excellent resource for further study. <sup>2</sup>

## Basic listing of Jewish literature

1. Torah
2. Targums
3. Talmud
4. Mishnah
5. Gemara
6. Midrash
7. Halakhah
8. Haggadah
9. Septuagint
10. Aquila's Greek Version
11. Apocrypha
12. Pseudepigrapha
13. Philo's Canons

## The Torah

The **Torah** is the name given to the canon of Hebrew scriptures. Originally, the word "torah" referred to the first five books, the Pentateuch. Later, the Pharisees and Rabbis expanded the definition to include the poetical and prophetic books of the Old Testament.

The Jewish scholars also recognized an Oral Torah, which was made up of general applications of general principles. Both the

written and oral Torahs were considered to have been given to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

## The Targums

The **Targums** were explanations of the Hebrew, translations and paraphrases of the Hebrew in the Chaldean language, for Jews who no longer understood Hebrew. The word means "explanation" or "interpretation". A combination of Chaldean and Hebrew languages became the Aramaic language.

Many Jews of the Babylonian captivity had adopted the Aramaic language, both in the areas of captivity and in Jerusalem itself. The Jewish worship also had shifted from temple-centered worship to several other things:

- Study of the Law in common
- Chanting of Psalms, and united prayers

The common language used in worship was usually Aramaic.

The three basic Targums of the Old Testament are:

1. The Targum on the Pentateuch, known as the Targum of Onkelos, about 70 AD
2. The Targum on the Prophets, the Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel, a student of the school of Hillel, first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.
3. The Targum on the Writings, or Hagiographa; includes Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Chronicles, Esther

The oral Targums date back as far as 444 BC, with written Targums being produced from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.

Nehemiah 8:8 describes how the Targums were communicated. It was a three-fold process:

1. they read "distinctly", they read the Law in Hebrew
2. they gave the "sense", they translated the Hebrew into Aramaic

<sup>1</sup> Topics cited are found in the Grace Notes Topical Library, <http://www.gracenotes.info>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org>

3. they caused them to understand the reading; that is, they interpreted in Aramaic the meaning of the translation.

The Talmud (see below) gives extensive and explicit rules for interpreting the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. There is always a question, of course, of how carefully individual teachers follow the rules. Here is a sample of the rules of interpretation:

The Law was read by the reader, verse by verse, and each verse was followed by translation into Aramaic and interpretation.

In prophetic books, three verses were read before interpretation.

The reader had to keep his eyes on the text without looking up. The one giving the translation and interpretation had to do so *without* looking at the text. This was done to make very clear the difference between the actual words of the text and the interpretation given in Aramaic.

At first, it was forbidden to write the Targums.

### **The Talmud**

The word "Talmud" means "teaching" or "doctrine".

The Talmud is a Jewish work which contains the civil and religious laws not found in the Pentateuch, with commentaries and illustrations of these laws. It represents the learning, teaching, opinions, and decisions of Jewish teachers over a period of about 800 years, from 300 BC to 500 AD.

The Talmud has two parts: (1) The Mishnah, or oral law, and (2) the Gemara, the commentaries and illustrations.

#### TOPIC: ORIGINS OF THE TALMUD

### **Mishnah**

The Mishnah was begun by Hillel in the years before the birth of Christ; it was called the Second Law. Its chain of succession was supposed to be from Moses to Joshua, from

Joshua to the elders, from the elders to the prophets, from the prophets to the men of the Great Synagogue, and from them to their successors in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.

The Mishnah was divided into six sections, each dealing with broad subject matter.

1. Seeds
2. Feasts
3. Women
4. Damages
5. Sacred Things
6. Purifications

TOPICS: ORGANIZATION OF THE TALMUD; STRUCTURE OF THE TALMUD

### **The Gemara**

The Gemara is the part of the Talmud which contains the notes, commentaries, explanations, and illustrations of the Mishnah, along with much other information. It was written in Aramaic and completed about 500 AD. The Babylonian Gemara contains about 6000 pages.

### **Midrash**

The Midrash is a less formal explanation and exposition of the Old Testament, from a doctrinal and homiletical point of view. The name means "investigation and interpretation". It is written in both Hebrew and Aramaic.

The Midrash differs from the Targums in that it is not a translation, but a commentary. And it differs from the Talmud in that it deals only with the written Law. There are two parts of the Midrash, the Halakhah and the Haggadah.

### **Halakhah**

The Halakhah is the collection of all Jewish Law, including the biblical law (the 613 commandments) and later Talmudic and rabbinic law, as well as customs and traditions.

The Halakhah confines itself to the Pentateuch and gives explanation and additions to the Law

and ritual. It also covers cases which the Law does not cover; and it gives decisions of Rabbis on controversial subjects.

Halakhah guides not only religious practices and beliefs, but numerous aspects of day-to-day life. Halakhah is often translated as "Jewish Law", although a more literal translation might be "the path" or "the way of walking". The word derives from the Hebrew root that means to go or to walk.

### Haggadah

The Haggadah covers the entire Old Testament and includes the historical, prophetic, and poetical sections. It is popular, and covers history, tradition, stories, legends, parables, allegories, beliefs, customs. Much of the writing is fanciful, some of it is good.

The Haggadah was used mostly between 100 BC and 300 AD

### Septuagint – What is it? <sup>3</sup>

Septuagint (sometimes abbreviated LXX) is the name given to the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures. The Septuagint has its origin in Alexandria, Egypt and was translated between 300-200 BC. Widely used among Hellenistic Jews, this Greek translation was produced because many Jews spread throughout the empire were beginning to lose their Hebrew language. The process of translating the Hebrew to Greek also gave many non-Jews a glimpse into Judaism. According to an ancient document called the *Letter of Aristeas*, it is believed that 70 to 72 Jewish scholars were commissioned during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus to carry out the task of translation. The term "Septuagint" means seventy in Latin, and the text is so named to the credit of these 70 scholars.

<sup>3</sup> [published on the Septuagint web site:  
<http://www.septuagint.com>]

### Septuagint – Influence on Christianity

The Septuagint was also a source of the Old Testament for early Christians during the first few centuries AD. Many early Christians spoke and read Greek, thus they relied on the Septuagint translation for most of their understanding of the Old Testament. The New Testament writers also relied heavily on the Septuagint, as a majority of Old Testament quotes cited in the New Testament are quoted directly from the Septuagint (others are quoted from the Hebrew texts). Greek church fathers are also known to have quoted from the Septuagint. Even today, the Eastern Orthodox Church relies on the Septuagint for its Old Testament teachings. Some modern Bible translations also use the Septuagint along side Hebrew manuscripts as their source text.

### What Does the Septuagint Contain

The Septuagint contains the standard 39 books of the Old Testament canon, as well as certain apocryphal books. The term "Apocrypha" was coined by the fifth-century biblical scholar, Jerome, and generally refers to the set of ancient Jewish writings written during the period between the last book in the Jewish scriptures, Malachi, and the arrival of Jesus Christ. The apocryphal books include Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus), the Wisdom of Solomon, First and Second Maccabees, the two Books of Esdras, additions to the Book of Esther, additions to the Book of Daniel, and the Prayer of Manasseh.

The Apocryphal books were included in the Septuagint for historical and religious purposes, but are not recognized by Protestant Christians or Orthodox Jews as canonical (inspired by God). Most reformed teachers will point out that the New Testament writers never quoted from the Apocryphal books, and that the Apocrypha was never considered part of the canonical Jewish scripture. However, the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches include the Apocrypha in their Bible

(except for the books of Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh).

### **Septuagint - Is it a Reliable Translation?**

Since the Septuagint is a translation, scholars speculate if it accurately reflects the Hebrew scriptures of the 2nd century BC. A close examination of the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text (the early Hebrew text of the Old Testament) show slight variations. Were these errors in translation, or are the Septuagint and Masoretic Text based on slightly different Hebrew manuscripts? The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has helped to shed light on this question. Discovered in the Qumran region near the Dead Sea beginning in 1947, these scrolls are dated to as early as 200 BC and contain parts of every book in the Old Testament except Esther. Comparisons of the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint show that where there are differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, approximately 95% of those differences are shared between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic text, while only 5% of those differences are shared between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint. Does this mean that the Septuagint is unreliable and that our Old Testament is wrought with contradictory sources? No. It is imperative to note that these "variations" are extremely minor (i.e., grammatical errors, spelling differences or missing words) and do not affect the meaning of sentences and paragraphs. (An exception is the book of Jeremiah, in which the actual passages are arranged differently.) None of the differences, however, come close to affecting any area of teaching or doctrine. The majority of the Septuagint, Masoretic Text and the Dead Sea Scrolls are remarkably similar and have dispelled unfounded theories that the Biblical text has been corrupted by time and conspiracy. Furthermore, these variations do not call into question the infallibility of God in preserving His word. Although the original documents are inerrant, translators and scribes are human beings and are thus prone to making

slight errors in translation and copying (Hebrew scribal rules attest to how exacting scribes were). Even then, the Bible has redundancy built into its text, and anything significant is told more than once. If grammatical mistakes were introduced that makes a point unclear, it would be clarified in several other places in scripture.

### **Septuagint - Dramatic Evidence for the Credibility of Messianic Prophecy**

The Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls establish a very dramatic piece of evidence for Christianity – that the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah unquestionably predated the time that Jesus Christ walked the earth. All theories of 1st Century AD conspiracies and prophecy manipulation go out the door when we realize that prophetic scripture like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 were fixed in written form at least 100 years before Christ, and probably many more. Again, despite time, persecution, and the incredibly minor instances of scribal mistakes, the Septuagint is just another example of how the Biblical text has remained faithful in its message and theme. The Holy Bible is truly a divinely inspired and preserved letter from God that is deserving of our time and attention.

"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." (Isaiah 40:8)