

Basic Jewish Texts

TaNaKh (Hebrew Scriptures)--Oldest existing manuscripts are Dead Sea Scrolls (2nd century BCE through 1st century CE). Greek translation (Septuagint) dates to 3rd century BCE. Fully vocalized Hebrew text (Masoretic Text) finalized some time in the 9th century CE.

- *Torah* (teaching) or *Five Books of Moses*: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Scrolls are read aloud three times a week, especially on Sabbath (Saturday), divided into standardized weekly portions so that the complete scroll is read either every year or every three years.
- *Neviim* (prophets): Early Prophets: Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings. Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. Minor Prophets (Book of Twelve): Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Isolated portions (Haftarot) are read following the Torah portion.
- *Kethuvim* (writings): Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles. Much of the prayer book contains quotations from Psalms, and the Five Scrolls (Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, Esther, Lamentations) are read on designated festivals and holy days.

Mishnah (from the root meaning “two,” usually translated “repetition”): first major written redaction of oral traditions, attributed to Rabbi Judah HaNasi (d. c. 217 CE). Written in Rabbinic Hebrew, divided into six orders, subdivided into tractates. contains discussions of existing oral law among the *Tannaim* (scholars who lived during the 1st and 2nd centuries CE)

- *Pirke Avot*: Tractate consisting of selections of moral aphorisms often published as a separate book and included in many prayer books.

Tannaitic (Halakhic) Midrash: Collections of Biblical interpretation tying specific rules to the text. Includes: Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, Sifre on Numbers, Midrash Tannaim, Mikhilta of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, Sifre, Sifre Zuta, and Sifre on Deuteronomy.

Tosephta: Parallel text to the Mishnah, believed to be either a commentary on the Mishnah or an older compilation.

Talmud: Amplification and discussion of the *Mishnah* by subsequent scholars known as *Amoraim*. Consists of Hebrew text of Mishnah and Aramaic discussions (also known as Gemara)

- *Talmud Yerushalmi* (also known as Palestinian or Eretz Yisrael Talmud) completed some time in the 5th century CE
- Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) completed by Saboraim (anonymous redactors) some time in the 7th century CE

Amoraic (Aggadic) Midrashim: Commentaries on the Torah compiled between the 5th and 10th centuries.

Responsa: Responses written by recognized authorities to specific questions asked by individuals and/or communities. Practice begun by Geonim (leaders of Babylonian academies) during the 7th through 11th centuries and continuing to the present. Often published as collections by individual authors.

Prayer Books: First known compilation is the *Siddur Amram* in the form of a responsum sent to the Jewish community of Spain some time in the 8th century CE. The next compilation is that of Saadya Gaon in the 11th century. Sets forth the order of prayers in each of the three daily sessions and for the four sessions on Sabbath and Festivals. Originally included the order of the Passover home observance (Seder) which became the *Haggadah*. Eventually, separate volumes were published for the High Holidays, Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur, (Machzorim). Specific wording of prayers and sometimes the order vary from community to community, but overall structure is constant.

** For a more extensive discussion of Jewish texts in general, I strongly recommend Barry Holtz, *Back to the Sources* (Simon & Schuster; Reprint edition, 1986) (Available on Kindle)