

**A  
FRIENDLY  
GUIDE TO**

**THE OLD  
TESTAMENT**

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# FOREWORD

For many people, the Old Testament is both fascinating and overwhelming. This Friendly Guide hopes to introduce first time readers, or readers who have little experience of the Old Testament, to these ancient texts. The Old Testament is much longer than the New Testament. This Friendly Guide does not attempt to cover every book; it takes a selection of texts from the various divisions of the Old Testament and offers a way of reading them that will help them “come alive” for the contemporary reader.

In the Jewish Bible the Old Testament is organised into three categories: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. In the Christian Old Testament the books are divided into the Pentateuch, the Historical Books, the Prophets and the Poetry and Wisdom books. This Guide will

give an overview of these divisions, and will select some from each category to treat with more depth.

It is not well-known among beginning readers that the different Christian traditions name a slightly different collection of books as their sacred Scriptures. For example, the Protestant traditions have thirty-nine books in their Old Testament, but the Roman Catholic tradition has forty-six books. The reason for the difference has its origins in the history of Israel, and the spread of its peoples into areas of the ancient world beyond Israel. In the section entitled “What is the Old Testament”, a brief history of Israel is given to show how this situation came about. A short foray into the formation of the canon will help to explain how various church communities came to recognise these

writings as the “word of God”.

Since the books of the Old Testament come from a wide range of periods and contexts, the historical events and figures selected for coverage are those which best serve for an understanding of the biblical texts.

The Friendly Guide then offers some insights into representative texts from the various divisions of the Old Testament. The treatment will necessarily be brief, but it is our hope that the pages you are about to read will whet your appetite for a life-long exploration.

<sup>11</sup> Wisdom teaches her children and gives help to those who seek her. <sup>12</sup> Whoever loves her loves life, and those who seek her from early morning are filled with joy. (SIRACH 4: 11–12)



# INTRODUCTION

I have spent many years reading, pondering, and teaching the Old Testament. It may seem strange that someone should spend a large part of a lifetime learning and teaching about one section of one book: the Bible; but—of course—both the Bible and the Old Testament are not *just one book*. They are made up of many books. I never get tired of these books, and if I spend the rest of my life learning and teaching about them, I will never cease to be excited by them. That is because the Old Testament is a rich kaleidoscope of images of God, of characters who loved that God, and of the events that shaped their stories and beliefs about God.

In this Friendly Guide I will be able to explore with you only a part of the Old Testament. If you have your Bible open in front of you, or if you take it to your room each night to read before sleep, or if you have ever been a bit puzzled by some of the readings you might have heard during a Sunday Liturgy, you might find it a bit overwhelming. Indeed, if you are already quite familiar with it, you might still find it difficult in parts. That is because we are dealing with ancient texts written in a culture and time far removed from our own.

Yet these books have stood the test of time. They are sacred books for people of the Judaeo-Christian traditions, but they are also appreciated by many non-believers

because so many of the books of the Bible have inspired great writers and playwrights to draw upon them for inspiration. Most of the plots in the great literary classics were first found in the Old Testament: the first murder of a brother by a brother because of jealousy; the great love stories of Ruth and Naomi, of David and Bathsheba; the refusal of people to be bound by the chains of slavery. You are perhaps already familiar with the many modern songs which have their basis in the words of the Old Testament books. The Rock group U2 always used to finish their concerts with an adaptation of Psalm 40; you may have seen the musical, *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Coat*; you may remember the Byrds' song, 'Turn, turn, turn'; and is there anyone who can keep still when 'By the rivers of Babylon' gets airplay?

All of these have their basis in the words and stories of the people of the Old Testament. Many of our proverbs come out of the Old Testament. Have you ever cautioned someone by saying: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread?" It comes from the book of Proverbs. An old song uses a proverb for its opening line, "Wise men say only fools rush in..."

In this Friendly Guide you will meet these wise men and some of the wise women too! One particularly fascinating "wise woman" is the figure of Sophia. Readers who meet her in the great wisdom poems will be left wondering,

Bergamo: Moses crossing the Red Sea





“Who is she? How did she emerge from these ancient Jewish texts?” Interwoven with all these stories and themes is the perennial question: who is this God of Israel?

At various times the people we meet in the Old Testament have loved, responded to, cried out to, and even rejected their God. At times they turned to other gods; but in the final analysis, they returned to the one God who had been with

them from the beginning. The Old Testament is indeed a love story. Some theologies emphasise the distance between God and human beings; in the pages of the Old Testament you will encounter a God who loves the people with a passion, and who hopes that the love will be returned. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. And that is the core of the Old Testament, and the reason its pages are full of such drama.

No matter how often or how deeply we read these ancient texts, they never fully give up their secrets. They always beckon us to re-embark on another journey to find previously undiscovered pathways. I hope this Friendly Guide to these ancient and sometimes “unfriendly” stories will help you as you begin or continue your own exciting and lifelong path of discovery.



# WHAT IS THE OLD TESTAMENT?

**T**he Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections called the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. In Hebrew, the language most of the Old Testament was written in, these sections are called the *Torah*, the *Neviim*, and the *Kethuvim*. When we take the first letters of each of these sections they form the word, TaNaK, and this is what Jewish people call their bible. They do not use the term Old Testament because it presumes the New Testament which, of course, Jewish people do not include among their sacred Scriptures.

The Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament are not quite the same thing. The books of the Hebrew Bible are set out in a different order from the Christian Old Testament. Even the Old Testament is different for the various Christian denominations. The Protestant tradition recognises thirty-nine books as their Old Testament, while Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Eastern Rite Catholics have more. Roman Catholics have forty-six books in their Old Testament; they call these additional books the deuterocanonical books, meaning the “second canon”, while the Protestant tradition refers to them as “apocryphal” books.

## STRUCTURE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

HEBREW BIBLE	CHRISTIAN OLD TESTAMENT
TaNaK: an acronym for the three divisions	<b>Pentateuch</b> Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
<b>Torah (The Law)</b> Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	<b>Historical Books</b> Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, I and II Chronicles
<b>Nevi'im (Prophets)</b> Former: Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, I and II Chronicles Latter: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)	<b>Poetry and Wisdom</b> Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), Song of Songs, Esther, Lamentations  In addition, in the Roman Catholic tradition: <i>Deuterocanonical Books (Apocrypha)</i> I and II Maccabees, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Wisdom of Solomon, Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Additions to Daniel, Additions to Esther
<b>Kethuvim (The Writings)</b> Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), Ruth, Song of Songs, Daniel, Esther, Lamentations, Ezra-Nehemiah, I and II Chronicles	<b>Prophets</b> Three Major: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel Thirteen Minor: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Daniel
<b>39 BOOKS</b>	<b>46 BOOKS</b> Eastern Rite and Orthodox traditions have all the above books plus others.





Before we look at the books and their arrangement in our various sacred Scriptures we need to go back in time to the ancient world so that we can understand how these differences have come about. Today, English is probably the most widely-spoken language; wher-

ever we travel, we will often find someone who understands English or speaks it a little, even in some of the more exotic parts of the world. In a similar way, in the ancient world, Greek was widely-spoken and understood. Some of the Old Testament books were written in

Greek and others were translated into Greek from the Hebrew. These Greek translations became known as the Septuagint. It was the Septuagint version of the Bible that Roman Catholics adopted as their sacred Scriptures.



# HOW THE OLD TESTAMENT CAME TO BE

**T**he whole process of the compilation of the books of the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament was rather complicated. The story begins in the wonderful, ancient city of Alexandria. This is not the place where the Scriptures were first written, but it is the city where the Greek translation that we know as the Septuagint was undertaken. It is this translation which forms the basis of the Roman Catholic canon of Scripture.

## Alexandria and the Septuagint

In Israel, the people spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language common in the

Ancient Near East. The written language of the Bible was mainly Hebrew. However, since the time of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), the main language of the ancient world was Greek. As the Jewish people were exiled by various conquerors at different times, or emigrated by choice to regions outside Israel, they adopted the local language. When they could no longer read Hebrew, the Jewish people of “the diaspora” or “dispersion” needed translations of their Hebrew Scriptures into Greek.

One of the chief centres for the Jews of the Diaspora was Alexandria in Egypt. Alexandria is known for the

Pharos lighthouse, Alexandria, Egypt

famous Pharos Lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. But the city in its heyday was also known as a glorious intellectual centre.

Alexander the Great is considered to be the founder of Alexandria in 332 BC, but archaeological evidence attests to building constructions dating seven hundred years earlier than Alexander’s invasion of Egypt. Its cultural significance stretches over a period of about one thousand years before it started to decline. In its earliest three centuries it was perhaps the leading cultural centre of the world, with architecture that could compete with Rome and Athens.





Its population was one of different religions and philosophical orientations. It was also an important trading post because it supplied an overland connection between the Mediterranean and Red Seas.

## The Library

Alexandria was also famous for its Royal library, founded during the reign of Ptolemy II. In the third century BCE it had five hundred thousand scrolls, and was at one time the largest library in the world. The *Musaeum*, a centre of research with laboratories and observatories, was part of the complex. Scientists and scholars of various disciplines would visit the library from all over the ancient world to study. Scholars who visited included Archimedes, Euclid and Ptolemy. Often, scientists would re-write old scrolls that were badly written or growing brittle with age.

## The Septuagint

From this intellectual milieu emerged the Greek Bible, known to biblical scholars today as the Septuagint (also written as LXX). The Septuagint derives its name from a legend. *Septuaginta* is the Latin word for seventy. When it was decided that the Torah needed to be translated into Greek, seventy of the top Greek and Hebrew-speaking scholars were assigned separate rooms in Alexandria, and at the end of seventy days they emerged with exactly the same translation! However that may be, it was a highly respected translation.

At first, the term Septuagint was used to refer only to the translation of the Pentateuch; but then other biblical books were translated into Greek and included. Eventually, books such as the Wisdom of Solomon—which was written originally in Greek in Alexandria—were also included.

Throughout the centuries, there has not been agreement as to the actual books the Christian Churches would consider to be their Scriptures. Eventually, all the Christian traditions agreed on the same twenty-seven books of the New Testament, but the situation is different with the Old Testament. The Protestant canon uses the Hebrew Scriptures as the basis for their canon—the list of books they consider to be their Scriptures. This is known as the Masoretic Text (MT) and was compiled in the early Middle Ages by a family of Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes.



Above: Alexander the Great  
Below: Bibliotheca Alexandrina



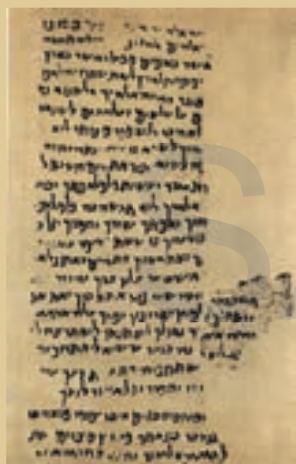
The Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions use the Septuagint books as the basis of their canon. The manuscript translation behind both the MT and the LXX is very complex. Because a text is written in Hebrew does not necessarily make it older than the Greek translation. There are some very old manuscripts behind the Greek.

Augustine preferred the more extensive Alexandrian canon while Jerome preferred the narrower Hebrew canon. The Catholic Council of Trent (1546) accepted the wider Alexandrian (Greek) canon on the

## DID YOU KNOW?

The library was probably destroyed by fire, but to this day the details of the destruction remain somewhat of a mystery. However it was destroyed, it was a great loss to humanity. In 2003, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was inaugurated near the site of the old library.

Some examples of the manuscripts scholars work with are illustrated below. You can also appreciate, perhaps, the beauty of Hebrew script.



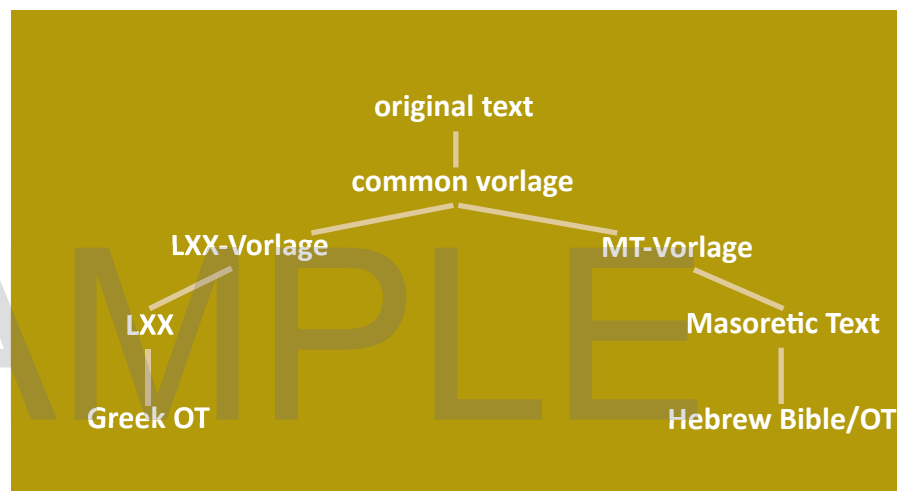
grounds that it contained books that had been used by Christian communities from antiquity. Thus, for the Roman Catholic, Eastern and Orthodox traditions, the issue was decided not on whether particular translations were older, but on whether the church community had always used the books as Scripture.

Most New Testament writers, including Paul, quote the Bible according to the Septuagint (Greek) when they refer to the Old Testament Scriptures. Of course, the New Testament writers do not call it the Old Testament, but simply

“the Scriptures”. Jesus and his earliest Palestinian disciples probably used the Hebrew Scriptures, as that would have been the natural language for them to use.

Modern textual scholars of both Catholic and Protestant traditions work together now to offer the best translations based on good manuscripts. As you can imagine, issues of the canon of Scripture and the various translations provide a lifetime of research for Textual Critics!

A diagram might help to clarify the relationship between the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts:



‘Vorlage’ is a word referring to a previous or original version of a text—sometimes lost to us—that a new text has been based on.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Modern English translations of the Bible are based on the printed editions of the Hebrew Bible and the principal ancient Latin and Greek translations. In turn, these printed editions are based on ancient manuscripts. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the most important manuscripts date from the tenth and eleventh centuries CE; so the manuscripts behind the Hebrew Bible, upon which our English translations are based, date from approximately a thousand years after the Jewish canon was fixed. The text found in these manuscripts is known as the Masoretic Text (MT), dating from the Middle Ages.