

## Biblical Literacy 2021

### Some Common Terminology

#### The Hebrew Bible: Septuagint (LXX); Masoretic Text (MT);

Around 250BCE (well into the Hellenistic period), the large and flourishing diaspora Jewish community in Alexandria for whom Greek was the main language (and knowledge of Hebrew was declining) sponsored a translation of the Torah into Greek. Because the translation was done by seventy Jewish scholars (it was entitled “Translation of the Seventy Interpreters”), it and the translation of the other books which followed has been known as the Septuagint (often written LXX). It offers a window into the Hebrew text circulating at the time. Most significantly, all of the New Testament authors know and quote this version of “the Scriptures.” Its idiosyncrasies such as the mistranslation of “young woman” (almah) as “virgin” (parthenos) in Isaiah 7:14 thus become important. Rabbinic Judaism rejects the Septuagint as scriptural.

As you know, biblical Hebrew had no vowels, no sentence markers or other punctuation, and no chapter or verse markings. For this reason, it was inherently ambiguous and this ambiguity was resolved by adopting traditional readings.

Beginning in the 7th century CE, a group of Jews called the Masoretes, added diacritical markings to signify the vocalization (i.e., the vowels) and accentuation of the words, thus eliminating ambiguity and standardizing the text. This Masoretic Text (often written MT) defines the Jewish canon.

#### Tanakh: Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts: **Torah** (“Instruction”), **Nevi'im** (“Prophets”) and **Ketuvim** (“Writings”). The whole is referred to by the acronym **Tanakh** for the three initial letters of the parts.

#### Torah; Pentateuch; Five Books of Moses

The three names (Hebrew, Greek, English) for the five five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

#### The Documentary Hypothesis; The Synoptic Problem

The documentary hypothesis, most closely associated with the German scholar Julius Wellhausen who consolidated previous work in the 1880s, proposes that the Torah is a

combination of four sources called J (the Yahwist), E (the Eloist), D (the Deuteronomistic school), and P (the Priestly source). The sources were given a final revision by the “final redactor” in the 400s BCE. Arguments continue about the proper dating of these sources; we’ll focus on the consensus reached during the middle twentieth century.

The synoptic problem considers the dependencies among the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. The “four source” consensus is that Matthew and Luke each copied most of Mark, copied from a hypothetical source “Q” containing mostly sayings of Jesus (often called “the sayings source”), and added independent material of their own, e.g., the birth narratives (called “M” and “L”).

## The Oral Torah; The Mishnah; The Gemara; The Talmud

The Pharisees of NT fame were a substantial Jewish minority who emphasized the importance of keeping the law of Moses (Paul was a Pharisee). In order to do so one needed to know many details about the commandments which were not recorded in the Torah. For these details, the Pharisees relied on traditions which they believed had been given to Moses orally on Sinai and transmitted since then down the generations. They considered this “oral Torah” as binding as the written law; they were also willing to establish new traditions according to changed needs by means of scholarly debate. Following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the rabbis of the Pharisees were the only sectarian group remaining and they became the leaders of the emerging rabbinic Judaism. Around 200 CE, the oral Torah (including the debates of contending rabbis) was edited into the Mishnah which organized its material by topic rather than by reference to the Torah. Thereafter, generations of rabbis analyzed and commented on the Mishnah. Two versions of these writings became the Jerusalem Gemara (c. 350-400 CE) and the more extensive Babylonian Gemara (c. 500 CE). The Talmud refers to a volume containing the Mishnah and the associated commentary of the (usually) Babylonian Gemara.

## Maimonides’s Thirteen Principles of Faith

Maimonides, a late 12th-century Sephardic Jewish scholar, was the most influential commentator on the Torah of the Middle Ages. He is well-known for putting forward a list of the thirteen principles of faith, considered authoritative by Orthodox Judaism. They are:

The existence of God.

God's **unity** and indivisibility into elements.

God’s spirituality and incorporeality.

God's **eternity**.

God alone should be the object of **worship**.

**Revelation** through God's **prophets**.

The preeminence of **Moses** among the prophets.

That the entire Torah (both the Written and Oral law) are of Divine origin and were dictated to Moses by God on Mt. Sinai.

The **Torah** given by Moses is permanent and will not be replaced or changed.

God's awareness of all human actions and thoughts.

Reward of righteousness and punishment of evil.

The coming of the **Jewish Messiah**.

The resurrection of the dead.

## Halakhah; Aggadah

Halakhah refers to the collective body of Jewish law derived from the written and oral Torah. Aggadah refers to the additional non-legal exegetical, narrative, philosophical, and mystical rabbinic texts.

## Shema

The most important prayer in Judaism, the Shema is recited twice daily, in the morning and in the evening. From Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

## Etiology; etiological

An etiological narrative is one which describes why something is the way it is. The tales of Paul Bunyan (Minnesota's lakes as his footprints) and the Just So Stories of Rudyard Kipling (how the elephant got his trunk; how the snake lost its legs) are examples of etiologies.

## Syncretism; syncretic

The merging of several discrete religious traditions. The joint worship of YHWH and Baal in Canaan was syncretic.

## Hypostasis

The closest English word would be "personification." For scholars, it refers to a feature or attribute of God that comes to take on its own distinct existence apart from

God. Imagine, for example, that you think that God is wise. That means he has wisdom. But that means that wisdom is something that God “has” – i.e., it is something independent of God that he happens to have possession of. If that’s the case, then one could imagine “Wisdom” as a being apart from God; and since it is God’s Wisdom then it is a kind of divine being alongside God that is also within God as part of his essence, a part of who he is. This hypostasis appears in Proverbs 8 where Wisdom declares “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work.” Another hypostasis is the outward manifestation of God’s wisdom, the Logos (Greek: word) of the prolog of the gospel of John (“In the beginning was the Word . . .”). [from Ehrman’s blog]

## Eschatology; eschaton

Eschatology concerns the final events of history, of the “end times.” The NT book of Revelation concerns eschatology. The eschaton is that final event.

## Theodicy

Theodicy means vindication of God. God needs to be vindicated because the existence of evil appears inconsistent with an all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good deity. The Book of Job appears to be a theodicy. Often found in the phrase “the theodicy problem.”

## Josephus [joe-see-fuss]

Josephus (37-c.100 CE), an aristocratic Jewish historian, wrote the seven-volume *The Jewish War* following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and *The Antiquities of the Jews* (c.95), the most detailed (and virtually only) account we have for the history of the times. In the Jewish revolt of 66-70, he led Jewish troops in Galilee until his surrender during a siege to Vespasian, then a general. Later, as emperor, Vespasian freed him and granted him Roman citizenship. As a member of the court, he lived in Rome and wrote his books.

## Philo [fie-low]

Philo (c.20 BCE - c.50 CE) was an influential Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher who lived in the large diaspora community in Alexandria, Egypt. He attempted to harmonize the Torah with Greek philosophy using an allegorical method which was disapproved of by the rabbis.

## The Book of Jubilees

The Book of Jubilees is a Hebrew text of c.150BCE retelling the story of Genesis. It's associated with the Qumran community of the Dead Sea Scrolls because the only ancient manuscript was found there. It contains an expanded version of Exodus 6:1-4 concerning the Nephilim.

## The Book of 1 Enoch

The Book of 1 Enoch is a non-canonical composite of Jewish apocalyptic texts written between 250 and 100 BCE probably in Aramaic or Hebrew or both. The initial 36 chapters are styled "The Book of the Watchers" and contains a description of the fallen angels and their offspring (with human wives) of the giant Nephilim.

## Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics refers to the method of interpretation of texts. A modern style of biblical hermeneutics is the "hermeneutics of suspicion" in which the scholar asks himself (according to Shaye Cohen) "Why is this SOB trying to get me to believe these lies?" In other words, what is the author trying to get the reader to believe and can we discern from this his hidden agenda?

## YHWH

The tetragrammaton is the four-letter Hebrew word יהוה transliterated as YHWH. Many orthodox Jews follow the tradition that the word is not to be pronounced. When the word is encountered, a substitute such as Adonai ("my Lord") is used. The tetragrammaton is usually translated in English as "the Lord" as in Genesis 2.

## Yeshua; Jesus; Christ

Most likely, Jesus's Aramaic name, Yeshua, is a variant of the Hebrew Yehoshua which means literally "divine deliverance" and colloquially "YHWH saves". Yeshua is Joshua in English and the Aramaic diminutive is Yeshu (Josh). As the traditions were influenced by Greek culture, Yeshua became Iesus and then Jesus.

Of course, Christ is not Jesus's last name! It's the English equivalent of *christos*, the Greek translation of "messiah," which in turn means "anointed one". So it's a title, like *rabbi*. Traditionally, kings and high priests were anointed and this signified a closer relationship with the divine. At the turn of the era, many Jews hoped that a new messiah would appear to lead the community to political independence. (The Essenes in Qumran expected two messiahs, one a priestly leader and the other a military

leader.) The last thing any Jew imagined was a messiah who would be executed as a political troublemaker.

## The Immaculate Conception

A favorite trivia question: “Who was born as a result of the immaculate conception?” The most common answer: “Jesus”. However, the phrase refers to the Roman Catholic belief that Mary, the Mother of God, although she was conceived by ordinary sexual intercourse, was by the grace of God free from the stain of original sin (a doctrine promulgated by St. Augustine in the early fifth century). This doctrine was adopted as a divinely revealed truth by Pope Pius IX in 1854. It came 300 year after the Council of Trent had affirmed Mary’s freedom from personal sin.

## Asherah

Asherah is the name of a Semitic goddess associated in several non-biblical sources with YHWH as consort, probably the consequence of syncretic practices. Deuteronomy 12 directs the destruction of the “Asherah poles” used in worship of her.