

What is the Tanakh?

The Tanakh is composed of the Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuv'im. The Tanakh is the basis of understanding the laws, philosophy, and history of Judaism. As such, studying the Tanakh is the first step to understanding the whole of Judaism.

The Torah is made up of five books that were given to Moshe directly from God shortly after the Exodus from Mitzrayim around 1230BCE. The Torah was handed down through the successive generations from the time of Moshe.

The Nevi'im covers the time period from the death of Moshe through the Babylonian exile (ca.1200BCE-587BCE) and contains 19 books. The Nevi'im covers the time from the Hebrews entering Eretz Yisrael, conquest of Yericho, conquest of Eretz Yisrael and division among the tribes, judicial system, Era of Saul and David, Solomon's wisdom and the construction of the First Beit HaMikdash, kings of Eretz Yisrael, prophecy, messianic prophecies, and the Babylonian exile.

The Ketuv'im covers the period after the return from the Babylonian exile (6th century BCE) and contains 12 books. The Ketuv'im is made up of various writings that do not have an overall theme. This section of the Tanakh includes poems and songs, the stories of Job, Ruth, and Esther, the writings and prophecies of Daniel, and the history of the kings of Eretz Yisrael.

The Tanakh is also called Miqra (meaning "reading" or "that which is read"). The three-part division reflected in the acronym "Tanakh" is well attested to in documents from the Second Beit HaMikdash period. During that period, however, "Tanakh" was not used as a word or term. Instead, the proper title was Miqra, because the biblical texts were read publicly. Miqra continues to be used in Hebrew to this day alongside Tanakh to refer to the Hebrew scripture. In modern spoken Hebrew both are used interchangeably.

According to Rabbinical Judaism after the destruction of Yerushalayim Rabbi Zakkai asked for permission from the Romans to set up a school in Yavneh (Gittin 56b).<sup>1</sup> It is at this place that the school at Yavneh canonized the Tanakh.<sup>2</sup> This teaching is rejected by Karaite Judaism because the Tanakh was already "codified" by the time the Second Beit HaMikdash was destroyed. All the books contained in the Tanakh were already well-known to the Yisraelites and were established as the authoritative and divine texts for the Yisraelites.

*For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, [as the Greeks have,] but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years; but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life.*

*It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time; and how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add any thing to them, to take any thing from them, or to make any change in them; but it is become natural to all Jews immediately, and from their very birth, to esteem these books to contain Divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be willingly to die for them. For it is no new thing for our captives, many of them in number, and frequently in time, to be seen to endure racks and deaths of all kinds upon the theatres, that they may not be obliged to say one word against our laws and the records that contain them; whereas there are none at all among the Greeks who would undergo the least harm on that account, no, nor in case all the writings that are among them were to be destroyed; for they take them to be such discourses as are framed agreeably to the inclinations of those that write them; and they have justly the same opinion of the ancient writers, since they see some of the present generation bold enough to write about such affairs, wherein they were not present, nor had concern enough to inform themselves about them from those that knew them; examples of which may be had in this late war of ours, where some persons have written histories, and published them, without having been in the places concerned, or having been near them when the actions were done; but these men put a few things together by hearsay, and insolently abuse the world, and call these writings by the name of Histories. (Josephus – Against Apion 1:8)<sup>3</sup>*

The Tanakh was not originally broken into chapter and verses. The idea of chapter and verses – as well as the breaking apart of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles – is a leftover from Christians in the 13th century. The chapter divisions and verse numbers have no significance in the Jewish tradition. Nevertheless, they are noted in all modern editions of the Tanakh so that verses may be located and cited.

The division of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles into parts I and II is also indicated on each page of those books in order to prevent confusion about whether a chapter number is from part I or II, since the chapter numbering for these books follows their partition in the Christian textual tradition. The adoption of the Christian chapter divisions by Jews began in the late Middle Ages in Spain, partially in the context of forced clerical debates which took place against a background of harsh persecution and of the Spanish Inquisition (the debates required a common system for citing biblical texts).

From the standpoint of the Jewish textual tradition, the chapter divisions are not only a foreign feature with no basis in the mesorah but are also open to severe criticism of three kinds:

- The chapter divisions often reflect Christian exegesis of the Bible.
- Even when they do not imply Christian exegesis, the chapters often divide the biblical text at numerous points that may be deemed inappropriate for literary or other reasons.
- They ignore the accepted closed and open space divisions which are based on the mesorah.

Nevertheless, because they proved useful for citations, they are often included in most Hebrew editions of the biblical books.

A parsha formally means a section of a biblical book in the Masoretic text of the Tanakh. In common usage today the word often refers to the Weekly Torah portion. The weekly Torah portion is a section of the Torah read during Shabbat services. Each weekly Torah portion adopts its name from one of the first unique word or words in the Hebrew text.

Dating back to the time of the Babylonian captivity (6th Century BCE), public Torah reading mostly followed an annual cycle beginning and ending on Simchat Torah, with the Torah divided into 54 weekly portions to correspond to the Hebrew calendar. There was also an ancient triennial cycle of readings which was established by the Egyptian and Palestinian Jewish communities. Even though this is a tradition of Rabbinical Judaism, many Karaite Jews also follow this schedule – although some Karaite communities follow their own set schedule.

Due to the influence of Maimonides, these divisions in the Torah have become highly standardized, and there is close to exact agreement amongst Torah scrolls, printed Jewish bibles, and similar online texts.

Karaite Judaism teaches that everyone has the obligation to study Tanakh and to determine for themselves the correct meaning of the mitzvot based upon their own understanding and reasoning.

*The ancient adage of the Karaite sages declares: “Search well in the Scriptures and do not rely on anyone’s opinion”. In this regard the Karaite sages taught: “He who relies upon any of the teachers of the Exile without personal investigation, it is as if he has engaged in idolatry.”<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>Tzvee Zahavy. “Gittin.” *halakhah.com*. Halkhah.Com, n.d. [ <http://halakhah.com/pdf/nashim/Gittin.pdf> ]

<sup>2</sup>Robert Newman. “The Council of Jamnia and the Old Testament Canon.” *ibri.org*. Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1983. [ <http://www.ibri.org/RRs/RR013/13jamnia.html> ]

<sup>3</sup>William Whiston. “The Works of Flavius Josephus.” *sacred-texts.com*. Sacred Texts, 1737. [ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud//josephus/apion-1.htm> ]

<sup>4</sup>Nehemiah Gordon.. “What is Karaism?” *karaite-korner.org*. World Karaite Movement, 22 May 2008. [ <http://karaite-korner.org/main.shtml> ]