The sacred texts of a religion are written at a specific time in a specific place. They become important to a religion's followers and are preserved by them because the messages they contain address their immediate political, social and economic circumstances.

But those circumstances do not always stay the same. Sacred texts written for desert dwellers can become holy to people living in mountains or jungles. Books written for agricultural communities can be carried into cities and become guides for urban residents. This kind of reversal took place for both Judaism and Christianity in the realm of governance and political organization.

Most books of Judaism's Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) were written at a time when its adherents -- called Israelites at first and later Jews -- were self-governing. For about 600 years, from the time Moses liberated the Israelites from Egyptian slavery to the fall of the last Judean king in 586 B.C., from the books of Exodus to end of Second Kings and Second Chronicles, the Israelites ruled themselves. Prophets and "judges" comprised the first native rulers and then the Israelites were led by four centuries of kings. Even Deuteronomy's laws presume that kings are Israel's normal rulers.

The Babylonian invasion of 586 B.C. changed all that. Taken into exile by the Babylonians, the Israelites were allowed by the Persians to return to Judea, which had become a province of the Persian empire. This subordinate status continued for centuries, under the Persians, the Greeks, and then the Romans, with only 100 years of independence under the Maccabees in the second century B.C.

Then matters got worse. In 70 A.D., the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and banned Jews from living in Judea. Jews spread throughout the Mediterranean world, Europe and the Middle East. There they remained for almost two millennia, until they began to return in the 20th century. They were forced to live as foreigners and guests (often unwelcome) in countries they did not rule. They were subjects, with no rights of self governance or self control, and indeed often without any rights at all.

So Judaism, the religion of people whose sacred texts recorded their centuries of self-rule and which considered that the normal political situation of Jews, has spent nearly two-thirds of its existence without any political power whatsoever.

Christianity finds itself in the opposite position. Its founding document, the New Testament, presents earliest Christianity as a religion of the powerless, of those subject to rule by the Roman Empire. Jesus taught his followers to turn the other cheek when struck and to walk a second mile when forced to go one. He taught them to pay taxes to the government ("render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's.") And when it came time to bless people, he blessed the meek, the poor in spirit, the merciful and the poor in heart. He did not bless the rulers, the army, or even the leaders of the city, or town, or village. He emphasized humbling oneself before others, not ruling over them.

Despite three centuries of being despised and frequently persecuted, Christianity found itself in the 4th century ruling the empire that had humbled them. Once Constantine ascended the throne and decided to make Christians his main body of allies, the die was caste. With only a few exceptions, Christianity ruled empires and countries from then on. The Christian Byzantine Empire lasted until the 15th century, during which time Christianity spread through Europe, forming Christian nations and empires. Starting in the 16th century, those empires spread Christianity around the world, from the New World to Africa and Asia.

So Christianity had to perform the opposite transformation from Judaism. Although its sacred New Testament envisioned a humble community subject to mighty powers and without self-rule, it became a governing religion. And for more than three-quarters of its existence, Christianity has been the dominant religion of major empires and nations, usually closely allied with their kings, emperors, presidents and other leaders.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence, then, that when Christianity chose the books of its Bible at the end of the fourth century, it included the Old Testament. It needed some guidance for how a religion handled political power.