

## THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Our consideration is as to how and when the books of the Old Testament came to be regarded as the Word of God.

Who chose the 39 books? Why these and none others?

The putting together of the Divinely inspired writings is called the canon. We talk about the canon of the Old Testament, of the New Testament and of the whole Bible. The word canon comes from the Greek word *kanôn* which means a rod such as a mason's plumb line used to measure things or keep an object on a straight course. The word has come to mean the standard by which people compared things and judged their qualities or worth e.g. Galatians 6.16. From this came the idea of using the word 'canon' to mean a collection of writings (Scriptures) inspired by the Spirit of God and therefore holy and authoritative. Paul refers to this in 2 Timothy 3. 14-17.

The 39 books of the Old Testament canon have been a part of the Bible for so long that some may think that God dropped from Heaven a bound volume of these books.

The Hebrew Bible consists of three parts:

1. Torah The law, i.e. the Pentateuch.
2. Nebiim The Prophets which consists of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve 'minor' prophets – as well as Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings.
3. Kethubim or Hagicgrapha The writings: consisting of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1-2 Chronicles.

Not all the sacred writings of the Jews are included in the Old Testament. As Christians we can say that the books that make up the Old Testament canon came about by Divine Will employing human selection inspired by God and that such books are the measure of the rule for faith and practise.

It is not easy to construct a history as to how the Old Testament was formed.

What we can say with some certainty is that the Torah or Pentateuch existed in the time of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8. 1-6). In one of the books of the apocrypha (2 Maccabees 2.13) we read of the same Nehemiah founding a library and he 'gathered the acts of the kings, and the prophets, and of David and the epistles of the kings concerning the holy gifts'.

Nehemiah lived at the time of the Jews returning from exile in Babylon. It was a time of national fervour and revival in religion, culture and an awareness of God. They were to rebuild Jerusalem and its Temple. What is clear is that the Torah existed and so did the stories of the kings and ministry of the prophets in written form.

Incidentally, apocrypha comes from the Greek word *apokryphos* meaning 'hidden', 'secret' or 'things obscure or hard to understand'. The 15 books of the apocrypha are in four sections.

1. Historical 1 Esdras, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Esther, Epistle of Jeremy, Prayer of Manasseh.
2. Apocalyptic (obscure) 2 Esdras, Baruch.

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|----|-----------|---|
| 3. | Legendary | Tobit, Judith, The Song of the Three Holy Children, The History of Susanna, Bel and the Dragon. |
| 4. | Didactic  | The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus.  |

So Nehemiah's library indicated his desire to collect the scriptures that make up the Old Testament.

Two and a half centuries later in the time of Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes an attempt was made to destroy all the holy writings of the Jews. This is recorded in 1 Maccabees 1.56-7. In 2 Maccabees 2.14 we read of Judas Maccabeus' endeavour to collect copies of the most precious books and documents which the Jews possessed.

By the time of Our Lord's earthly ministry it would appear that the Old Testament as we know it existed whereas about 550 years earlier in Nehemiah's day the Pentateuch existed but other scriptures were being collected. Evidence of the complete scriptures existing in the time of Christ is provided by the Lord quoting from the law, the prophets and the psalms, (Luke 24.44.) There are many occasions when He quoted from the Old Testament (of course, the New Testament did not exist then). He quotes about 20 characters and from 19 different books of the Old Testament.

Some disagree as to who wrote which book but does it matter? We said earlier that some Jewish writings were not in the Old Testament canon yet they are referred to in our Bibles viz:

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| The Book of the Wars of The Lord    | – | Numbers 21.14                  |
| The Book of Jasher                  | – | Joshua 10.13 and 2 Samuel 1.18 |
| The Duties of Being a King          | – | 1 Samuel 10.25                 |
| The Book of the Acts of Solomon     | – | 1 Kings 11.41                  |
| The Books of Samuel, Nathan and Gad | – | 1 Chronicles 29.29             |

Why they are not included we do not know. What we do know is that there is a quote in the New Testament from every book in the Old Testament with the exception of seven, namely: Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Ezra, Nehemiah, Nahum and Zephaniah.

So the earliest known collection of Holy Scriptures is the Law, the Pentateuch existing in the days of Nehemiah. He had a rival who was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horomite who was also a grandson of Eliashib the high priest. Nehemiah expelled this man from Jerusalem who went to Samaria where he built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim (the Samaritan Temple) and took with him the sacred writings Nehemiah had collected twelve years before (Nehemiah 13.28). In addition to the Pentateuch there was a modified book of Joshua hence this version has become known as the Samaritan Pentateuch.

550 years earlier the one Jewish kingdom of Israel had split into two: Israel, with Samara as its capital which kingdom never had a good king and Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital. No wonder we read that the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans (John 4.9). It also explains the Temple at Samaria (John 4.20).

The first translation of the Old Testament is called the Septuagint which dates from about 250 BC and which translation took place in Egypt. This translation was from Hebrew into Greek and this was the

Bible used in the time of the Lord by non-Hebrew speaking people. It did not include the apocrypha and the Lord never quoted from it. Of course, the Lord would have used the original Hebrew version.

Septuagint, or seventy, is so named because legend has it that about 70 or so scholars compiled it.

One of the books of the apocrypha is the 51 chapters of Ecclesiasticus (not to be confused with Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament). This was written about 180 BC by Jesus the son of Sirah. It is a book of wisdom and honest moral values. In this book he praises the famous men from Enoch to Nehemiah which covers almost all the historical detail of the Old Testament which indicates a large measure of the completion of the Old Testament canon. The grandson of Jesus Ben Sirah translated Ecclesiasticus into Greek and added a prologue of his own about 130 BC. What he writes also indicates the canon of the Old Testament was, by then, complete. His words are, "Whereas many and great things have been delivered unto us by the Law and the Prophets and by others... the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our fathers."

The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in eight large clay jars in the caves of Qumram, seven miles south of Jericho in 1947. These were found to quote from most of the books of the Old Testament and contained a complete Isaiah almost exactly the same as we have in our Bibles today. Carbon dating and the discovery of nearby coins indicate the age of these scrolls to be about a century before Christ or about the same time as Ecclesiasticus.

By the time of Christ, most of the Old Testament was then considered canonical but there was doubt about three books, namely Esther, because it does not mention God although Jews say the name of God does appear as an acrostic, and the two books attributed to Solomon, Ecclesiasticus and Song of Solomon. Because of Solomon's evil lifestyle (1 Kings 11) some Jews did not feel Solomon was worthy to be represented in Holy Writ and to this day the Song of Solomon is not read in public unless the women and children leave first.

There are some scholars who believe that the canon of the Old Testament was finally decided at the Council of Jamnia near Joppa on the Mediterranean. Twenty years earlier Jerusalem had been destroyed and Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai asked the Romans' permission to establish a place of learning at Jamnia.

We should mention the Talmud, a Jewish work of rabbinical writings consisting of:

1. The Mishna – various aspects the law: finished about 200 AD
2. The Gemara – a gigantic commentary and a record of debates on the Mishna. This was finished about 500 AD.

In this there is an extract which lists the books of the Old Testament in much the same order as now found in the Hebrew Bible and also claims who wrote each book but that is not Divinely inspired!

But after all this we still know very little about the writers, the collecting of the books, the selection of some and the rejection of others. The Old Testament does not explain the problem either. What is clear is that much of the material was handed down by word of mouth and as such material referred to God it was passed down with great carefulness insisting on accuracy.

Jewish scribes were very precise.

Because of the oral traditions these sacred stories circulated in other parts of the world and this is why there are several variations on stories such as Noah's Flood. One such is the epic of Gilgamesh preserved on clay tablets and telling of the adventures of the King of Uruk in Mesopotamia around 3000 BC. It

tells of his search for everlasting life and includes the story of the Flood which agrees with many of the details in Genesis.

In the compilation of the Old Testament canon consideration must also be given to God's role in the events. He, being God, will achieve His Will and Purposes in His own way. The Bible is a miraculous book in many ways; one being the fact that it has survived. The Jews will never destroy any Hebrew writing regarding it as the language of God. When a scroll was too old to be used in the Temple or synagogue it was buried and a funeral service was held. This explains the preservation of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Bible is miraculous because of its unity. It is the Word of God.

The question of why the apocrypha was never regarded as scripture may present a problem to some. It does contain reliable historical detail of the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Much of it is on a high moral plane but the Jews did not consider it inspired because there are some historical, chronological and geographical errors. The apocrypha was excluded from the Hebrew canon from at least AD 90 but some branches of the Christian church, notably the Roman Catholics, have kept it or, rather, parts of it.

This leads us to consider the purpose of the Bible. It is not just a Jewish history book nor is it just literature. The Bible is the record of how God revealed Himself to His creation. It tells us what God is like and what man is like and how God deals with men. God has revealed Himself and ultimately by His Son (Hebrews 1. 1-2). Christ came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5.17 - 19). He said that, "The Scriptures testify of Me." (John 5.39).

Compare some of the prophecies about Christ in the Old Testament fulfilled in the New Testament.

1. Genesis 49. 10	Of the tribe of Judah	Luke 3. 33
2. Micah 5. 2	Place of His Birth	Matthew 2. 1
3. Isaiah 7. 14	Born of a Virgin	Matthew 1. 18
4. Jeremiah 31. 15	Massacre of infants	Matthew 2. 16
5. Hosea 11. 1	Flight into Egypt	Matthew 2. 14
6. Isaiah 9. 1-2	Ministry in Galilee	Matthew 4. 12-16
7. Deuteronomy 18. 15	A prophet	John 6. 15
8. Psalm 110. 4	A priest	Hebrews 6. 20
9. Isaiah 53. 3	His Rejection	John 1. 11
10. Isaiah 11. 2	His Characteristics	Luke 2. 52
11. Zechariah 9. 9	Entry into Jerusalem	John 12. 13-14
12. Psalm 41. 9	Betrayed by a friend	Mark 14. 10
13. Zechariah 11. 12	Sold for 30 pieces of silver	Matthew 26. 15
14. Psalm 27. 12	False witness accuse Him	Matthew 26. 60-61
15. Isaiah 53. 7	Silent when accused	Matthew 26.62 - 63
16. Isaiah 50. 6	Smitten and spat upon	Mark 14. 65
17. Psalm 69. 4	Hated without a cause	John 15. 23-25
18. Isaiah 53. 4-5	Suffered vicariously	Matthew 8. 16-17
19. Isaiah 53. 12	Crucified with sinners	Matthew 27. 38
20. Psalm 22. 16	Hands and feet pierced	John 20. 27
21. Psalm 22. 6-8	Mocked and humiliated	Matthew 29. 39-40
22. Psalm 69. 21	Given gall and vinegar	John 19. 29
23. Psalm 22. 8	Hears prophetic words mocked	Matthew 27. 43
24. Psalm 109. 4	Prays for His enemies	Luke 23. 24
25. Zechariah 12. 10	His side is pierced	John 19. 34
26. Psalm 22. 18	Soldiers cast lots for His coat	Mark 15. 24

27. Psalm 34. 20	Not a bone broken	John 19. 33
28. Isaiah 53. 9	Buried with the rich	Matthew 27. 57-60
29. Psalm 16. 10	His Resurrection	Matthew 28 .9
30. Psalm 68. 18	His Ascension	Luke 24. 50-51

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