

## THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Virtually all scholars agree that there is an established canon of books that comprise the Old Testament, though the canon's development and extent are a matter of dispute between Roman Catholics and Protestants. The *canon*, as we shall discuss here, refers to the divinely inspired writings of the 39 books of the Old Testament accepted by Judaism and all sections of Christianity.

As scholars have sought to understand the historical process of Old Testament canonization, they have generally proposed successive criteria that a text had to meet: It must be 1) inspired by God; 2) recognized as inspired by men of God; and 3) collected and preserved by the people of God.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the books of Scripture that were inspired by God and written through men possess a self-authenticating nature. The books' authoritative nature is not given to them because they were included in the canon; rather, they are recognized by the Israelite nation as possessing divine authority; therefore, they were included in the canon. After the publication of a prophetic message, the work would be recognized as divinely inspired by the people of God and would then be preserved and copied for future generations.

### **Transmission and Collection of Biblical Materials**

The earliest techniques of transmission of biblical materials were oral. In Deuteronomy, Moses commanded the people of Israel to teach their children and future generations the laws and statutes of God. These oral-transmission traditions were later written down for the sake of preserving the sacred message, thus ensuring their accuracy. The biblical text reflects a high reverence given to the Law of Moses. The Old Testament also contains evidence of biblical authors referencing earlier biblical writings (for example, Daniel 9:2), as well as rebukes to Israel for not obeying what was previously written.

Scholars have recognized that after the destruction of the first Temple a renewed emphasis on the collection and study of Scripture emerged. Sanders states that it was this major event that brought about the collections of what we now know as the Law and the Prophets. According to tradition, prophecy ceased in Israel around 400 BC after

the death of the last prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). The Holy Spirit ceased to communicate to Israel directly through the prophets. Because of these circumstances, the people relied upon *bath kol* (literally “daughter of a voice”). *Bath kol* was not considered as authoritative as the prophets’ teachings, but was “a voice [that] fell from heaven” without the personal or physical manifestation of the messenger (for example, Daniel 5:31; Matthew 3:17). With this Jewish tradition in place, scholars such as R.K. Harrison argue that the canon was probably completed by about 300 BC. No further books were being added as Scripture.

### *Divisions of the Hebrew Bible*

The Hebrew Bible now has three recognized divisions: the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Nevi'im), and the Writings (Ketuvim), forming the consonantal acronym *TaNak*. Sometime prior to Christ's ministry this threefold designation was in use (Luke 24:27,44). Some scholars believe that the Hebrew Scriptures were canonized in these three stages in accordance to their dates of composition: the Law around 400 BC, the Prophets around 200 BC, and the Writings approximately AD 100. This assumption is, however, unlikely due to the fact that more recent scholarship dates the Old Testament canon as having been finalized between the fourth century and second century BC. What is more, some of the books and passages in the Old Testament were quoted as “Scripture” (Matthew 21:42), “words of the Lord” (Daniel 9:2), or “the Spirit says” (Matthew 22:43-44) prior to the dates proposed above (Ephesians 4:8; see also Psalm 68:18; Acts 13:35; see also Psalm 16:10). Other theories have been put forward, one of which states that the Old Testament canon was not finalized until the Council of Jamnia (Jabneh) around AD 90, which has been refuted by Roger Beckwith.<sup>2</sup>

There is, however, much evidence that supports the claim that the Old Testament was originally canonized in a twofold division between the Law (the first five books) and the Prophets (seventeen books). The way in which the historical books are linked together as one unit supports this claim, as well as the fact that the New Testament most commonly refers to the Old Testament as “the Law and Prophets.” This was the standard way to refer to the Old Testament in even Old Testament times (see Zechariah 7:12; see also Daniel 9:2,10-12), during the intertestamental period (2 Maccabees 15:9), in the Qumran community just before the time of Christ (*Manual of Discipline* 9.11), and by Jesus and New Testament writers (see Matthew 5:17; Luke 16:31). Indeed, Luke 24:27 refers to “Law and Prophets” as “all the Scriptures.”

While some believe that the third category (the Writings) was created for liturgical reasons to accord with the Jewish festal year, it, this tripartite division of the Old Testament may have resulted from topical arrangement into legal, historical, and nonhistorical books. There are possible allusions to an early threefold division in the prologue to Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sira or Sirach) in the middle of the second century BC, where the writer refers to “the law and the prophets and the other books of our fathers,” though this last category is undefined and may not even be a reference to inspired books. The alleged New Testament reference to a threefold division (Luke 24:44) does not refer to

a third section called “Writings.” Rather, it probably singles out “Psalms” for their messianic significance.

### *Sequence of Canonical Recognition*

The first section of the Hebrew Bible, the Law or Pentateuch, may be the first section of the Bible to be written and recognized as canonical, which would explain why it is referenced numerous times throughout the rest of the Old Testament. There is no doubt that the Pentateuch was recognized as complete and canonical by the time of Ezra and Nehemiah in the fifth century BC. There is also good reason to believe that it had been regarded as such even earlier. With the Hebrew Bible being translated into the Greek language by the mid-second century BC, the Pentateuch became a part of the Septuagint Bible (LXX); the Samaritans deviated from the Jews shortly thereafter with the creation of their revised version of Moses’ writings (the *Samaritan Pentateuch*). The evidence of the Pentateuch’s inclusion and preservation reveals that the books of the Law were considered a complete canonical unit within the Old Testament canon.

First-century Jewish historian Josephus does have three categories of books, but he does not call them “Writings” but “four books containing hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.”<sup>3</sup> However, the later “Writings” section of the Jewish Old Testament had 11 books in it. While Josephus numbers the total Old Testament books as 22 just before AD 100, nevertheless, these are the same as the 39 books of the Protestant Old Testament. They are just numbered differently (the 12 Minor Prophets are counted as one book and all the double books (Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah) are listed as one book each. Also, the 22 books of Josephus are the same as the later 24 books of the Jewish Old Testament, for Ruth was attached to the end of Judges and Lamentations to the end of Jeremiah in order to number the books at 22, the same number of letters as in the Hebrew alphabet. There has been no doubt that these books made up the Hebrew Old Testament canon. Individual attestations provide evidence of their canonicity from the first century AD or earlier. What this implies is that there has been an established canon of the Hebrew Old Testament since before the Christian era.

The final threefold division of the Old Testament—Law (5), Prophets (8), and Writings (11)—did not come until the time of the Mishnah (*Baba Bathra*) in the fifth century AD.

It is also worthy of note that the Old Testament books were most likely immediately adopted as the Word of God by the people of God very soon after they were written. When Moses wrote his book it was preserved inside the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle (Deuteronomy 31:9). Joshua’s books were added to it (Joshua 24:26). Later, we see that Daniel had the Law and the Prophets up to his time, including the contemporary prophet Jeremiah (Daniel 9:2,6,10-11). Still later Zechariah spoke of “the law and . . . the former prophets” (Zechariah 7:12). So, the books of the Old Testament were recognized by the people of God immediately, though the *official* divisions of the Scriptures took over a thousand years to establish.\* This immediate acceptance of the Hebrew Scriptures is supported by more than 2600 claims within the text that it is divinely

\* This was primarily due to God’s progressive revelation to Israel, which began with Moses (1400 BC) and culminated with Malachi (400 BC).

inspired.\* This, along with appropriate content, would be enough to immediately bring the acceptance of the Scriptures in the eyes of the Jews.

## The Intertestamental Period and the Apocrypha

There has been much dispute throughout church history about the validity and inspiration of the texts written during the intertestamental period (the 400-year period of time between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament).

### *The Pseudepigrapha*

One group of writings that has been universally rejected by all in the church is the *Pseudepigrapha*. These books are seen as unauthentic in regard to the overall content and authorship. The pseudepigraphal works claim to be written by biblical authors and to be authoritative, but their contents reveal nothing of the sort. These books were written as early as 200 BC to as late as AD 200. These writings are known in Roman Catholic circles as the Apocrypha—which is not to be confused with the same term used by the Protestant church to identify a completely different group of books (see below). The pseudepigraphal books are comprised of visions, dreams, and revelations in the style of apocalyptic literature found in Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah.

### *The Apocrypha*

A similar group of books, known to Protestants as the *Apocrypha* (meaning “hidden” or “doubtful”), have been accepted by some in the church, though others view them as extrabiblical. These books were translated into the Greek language and added to the Septuagint in the third century BC along with the rest of the Hebrew Bible. The close pairing with the Septuagint led some early church leaders to regard the writings found in the Apocrypha as nearly or just as authoritative as the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures. Eleven of the fourteen Apocryphal books were instituted as inspired canonical texts (called *deuterocanonical*, meaning “second canon”) by the Roman Catholic Church in 1546 at the Council of Trent during the Counter-Reformation period. This may have been due to pressures resulting from the Protestant Reformation; the Church hoped to present scriptural support for purgatory, prayer for the dead, and justification by works.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran has given insight into the historical view of the Apocryphal books. Interestingly, there were no commentaries found in the caves at Qumran on any book within the Apocrypha. Only the canonical biblical books were found, written on special parchment in the sacred script. Based on the findings at Qumran, the Apocrypha was not viewed as canonical by the Qumran community. It was only during and after the time of Augustine (AD 354–430), when he, along with the local councils he influenced, declared the books of the Apocrypha inspired, that they gained wider usage and, eventually, inclusion in the Roman Catholic Church’s canon as infallible. Even here, Augustine’s reasons for inclusion in the canon appear to be sentimental and not theological; he declared the books to be canonical because of the glorious martyrs included in the texts. By contrast, the books of the Hebrew Bible

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\* Of the 2,600-plus claims of divine inspiration, 680 are found in the Pentateuch, 418 in the historical books, 195 in poetical books, and 1,307 in the prophetic literature.

were received into the canon, quoted often, and had long been generally recognized as inspired and authoritative texts.<sup>4</sup>

It is also interesting to note that Jesus and the apostles never directly quote from the books of the Apocrypha, even though it is likely that they were included in the Septuagint Bibles Jesus and the apostles used. This was because they knew the Apocrypha was not inspired and there had been no prophet to speak to the people, by the text's own admission (1 Maccabees 9:27; 14:41).

### *Negatives and Positives of the Apocrypha*

There are also instances of historical and doctrinal errors found in the Apocrypha. For example, there are references to Nebuchadnezzar as the king of Assyria, reigning at Nineveh, rather than as king of Babylon and reigning from that city (Judith 1:15). Further, the Jews were said to be in Babylon for "seven generations" (Baruch 6:2), rather than 70 years as stated in Jeremiah 25:11. The use of superstition and magic is condoned when it is said that the smoke from a fish's heart will drive away evil spirits (Tobit 6:5-7). Moreover, salvation by works (for example, giving of alms) is put forth as a legitimate method of deliverance from sin and gaining right standing before God (Tobit 4:11; 12:9). What is more, money (silver) is given as a sacrifice for the sins of the dead (2 Maccabees 12:43). Other passages contradict the teachings that are found in the rest of the Old Testament, such as those Apocryphal verses that mention purgatory and prayer for the dead, which are nowhere else mentioned.

It seems apparent as well that none of the books of the Apocrypha ever claim to be divinely inspired. Phrases such as "Hear the word of the LORD" are never found in the Apocrypha, whereas this phrase is common in the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures. Based on evidence like this, one can conclude that the writers were being careful to avoid having their writings viewed as inspired Scripture.

The Apocryphal books do contain a good amount of historical information pertaining to the nation of Israel during the intertestamental period, and some people have valued them for their homiletic and historical qualities. These books do give good insight on the history of the Jews during the silent period (400 BC to the time of Christ) and are a valid witness to Second Temple Judaism. They are also regarded by some as an essential resource in appreciating the Jewishness of Jesus and of the early Christian movement that began in His name.

### *Acceptance or Rejection of the Apocrypha*

The books do deserve to be read and studied for their own merits—not as inspired Scripture, but as we would study any other ancient written historical account. This approach is evident among the early Church Fathers. Even though Augustine accepted the Apocrypha, Jerome, who knew the languages of Scripture and was the translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible (AD 405) rejected them; he reluctantly made a translation of part of the Apocrypha to be added to the Vulgate. The vast majority of Church Fathers (from AD 100 to AD 400) rejected the canonicity of the books, including Origen, Cyril, and Athanasius.

Based on, as mentioned, Augustine's acceptance of the Apocryphal books (c. AD 400) and those he influenced after that time, the Roman Catholic Church has accepted 11 of the 14 Apocryphal books into the Old Testament:

1. The Wisdom of Solomon (c. 30 BC)
2. Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) (c. 132 BC)
3. Tobit (c. 200 BC)
4. Judith (c. 150 BC)
5. 1 Maccabees (c. 110 BC)
6. 2 Maccabees (c. 110–70 BC)
7. Baruch (c. 150–50 BC)
8. Addition to Esther (140–130 BC)
9. Prayer of Azariah (second or first century BC) (included in Roman Catholic Bibles as Daniel 3:24-90)
10. Susanna (second or first century BC) (included in Roman Catholic Bibles as Daniel 13)
11. Bel and the Dragon (c. 100 BC) (included in Roman Catholic Bibles as Daniel 14)

The other three Apocryphal books are

1. The Prayer of Manasses
2. 1 Esdras
3. 2 Esdras

Jews and Protestants, however, have rejected the Apocrypha because 1) It does not claim to be inspired by God; 2) it was not written by prophets of God (1 Maccabees 9:27); 3) it was not confirmed by supernatural acts of God (Hebrews 2:3-4); 4) it does not always tell the truth of God—for example, it supports praying for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:46) and working for salvation (Tobit 12:9); 5) it was not accepted by the people of God (Judaism); 6) it was not accepted by Jesus, the Son of God (Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 24:27), who never once cited it; 7) it was not accepted by the apostles of God (who did not ever quote it); 8) it was not accepted by the early church of God;\* 9) it was rejected by the great Catholic translator of the Word of God (Jerome); 10) it was not

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\* Most early Church Fathers rejected the Apocrypha. Of the few who cited it, Roger Beckwith, authority on the Old Testament canon, noted that “when one examines the passages in the early Fathers which are supposed to establish the canonicity of the Apocrypha, one finds that some of them are taken from the alternative Greek text of Ezra (1 Esdras) or from additions or appendices to Daniel, Jeremiah or some other canonical book, which...are not really relevant; that others of them are not quotations from the Apocrypha at all; and that, of those which are, many do not give any indication that the book is regarded as Scripture” (Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2008], 387).

written during the period of the Old Testament prophets of God. According to Jewish teaching, the line of Jewish Old Testament prophets ended by 400 BC; the Apocrypha was written starting in 200 BC. Josephus declared, "From Artaxerxes [fourth century BC] until our time everything has been recorded, but has not been deemed worthy of like credit with what preceded, because the exact succession of the prophets ceased."<sup>5</sup> The Jewish Talmud adds, "With the death of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi the latter prophets, the Holy Spirit ceased out of Israel."<sup>6</sup>

In spite of all this evidence, the Roman Catholic Church officially and infallibly added these books to their Old Testament in AD 1546. But Protestants point out that this canonization was unfounded because it was done 1) by the wrong group (Christians, not Jews); 2) at the wrong time (about 1,700 years late!); 3) on the wrong basis (on the authority of the *Church*, not on the authority of *God* (for example, through a prophet of God); and 4) for the wrong reason: to help the Roman Church defend its dogma (such as prayers for the dead) against Protestants. For example, the Church accepted 2 Maccabees, which supports praying for the dead: "It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins" (2 Maccabees 12:45[46]). But it rejected 2[4] Esdras, which was against it: "Just as a father does not send his son...to be ill or sleep or eat or be healed in his stead, so no one shall ever pray for another on that day ["when they shall be separated from their mortal body"—verse 88]" (2[4] Esdras 7:105).

### **The New Testament Authors' Reverence for the Old Testament Canon**

The inspiration of the Old Testament as a whole is evidenced by the way the New Testament authors used the Old Testament Scriptures. Scholars have noted that the amount of Old Testament quotations found making up the New Testament is from about 4 percent to 10 percent. The percentage depends on whether one includes allusions and parallel references to the Hebrew texts as well as direct, word-for-word quotations. It is without doubt that the New Testament authors viewed the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative and divinely inspired. The writings of these authors are never in conflict with what the Old Testament says; rather, they complement and reveal the fulfillment of the Hebrew text by clarifying to us its application and original intent. Jesus displays a great example of this in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-43). Here He explicitly tells His disciples that He has come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it; He applies the Hebrew Scriptures in a deeper and broader way than had been done previously.

The New Testament authors held the Hebrew Bible in very high reverence down to the letter, basing whole arguments on a single word\*—and in some cases the grammatical form of a single word, as in Galatians 3:16. Even the formulas used by the authors when introducing direct quotes from the Old Testament give insight into their view of the Scriptures. These formulas reflect a strong belief in the canonicity and binding nature of the words uttered in the Old Testament. Statements such as "It is written..."

\* See Matthew 2:15; 4:10; 13:35; 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 4:8; 20:42-43; John 8:17; 10:34; 19:37; Acts 23:5; Romans 4:3,9,23; 15:9-12; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Galatians 3:8,10,13; Hebrews 1:7; 2:12; 3:13; 4:7; 12:26.

assume the authority, finality, binding nature, and eternity of the Scriptures.\* This phrase is used more than 90 times in the New Testament and is often placed by the author in the Greek perfect tense (which indicates a completed *past* action with abiding results in the *present*), meaning the Scripture was completely written in the *past* and continues in the *present* to be the binding, written Word of God, thus referring to its eternal nature. In other words, there will never be a time when the Scriptures will not be the Word of God.

To reinforce this point, the formulas used in the New Testament also convey the conviction of the writers that the Hebrew Scriptures were indeed applicable to their contemporary audiences. That is to say, the Scriptures of the Old Testament possessed eternal contemporaneity. In regard to quotations or references, the New Testament uses present-tense verbs such as “He says” as opposed to “He said”; it directs the force of these passages squarely upon the readers by using pronouns such as “we” and “you,” as opposed to other pronouns such as “them.”† The apostle Paul echoes this view in Romans 15:4, when he states that what was written in the Old Testament Scriptures was written for our learning and example (see also 1 Corinthians 10:6).

### *The Stamp of Authority*

The New Testament authors also show reverence for the Old Testament Scriptures by using interchangeable language describing what the Scripture says and what God says. Their formulas usually are seen in phrases such as “the Scripture says...” or “God [or “the Spirit”] says...” For example, God instructs Moses to speak to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD the God of the Hebrews...” (Exodus 9:13,16 NKJV), but in Romans 9:17 Paul writes of the same passage and says, “The Scripture says to Pharaoh...” Other examples of such interchangeable language are found in Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:4-5; Psalm 2:1 and Acts 4:24-25; and Isaiah 55:3 and Acts 13:34). The equating of Scripture’s speaking with God’s speaking shows the utmost regard for the Scriptures as being God-breathed, thus revealing the very mind of God Himself. With this said, it is important to note that Jews would make an ontological distinction between God and His Word. Jews would find it highly inappropriate to worship the Scripture as God since they are not equals, and this would certainly be considered a form of idolatry known as “bibliolatry.” The Scriptures, though inerrant, infallible, and authoritative, are an expression of God’s voice to reveal Himself (John 5:39), give us examples (1 Corinthians 10:6), sanctify His church (John 17:17), and to thoroughly equip and instruct the people of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Their prolific use of the Old Testament demonstrates that the New Testament authors revered the Scriptures as the highest written authority among mankind. These writers employed the Old Testament texts in a variety of different ways, using them in their sermons, prayers, and historical accounts; when addressing Jews and Gentiles; in churches for exhortation as well as rebuke.

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\* See John 7:38,42; 15:25; 19:37; Romans 4:3; 7:7; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; 1 Corinthians 14:24; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Galatians 3:8; 4:30; 1 Timothy 5:18; James 2:23; 4:5.

† See Matthew 15:7; 22:31; Mark 7:6; 12:19; Acts 4:11; 13:47; Hebrews 10:15; 12:5.

We can conclude with no more significant example than Jesus Himself. When Satan tempted Him in the wilderness, He appealed to the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures to rebuke the tempter (Matthew 4:4,7,10). Jesus regularly referred to them in His ministry: when speaking to His opponents (John 5:39); quoting it in prayers; during His most intense times of suffering on the cross (Matthew 27:46); as well as in His resurrected glory (Luke 24:45-46). Down to the words (Matthew 22:43, see also 1 Corinthians 2:13), the tenses of the verbs (Matthew 22:32, see also Galatians 3:16), and the smallest parts of the words (Matthew 5:17-18), He unabashedly endorsed the divine authority of the Hebrew Old Testament Bible.