

THE FORMULATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

By

Abraham Philip, PhD

Stephen Olford Fellow of Expository Preaching

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The term “canon” is derived from the Greek *kanon*, which originally meant a “reed,” but later has been changed to mean a “rod” or a “bar.” It refers to a measuring stick used to draw a straight line or to measure distances. When applied to the context of the Scriptures, the word “canon” refers to the books in the Bible recognized as inspired and authoritative for faith and practice.

Contrary to what many think, the Hebrew canon was not created by an ecclesiastical body deciding by vote which books were authoritative and which were not. Even the famous rabbinic Council of Jamnia held in A.D. 90 was not convened to determine the canonicity of the Hebrew Scriptures; it was for defending and explaining why the books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament were already considered as authoritative for centuries. The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament were received (Latin: *recipimus*) as canonical over a period of several hundred years by the ancient Jews who submitted themselves to the instructions contained therein.

In the Old Testament of the English Protestant Bible, the books are listed in a different order compared to the Hebrew Scriptures (Tanakh). In the English Bible, they are listed topically under four groups: Law (Pentateuch), History, Poetry, and Prophets. In the Hebrew Bible, they are listed in a different order: Tora (Law), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Kethuvim (Writings). The exact reason for this difference in order is unknown. Though the canonical books of the Old Testament are the same in the English and the Hebrew Bible, their number varies between the two versions due to conflation of some books into one in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., 1 and 2 Samuel as one book; 1 and 2 Kings as one book; 1 and 2 Chronicles as one book; and the 12 minor prophets as one book). In addition, Chronicles is listed as the last book in the Hebrew version, but in the Protestant Bible, Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament.

The canonization of the Old Testament has been a long process extending over a period of nearly 1,000 years (1400–400 B.C.). However, it should be noted that the Israelites (Covenant people), at various stages in their history, received portions of the Old Testament as the inspired Word of God whenever they were revealed to them. The Bible teaches that when Moses and other prophets received specific instructions from God, they carefully wrote them down and passed them on to the Covenant people (Ex. 24:4; Deut. 27:2–3, 8; Isa. 8:1; Jer. 30:2; Ezek. 37:16). And the people received these instructions as canonical and authoritative on matters of faith and practice. For example, when Josiah (641–610 B.C.), king of Judah, discovered the law or Tora in the Temple, he was visibly moved with deep conviction and submitted himself to its authority because he received the law as the Word of God. The same goes for the oracles of the prophets given to the Israelites at various times in their history. The fact that the Covenant people of God received the oracles of God as canonical was no guarantee that they always obeyed the commandments or instructions of God.

Josephus (A.D. 37–95) recognized the tripartite division of the Old Testament (Law, Prophets, and Writings) and acknowledged that the Jews had only twenty-two books deemed sacred and canonical. He pointed to the internal consistency and inherent canonicity of the Old Testament as marks of its divine origin. He wrote, “We have not tens of thousands of books, discordant and conflicting, but

only twenty-two containing the record of all times, which have been justly believed to be divine.”¹ In his prologue to the book of Ecclesiasticus, Jesus ben Sirach around 130 B.C. affirmed that the Law, Prophets, and the Writings constituted the Hebrew canon. The apostle Peter attested that the Old Testament was inspired by God. He wrote: “For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). Jesus and the apostles had accepted the Torah, the prophetic oracles, and the writings as inspired by God (Matt. 12:39-41; Luke 11:51; 1 Cor. 9:9; 13-14). Milton Fishes noted:

There is only one consistent explanation of how we got the Old Testament—one that fully acknowledges all the data evident to any inquirer open to receive biblical and historical facts...when the findings are viewed against the biblical proclamation itself, they are seen to be completely adequate. They will reassure the Bible student that the Book he handles contains all the books (and only the books) divinely determined and that these will guide into truth and nurture in life and godliness.²

Divine inspiration is the first and foremost test for canonicity. The Bible says, “All Scripture is given by inspiration [God-breathed] and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). While some other religious scriptures may claim that they are inspired by God, they lack the unique signals of inspiration that the Christian Bible has such as accuracy and historicity of the narratives, fulfillment of prophesy following a considerable time gap, grand unity of God’s plan for saving mankind, and the power to penetrate the human heart to effect a life change. No wonder that the psalmist extols the virtues of God’s Word as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, saying it is “perfect reviving the soul...making the wise simple...rejoicing the heart...enlightening the eyes...more to be desired than gold” (Ps. 19:7–11).

It is generally accepted that the Tora or Pentateuch was substantially completed in its present form by the time of King David in 1000 B.C.³ The Prophets (former and latter prophets), and Writings were canonized during and after Exile (586–400 B.C.). Many Bible scholars believe that the Old Testament as we have it today was compiled during the Persian Period (500–400 B.C.). In fact, most Jews from fourth-century B.C. onwards concluded that God had ceased to communicate with them directly as He did through the prophets of old. “No word from God meant no *new* Word of God. Without prophets, there can be no scriptural revelation.”⁴

The oldest manuscript that we have of the Old Testament is the Masoretic Text (MT) called *Aleppo Codex*, dated to about A.D. 930. It is considered the most authoritative Hebrew manuscript. Unfortunately, it is incomplete because a third of the codex was allegedly burnt in a fire during the 1948 anti-Jewish war in Aleppo. The missing portion of the codex turned out to be the five books of Moses (Tora). Presently, the oldest complete MT manuscript of the Old Testament is *Codex Leningradensis*, dated to A.D. 1008. Both the *Aleppo Codex* and *Codex Leningradensis* are identical and are called the Asher texts because they represent the ben Asher tradition of the Masoretes. In addition to these Masoretic Texts, we have the Dead Sea Scrolls (200–100 B.C.), which contain portions of the Old Testament, including a complete text of the book of Isaiah. It should be noted, however, that reconstructing the dates and history of the formation of the Old Testament Canon

1. *Contra Apionem* 1.8

2. Milton Fisher, *The Canon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 391–392.

3. William Sanford Las Sor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 19.

4. Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 26.

continues to be challenging. One scholar wrote: “The gaps in our knowledge are so severe that all of us are driven to speculation and conjecture. Perhaps in our natural and important attempts to say something, we all pretend to know more than the available evidence gives us a right to know.”⁵

A word is in order regarding Apocryphal books and why they are not regarded as Scripture. Both the Tanakh and the Protestant Bible do not regard any of the fifteen or so Apocryphal books (e.g., 1 Esdras, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, Ecclesiasticus) or Pseudepigraphs as canonical. The term “Apocrypha” means “hidden ones.” It refers to the fact that these books were hidden at one point from common use because of the esoteric, mysterious, spurious, and heretical nature of their content. Ancient Jews had rejected the Apocrypha as Scripture because of many historical inaccuracies and teachings promoting lying, scheming, murder, and any means that justify the end. The Apocrypha is largely made of legendary stories and myths. Most noteworthy to Christians is the fact that Christ and the apostles never quoted from Apocrypha.⁶

The Pseudepigraphs (e.g., Testament of Abraham, Testament of Moses, Psalms of Solomon) are writings ascribed to fictitious authors or falsely attributed to persons of fame. They may be of Palestinian, Aramaic, or Greek origin and date between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. While the Protestant church rejects the Apocrypha as inspired Scripture, it recognizes its value in providing information and insights into the culture, life, thinking, and theology of the ancient Jews. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Churches, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Eastern, and Coptic Churches recognize many of these Apocryphal books as authoritative.

In conclusion, we can be confident that the Old Testament, as written in the original autographs and accurately reproduced in various manuscripts, is the immutable Word of God. Jesus Christ, who is the subject of the promises, rituals, and covenants given in the Old Testament, said, “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matt. 5:18). Indeed, He has fulfilled what was spoken of Him, for the Bible says, “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him [Jesus]. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory” (2 Cor. 1:29). *Soli Deo Gloria*

5 E. Kalin, “How Did the Canon Come to Us? A Response to the Leiman Hypothesis,” CTM4 (1977): 47–52. Quoted in Craig A. Evans and Emanuel Tov eds, *Exploring the Origins of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 88.

6. James Borland, *A General Introduction to the New Testament* (Lynchburg: University Book House, 1986), 64-67.