

The Canon of the Old Testament

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Introduction

Most people know that the Protestant Bible is actually a collection of 66 individual books, 39 in the OT and 27 in the NT. It is generally understood that the Bible was written by about 40 different men over a period of about 1600 years. But how did these books come to be collected as we have them today? This question brings us to a study of the canon.

The word canon comes from the Greek word *kanon*, which in turn is taken from the Hebrew word *kaneh*, meaning a reed or measuring stick. Later it came to refer to literature of acceptable standards, and then it came to mean the authoritative books accepted by a religious community.

The term actually occurs in 2 places in the NT and is translated in the King James Version as "rule" in both places. 2 Corinthians 10:13 says, "But we will not boast of things without our measure, but according to the measure of the rule which God hath distributed to us, a measure to reach even unto you." Paul further states in Galatians 6:16, "And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy."

Therefore, when we talk about the canon of the Bible, we are referring to that collection of books that has generally been accepted as being inspired of God and as the authoritative rule of God's people. This lesson will focus on the history of how the books of the OT came to be written and collected.

Categorizing the Books

Today we generally divide the 39 books of the OT into the following 5 divisions:

- The Books of the Law
- The Books of History
- The Books of Poetry
- The Major Prophets
- The Minor Prophets

However, the Jews themselves divided the OT collection of books into only 3 divisions:

- The Law
- The Prophets
- The Writings

The Law

The books of the Law contained the 5 books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. When these writings were completed they were accepted by Israel as divinely authoritative. Scripture itself teaches us concerning the process of inspiration and preservation of these books of the Law.

- Exodus 24:4 (Moses began to write down all the words of God)
- Exodus 40:20 (2 tablets placed in the ark of the covenant)
- Deuteronomy 31:9, 24-26 (Moses writes book of the law which is then placed beside the ark of the covenant)
- Deuteronomy 17:18-20 (kings would be required to make a copy of the law on a scroll and to read and observe it)

- Joshua 1:8 (maintains importance of the book of the law)
- 2 Kings 22 (Josiah finds the book of the law; acknowledges that it is the divinely authorized word of God)

The Prophets

Deuteronomy 18:18 clarifies that the words and writings given through Moses were not the only words to be accepted as inspired and authoritative. God stated that the words of the prophets were also to be accepted as the word of God. Throughout these books of the OT we find over and over again the statement that the prophets were proclaiming the word of God. Therefore it is easy to understand that these books would also be collected and accepted as part of the OT canon of scripture.

This division of scripture (as held by ancient Israel) contained altogether 21 books of our OT. First, there were the so-called Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings. Then there were the so-called Latter Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the 12 Minor Prophets (Hosea-Malachi).

The Writings

The 3rd division of scripture contained the 5 books of Poetry (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon) as well as these remaining 8 books: Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 & 2 Chronicles. These books were written by men who were inspired of God but nevertheless were not officially recognized as occupying the status of a prophet. There is no clear passage in the Bible that tells us who actually collected these books nor when such was done, but evidence makes it clear that these books of the third division were indeed recognized as part of the OT canon.

NT References to OT Canon

As far back as can be traced, we find the Jews holding to the 39 books of the OT as their authoritative canon. Most scholars state that the canon of the OT was complete and fixed by the time of the 1st century. Throughout the writings of the NT there are numerous references to the writings of the OT (these references to Scripture generally refer to the OT canon as a whole):

- "Scripture" (John 10:35; 19:36; 2 Peter 1:20)
- "Scriptures" (Matthew 22:29; Acts 18:24)
- "Holy scriptures" (Romans 1:2; 2 Timothy 3:15)
- "Law and prophets" (Matt 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; 24:44; Acts 13:15; 28:23)
- "Oracles of God" (Romans 3:2; Acts 7:38; Hebrews 5:12; 1 Peter 4:11)

Particular attention should be given to the statements made by Jesus Himself in regards to the OT scripture. His remarks indicate an acceptance of the OT as a whole and as unconditionally inspired by God:

- Matthew 5:17, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill."
- Matthew 7:12, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."
- Matthew 22:40, "[Love God and neighbor...] On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."
- Luke 16:16, "The law and the prophets were until John, since that time the kingdom of God is preached."
- Luke 16:29, Abraham said to the rich man in Hades concerning his five brothers, "They have Moses and the prophets...."

It is important to understand that a reference to the law and the prophets by Jesus or anyone in the NT does not necessarily exclude the 3rd division known as the writings. For all practical purposes, the phrase "law and the prophets" is a reference to the complete 39 books of the OT canon. Quotations and references from the 3rd division are found throughout the NT and are called "scripture" a total of 37 times.

Jesus makes this clear in several examples:

- John 10:31-36 (Jews were going to stone Him; He refers to OT by quoting Psalm 82:6 and then states that scripture cannot be broken.)
- Matthew 26:54 (He accepted being arrested so that the scriptures might be fulfilled, indicating His acceptance of numerous OT writings concerning the Messiah; all combined constituted "the scriptures.")
- Luke 24:44, "And He said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me." (The book of Psalms contains numerous Messianic references, so it seems natural that Jesus would refer to the 3rd division of Writings by simply saying "in the psalms.")

Finally, there are altogether about 700 quotations and references to the OT found throughout the NT. Out of the 39 books, citations from 31 are made, coming from all parts of the OT and from every division. Certainly there is every reason to have complete confidence that the 39 books we find in our OT today are the divinely inspired and authoritative word of God.

The Septuagint (LXX) and the Apocryphal Books

There is a notable difference between the Catholic Bible and the Protestant Bible. The Catholic Bible contains several books, as well as additional sections in other books, interspersed throughout the OT that are not found in the Protestant Bible. The Catholic Bible contains the 39 books of the Hebrew canon plus additional material known as apocryphal or deuterocanonical books (later or second canon). This material consists of seven additional books (Tobit, Judith, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch), as well as other additions to the canonical book of Esther and the canonical book of Daniel (The Prayer of Azariah, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon). Protestants (and some Catholics throughout time) refer to these books as the Apocrypha (books of doubtful authenticity).

These additional books are found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT. The original work was apparently done around 250-150 BC by approximately 70 different scholars, hence the name and the designation LXX. Since many of the Jews of that time (including the days of the early church) were Greek speaking (having given up their own language), the LXX came to be commonly used by them. Furthermore, since the early church was largely composed of converts among these Greek speaking Jews, the LXX continued to be the OT Scripture of the early church. It was thus commonly used by Jesus, the apostles, and their converts.

The Greek scholars did take numerous liberties in modifying the text while translating from the Hebrew to the Greek; it is, in fact, in many places, a rather free paraphrase. When NT writers quoted from OT writers, they generally quoted from the Greek translation. This explains the variations found between the quotes in the Greek NT and the original wording found in the Hebrew OT (from which modern translations are generally derived).

In *Historical and Geographical Background for the Development of the Two Old Testament Canons*, Paul Flanagan and Robert Schihl explain the differences between the Hebrew and Greek canons: "In Palestine, with the return of Ezra from exile (458 BC) and Nehemiah (445 BC), and the prophecy of Malachi (433 BC) there is established *biblical silence*--no further known divine revelation. . . There is *no biblical silence* in the Greek Septuagint: the Septuagint conveys the original text of some books (Wisdom, 2 Maccabees) and the basic canonical form of others, either in part (Esther, Daniel, Sirach) or as a whole (Tobit, Judith, Baruch, and 1 Maccabees). While the Septuagint was a collection of the books of the Old Testament and an attempt at a canon, it was *not a fixed canon* in the first century. It was a popular translation of scripture because Greek was the common language of the entire Mediterranean world by the time of the Apostolic Church."

In other words, the Hebrew canon stops at Malachi and contains only the same 39 books that most Bibles contain today. The Greek LXX, however, adds several more books that were written during the time of "biblical silence" that were apparently not accepted as inspired by the Jews of that time. Since the LXX was being used to prove Jesus as the Messiah, those Jews who did not convert to Christianity ceased their use of it around the end of the 1st century. Perhaps in further opposition to such, they met in A.D. 90 to confirm the long-accepted canon of 39 books.

The Catholic Church takes the position that, since the LXX was largely the Bible of the early church, all its contents ought to thus be considered as canonical. It is not possible, however, to determine with certainty the exact contents of the LXX. Zondervan's Bible Dictionary says: "Little is certainly known about it, for our information is frequently based on ancient traditions of doubtful authenticity, and scholars are divided in their judgments both concerning its origin and its usefulness in textual criticism" (p. 770). Furthermore, the Catholic Encyclopedia – Canon of the Old Testament admits: "The oldest extant copies date from the fourth and fifth centuries of our era, and were therefore made by Christian hands." In other words, there are no copies of the LXX of any period close to the time it originated, and thus there are no absolute means of verifying its original contents. Some scholars argue that, lacking any contrary evidence of that time period, the original LXX was identical to the Hebrew canon of 39 books. Some even go so far as to suggest that the original LXX never contained more than the Pentateuch and that the rest of the OT books were added by Christians at a later time.

Finally, it is acknowledged that the apocryphal books do provide some historical information regarding that time, but Protestant scholars (as did numerous Catholic scholars throughout history) believe that the inclusion of them in the Biblical canon is inappropriate as there is not sufficient evidence of inspiration.

Allow one example of such inferiority to be given from the end of 2 Maccabees (from which is found a passage that Catholics use to support their doctrine of Purgatory): "Author's Apology. Since Nicanor's doings ended in this way, with the city remaining in possession of the Hebrews from that time on, I will bring my own story to an end here too. If it is well written and to the point, that is what I wanted; if it is poorly done and mediocre, that is the best I could do. Just as it is harmful to drink wine alone or water alone, whereas mixing wine with water makes a more pleasant drink that increases delight, so a skillfully composed story delights the ears of those who read the work. Let this, then, be the end" (15:37-39). It is obvious that the writer claims to simply be writing a story; he claims no inspiration from God and sounds nothing like any inspired writer of Scripture.