

Old Testament Canon

Recently a supposed religious authority declared that the Bible was just a book assembled by the Catholic Church. That was an extremely ignorant perspective.

How did we get the books of the Old Testament? Did they fall from the sky as the Bible? Did one man assemble them or did one church decide? The Bible is quite a unique book in that about 40 writers over 1600 years wrote a consistent theme that agrees with the writers that came before and after them.

So when was the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible decided upon? What we currently use as the Old Testament and what was the Bible to Jesus was settled about 400 years previous to the birth of Christ and not hundreds of years afterwards.

The Hebrews separated the Old Testament into three sections: the law, the prophets and the writings. They didn't always agree as to what books belonged in each section but the same terminology is still used today. While we state them as 39 books, they have been divided differently at various times and Josephus lists 22 books but they included all 39 books that we use and do not include books we do not. This is not because there were no other books. There were many other books including the ones listed as the Apocrypha.

How these books were accepted is explained in the Old Testament, which is a better source than a group of men.

"And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord." Exodus 24:4

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments." Exodus 34:27-28

Deuteronomy 31

Verse 9 "So Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel."

Verse 24 "So it was, when Moses had completed writing the words of this law in a book"

Moses wrote the law of Israel, the history of the world until that time as it applied to Israel and even the geography of the wilderness wanderings of Israel. These writings are called the law, the law of Moses and the law of God.

These books were handed down as the law through the priests and the kings as per the command in the law.

Deuteronomy 17:18-19 "Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes"

You can find the records pertaining to this in:

Joshua 8:31-35 he read the books of Moses to the people

Judges 3:4 "commandments of Moses"

1Kings 2:3 David gives a copy of the law to his son Solomon

2Kings 14:6,18:6,21:8,23:25

2Chronicles 17:9,23:18, 25:4

Psalms 119 is a tribute to the law with 171 of 176 verses containing a direct reference to the law.

There are dozens of references from the Prophets and a few examples are: *Ezekiel 7:26, Daniel 9:11,13, Ezra 6:18, Nehemiah 8:1, Isaiah 8:20, Jeremiah 8:8.* Amos, Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai and Zechariah also refer to the law.

Malachi wrote in 4:4 *"Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, With the statutes and judgments."*

What does all this mean? It means that throughout the history of Israel the first five books of the Bible were

accepted as the Words of God.

What about the section called the Prophets? *Jeremiah 30:1-2*

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, "Thus speaks the Lord God of Israel, saying: 'Write in a book for yourself all the words that I have spoken to you. For behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord, 'that I will bring back from captivity My people Israel and Judah,' says the Lord. 'And I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it.'"

The prophets were told more than once as shown here, to write down the words of God, not just for their time, for future reference too.

The prophets also recognized the other prophets and their words as if from God.

Jeremiah 28:8,

Jeremiah 26:18 refers to Micah 3:12

Ezekiel 38:17 refers to Isaiah

Daniel 9:2 refers to Jeremiah 25:11-12

Zechariah also refers to Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

In Zechariah 1:5-6 *"Your fathers, where are they?*

And the prophets, do they live forever?

Yet surely My words and My statutes,

Which I commanded My servants the prophets,

Did they not overtake your fathers?

This passage demonstrates, that even though the prophets and their audience died, the Words of God live on through their writings and are eternal. In this way the test of authority is for someone to be recognized as a prophet of God, as Moses was.

How about the writings then?

Jesus referred to the entirety of the Old Testament as Moses and the Prophets in *Luke 16:29 and 31*. Although he puts the Psalms as part of this in *Luke 24:44*. Jesus quoted from *Psalms 78:2* in *Matthew 13:35* and says that it came from the prophet. Jesus wasn't wrong because the term prophet was used to describe someone who represents the Word of God whether they foretell the future or not. In that way Ezra, Nehemiah, David, Solomon, the writers of Judges, Ruth, Job and Chronicles can be described as writings from prophets.

When Jesus claimed not one dot or smallest letter will disappear from the law he meant all of what we call the Hebrew scriptures.

The New Testament writers quote 250 times from the Old Testament scriptures and allude to them about 1000 times. In total they refer to 34 of 39 books as authoritative. The other five are just not mentioned.

Jewish historian Josephus, who lived shortly after Christ, referred to our Old Testament as being authoritative. He listed 12 prophets as one book called the Book of the Twelve. This different grouping is how you get a different number, not a different content though. He contrasted the Jewish scriptures as being different from Greek writings in that they didn't add to them or take away from them. For Josephus and the Jews the prophets came to an end with Zechariah and Malachi and God ceased to provide more revelation through scripture.

The Babylonian Talmud, a collection of Jewish teachings in the centuries after Josephus, contains, "After the latter prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel." It is accepted that Ezra and Nehemiah gathered all the accepted books together when revelation ceased amongst Israel.

Philo, a Jewish philosopher from Alexandria quoted 2000 times from the Old Testament, mostly from the Books of Moses. The Dead Sea scrolls quote from the Law, the Prophets and the Writings.

The difference from Jews to Samaritans in those days is that the Samaritans only accepted the books of Moses as scripture, while the Jews, including Jesus, accepted all of what we see as the Old Testament.

The Old Testament Scriptures were written by Moses and the Prophets with nothing to be added or deleted. This was the view of Jesus, the New Testament writers, their contemporaries, and the Old Testament writers themselves. Each part was immediately accepted as scripture and this ended before 400BC with the end of the prophets.

The canon of the Old Testament wasn't slowly accepted over centuries by catholic bishops but by Israel immediately over the years. There were minor sects that accepted other writings but Israel as a whole and the other writers of the scriptures did not.

What about the Apocrypha written during the 400 years after Malachi until the time of Christ?

We do not accept that as part of the Old Testament Word of God for the following reasons:

1. Jewish Council of Jamnia held after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 100 rejected the Apocrypha as scripture
2. Jesus and the Apostles never once refer to the authority of the Apocrypha although other writings were quoted. (Jude quotes Enoch and Paul quotes Greek Poets)
3. The Apocrypha writers never once claim they are writing the Words of God, unlike the hundreds of times this is claimed by the prophets. The Writer of Maccabees acknowledges this by writing, "There was a great affliction in Israel, unlike anything since the time a prophet had ceased to be among them."
4. Josephus and the Talmud are quite clear they were never accepted as inspired Jewish scripture.
5. Parts of the Apocrypha contain errors and contradictions.
6. Melito set out in AD170 to ascertain what was truly considered the Word of God and determined the Apocrypha was not, as did most of the early church fathers until the fourth century.
7. There is little of spiritual value to be found in the Apocrypha.

Some of the Apocrypha does provide some historical context during those 400 years before Jesus but this in and of itself is no reason to accept it as scripture.

What about the fact that the earliest Hebrew text of the Old Testament we have is 900AD and is probably so distorted and inaccurate from so many copies occurring over the years. That is a claim that some foolishly make. One group that makes such a claim is the Muslims. They do this because Muhammad claimed he was spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures. One can easily see that he was not. Therefore they claim that over the years the Scriptures were changed by copyists in order to leave Muhammad out. This all sounds plausible on the face of it but the facts prove otherwise.

The fact is we have the Greek Septuagint version to compare to the Masoretic text to determine how accurate the oldest Hebrew version is. In addition we have uncovered: the Dead Sea Scrolls which includes the Book of Isaiah from 150BC that is incredibly accurate with the Masoretic text written over a 1000 years later, the Samaritan version that comes from a totally different family than the Masoretic text is also quite similar. These earlier versions are before Muhammad existed so how did anyone know to remove the scriptures in advance? In addition, there are many versions of the text in other languages that have been found over the years. What we can conclude is that the copyists were extremely concerned with accurateness or fidelity.

While this is a short and simple explanation it should be noted that with great detail you would prove the same things. That history, Jesus, the writings themselves, the Apostles and the Jewish contemporaries all confirm the Old Testament Scriptures. The authority of the Old Testament should not be in doubt by any Christian.

2 Timothy 3:14-17

"But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

It is not just the Word of God. It is the Word of God that we must conform to for our good and our growth.

May God bless you as you read His Word, the Holy Bible.