

## **STUDY ON THE BIBLE**

### **Session 2 - The Old Testament**

In this session we are going to examine how the Old Testament came into being. The challenge is that the Israelites did not write anything down as to the process of how what we call the Old Testament came about. If they did, it didn't survive. Thus, we are going to have to do a lot of detective work. Our problem is that the Old Testament was written over about a 1,000 year period of time and by no less than 27 authors but probably closer to 32 authors during this period of Hebrew history.

Before we get started, we need to cover a few definitions.

1. Testament - this word means covenant. A covenant is an agreement made between two parties where one of the parties is superior to the other. God, who is clearly superior to all mankind, only relates to humans through covenants. Though there are many covenants in the Bible described to us (such as the covenant God made with man but specifically with Noah after he flooded the earth and set up the rainbow as the sign of that covenant) there are two major covenants that directly impact how God will relate to human beings.

a. The first covenant is the Old Covenant (or testament). It is often called "the Law". It was made between God and man through the agency of Moses at Mt. Sinai. The first five books of the Old Testament were written by Moses and they lead up to the covenant of the Law being made. Then in history, God kept His promises by securing the Promised Land for His people (Joshua). The prophets all were the covenant enforcers pointing the people and rulers back to God when they strayed from their faith in Him.

b. The second covenant made is the New Covenant (or testament). It is referred to as the covenant of grace. It was inaugurated when Jesus Christ died on the cross and then rose from the dead, thus fulfilling the Old Covenant and making it obsolete. This is the covenant that several authors (prophets) in the Old Testament pointed to as the covenant that God desired to have with His people and would someday replace the Law. Rather than external rules and rituals, grace is receiving the gift of God's Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ and thus becoming a partaker of God's eternal life.

Just keep in mind that when the word "covenant" or "testament" is used it is meant to express one of these ways in which God deals with His people. In this session as we are discussing the Old Testament, we are speaking of the old covenant.

2. Canon - This word is never used in Scripture. However, it's root word is used in several places in the Old Testament (such as I Kings 14:15, Job 40:21) and it means "reed" or "stalk". It refers to a measuring rod or ruler. The measuring rod was pulled out and the books were examined in relation to this "rod" and those that rose to the level of the top of the rod (metaphorically) were considered divinely inspired and those that didn't weren't included.

It was first used as a theological term for the collection of divinely inspired books by Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria in his Easter letter of 367 A.D. where he outlined the contents of books of the New Testament.

When applied to the Bible, it refers to the individual books of the Bible that are held to be divinely inspired and recognized as the Word of God. Thus, the canon is a collection of books

deemed to be supremely authoritative for faith and religious practice by the community of faith (such as with the Old Testament - the Hebrew community). These books later became the standard by which later books of Hebrew history, tradition and religious teaching were evaluated. (Remember, the Old Testament was written over a millennium of time so there had to be a way to evaluate the later as to their canon-worthiness.)

3. Variant - As we'll see the Old Testament was copied thousands of times in many different languages. A variant represents an error in the hand-copying process of a book. They could be caused by someone's sight being poor, their hearing of another's dictating the book off, trying to copy a previous copy where the scribe had bad handwriting, it could be poor judgment as to what a mark on the former copy was, or just remembered a portion being copied wrong.

Whatever the case of the variant, this leads to manuscript to a process called "lower Biblical criticism". This process sorts through the thousands of Old Testament copies of a manuscript or book and tries to arrive at what the original text would be. By examining enough of the variants and realizing which manuscripts are older than others, it is possible to get closer to the original version.

4. Masoretic Text (MT) This is the traditional Jewish text of the Hebrew Bible.

5. Septuagint (LXX or seventy) - The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. After the exile, there were many Jews who were scattered throughout the world who did not return to Israel after the exile. The world's universal language from around 331 B.C. (when Alexander the Great founded Alexandria in Egypt) was Greek. It wasn't long after Alexander the Great died and the area of Judea (Palestine) formed part of the kingdom of the Ptolemies. As Alexandria was the capitol of the Ptolemy's kingdom and it spoke Greek, the Jews started giving up the use of their ancestral language and started adopting Greek as their main language. By around 250 B.C. the Law became available in Greek. This was important as it contained the laws for Jewish worship. This was called the Septuagint because it was the work of 72 elders from Israel who came to Alexandria for the task of translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Though it's hard to determine a specific date, it was not long before the entire Hebrew Bible had been translated in Greek. In fact, it was this version that was spread rapidly throughout the known world to Greek-speaking Jewish communities.

There are two reasons that the Septuagint is important historically. 1) It became the pre-Christian Greek version of the whole Old Testament. In fact, most of the ancient manuscripts of the Septuagint we now have were written by early Christians. This was the Bible of the primitive church. 2) The Septuagint reveals to us the Hebrew canon. There are no books of the Apocrypha in it. There are no outside or more recent works included in the Septuagint. While the books are in a different order, they are the same books as found in the traditional Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Bible was written, in its earliest texts, contained three languages. First and by far the most used language was Hebrew. There are also some sections written in Aramaic which is a language that came from Syria north of Israel and eventually became the more common language used by the Jews. Aramaic is very similar to Hebrew. The only other language found in the earliest manuscripts are scant passages in Daniel which were written in Chaldean, which was the language of Babylon. Since Daniel spent most of his life in Babylon,

it's not surprising that portions of his book were written in this language. Just keep in mind that by far the most prevalent language used in the Hebrew Bible was Hebrew.

So how did the Old Testament come about? How did the books of the Old Testament come to be recognized as holy scripture?

Here's the overview of the process as we can come to know it from looking back on it. Over the course of Hebrew history, the Holy Spirit guided the Hebrew religious leaders to make choices that resulted in the canon. What we do know is that the Hebrew canon was in the final shape it would remain in for Hebrew speaking world before Jesus' ministry. In fact, there are several sources of ancient literature that mention a three-fold division of the Old Testament around 200 B.C. (A couple of these books are Ecclesiasticus and The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach.) These sources list divisions in the Old Testament as being the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (Psalms).

**[Luke 24:44-49]**

Q: What is the three-fold division of the Old Testament that Jesus mentions in this passage (*v.44 - the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms*)

The Law of Moses is the first five books which the Jews refer to as the Torah and what Gentile believers have referred to as the Pentateuch (which means five books in Greek). These are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. When you open the Old Testament, these are the first five books listed as they were known to be written by Moses, the prophet who received the Law directly from God, and since they were written to describe history, they are in the order in which the history flows.

The Prophets are not exactly those books we would call "prophets" but encompass many of the books we would just call history. The prophets were divided into two categories: the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. There were four Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings. There were four Latter Prophets and they were: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the book of the Twelve (what we'd call the Minor Prophets).

The third division in the Old Testament was called the Writings. It contains 11 books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, then a group of five books called "The Scrolls" which contain the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther. Then there was Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (counted as one book) and then Chronicles at the end.

So the total number of books in the Hebrew Bible, as they had the organized was 24. Today, our Bible has 39 books in the Old Testament. These are the same books it's just that we split them up differently. To get the additional fifteen books, split Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles each into two books. Then split Ezra-Nehemiah into two books. Then take the book of The Twelve and make them all separate books.

While this is never codified anywhere, the following appears to be the manner in which books were considered authoritative and thus were included in the canon.

1. The text had to be divinely inspired. It could not be the Word of God if it had a source or

author that was not God Himself.

a. The leaders of the Jewish religious community recognized a text's authority through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. [**Numbers 11:16-17, 24-30**] Notice the Spirit's presence upon the leadership of Israel.

b. Those who were anointed as leaders by the Holy Spirit would speak the truth and the words they spoke would be fulfilled.

1) [**Jeremiah 28: 7-9**] - If a prophet's word came to pass then that prophet was one the Lord had sent and spoke the Lord's message. So some of the books were tested by history to be included as inspired as they were written before the events but came to pass.

2) At one point in Jewish history, just before the Babylonian sack of Judah, many of the Jews got the idea to make a run for Egypt. In the distant past, Egypt had been a safe haven for the Jews (though they were forgetting that the Egyptians enslaved them). God didn't want them to run to Egypt but rather repent and turn to Him. So He issued the following word for those Jews who decided to run to Egypt to escape their rightful judgement for their sin.

[**Jeremiah 44:26-30**] Again, this prophesy was spoken before the historical event and thus after it happened, it proved that Jeremiah was speaking through the Lord's direction and thus, his book would be confirmed as canonical.

c. To give a sense of how this worked, even in the ancient times, Daniel prophesied in the years during the exile. He and many other Hebrew youth were taken to Babylon to serve the king there. The belief of certain books being Scripture or God's Word was something Daniel understood. [**Daniel 9:1-2**] Daniel was searching to find the number of years of the captivity and knew to look in Jeremiah as he knew it to be an inspired work.

All the books that were to be included in the Hebrew Bible needed to first be considered divinely inspired. As mentioned in the examples, many were proven to be inspired in that what they book said came to pass - in some cases centuries later.

## 2. Authorship was a factor in recognizing a book as part of the canon or not.

a. Most of the authors of the Old Testament were men in divinely appointed positions of leadership or offices. They were lawgivers, kings, priests, prophets, or judges. These were offices that God has ordained as part of the administration of His people and thus, could be ones, when faithful to God, to be considered possible to receive divine revelation.

b. Take Moses for example. He was the first leader of Israel and a prophet. [**Exodus 33:11**] He spoke to God face-to-face like one speaks to a friend. He received God's words and faithfully wrote them down. No one doubted Moses' words because they always got backed up with actions from God. While Moses was not present for the creation of the world, God revealed to him how it happened and thus, the account of creation in Genesis is part of the canon.

3. The contents of the books were examined for internal consistency. The themes, the teachings, the message all needed to be consistent with the other records and accounts in the other books which were considered to be divinely inspired. God is a God of order. He cannot contradict Himself so if a book were truly God's Word, then it would be consistent with the other books known to be inspired.

4. The books were actually used by the Hebrew community. The books that the Hebrew people actually studied, copied, read and obeyed were those who came to be recognized as canon.

Notice that this was the last test that seems to be used. If a book was not often read or used, it was not copied or taught and thus fell out of use. If a book was not consistent with the other books, it wouldn't have a chance of making it into the canon. Remember, this was a very long process - probably close to 1,000 years. There were books that were used extensively and others who were not used and over time showed themselves to be non-inspired. In terms of what we were saying last week, some books were not timeless.

### How do we know that the books we have in our Old Testament are actually the books the Hebrews considered divinely inspired?

As mentioned before, by the time Jesus' ministry was taking place (around 30 A.D.) the Old Testament canon had been established and set. The first proof of this is that in 70 A.D. the Romans leveled Jerusalem, wiping out the Temple. This led to a meeting of Jewish rabbis in a city in western Judea called Jamnia. Under the leadership of Yohanan ben Zakkai, these rabbis addressed several issues at this meeting. The most important was how to reconstruct Jewish religious life after the destruction of the Temple and the nation of Israel. One of the things they discussed was the holy Scriptures and they introduced no new innovations or books to the existing canon. While this was not a council or synod on the Bible they did discuss the books which "defiled the hands" and those which did not. A book which "defiled the hands" was the technical name for an inspired book because if you touched or handled this book, you had to wash your hands afterwards as not to impart the rigors of ceremonial holiness to those people and items you came in contact with afterwards.

In this discussion, there were several books whose inspiration was questioned. Ecclesiastes was questioned as it appeared less orthodox than the book of wisdom by Jeshua ben Sira called Ecclesiasticus. Also, Esther and the Song of Solomon didn't even mention the name of God and so seemed to be non-religious texts. Ezekiel seemed to contradict Moses at certain points. Yet in the end, the rabbis through their debates and studies came to the conclusion to hold fast to the original 24 books of their canon and reject the rest. Thus this is the first historical proof of the existence of the full Hebrew canon and since it had been circulating long enough for the Septuagint to be translated 250 years earlier, we know that the canon was around for centuries before this time.

The second major proof of the Hebrew canon came lately, in terms of archeological proof. These are the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Qumran scrolls. In 1947 three Bedouin shepherds came upon what is now called Cave 1 which is on the western bank of the northern shore of the Dead Sea, in modern Jordan. One of the shepherds entered the cave and fell down into a hole. At the bottom of where he landed were seven clay jars each containing a parchment manuscript. They had no idea where they found and eventually found a seller for one of the manuscripts who paid \$28 for it. In time, the find caught the attention of some American scholars and archeologists and they began searching the caves after interviewing the shepherds. Over the next ten years, over 500 manuscripts were found in 17 different caves. About 100 of these scrolls were copies of the Hebrew Bible. A few of these copies were actually and incredibly fairly complete though most were fragmentary. With the exception of Esther, all the books of the Hebrew Old Testament were found in Dead Sea Scrolls.

The inhabitants of the Qumran community were the third sect of Jews called the Essenes (apart from the Pharisees and Saducees). To put it in modern terms, the Essenes were the strictest and most rigorous of the branches of Judaism. They were very fundamental and lived in what

we'd call communes - in communal life. They were men who were celibate and adhered to the most strict interpretation of the Jewish Law. The men who lived at the Qumran community did not specify which of the scrolls ranked as holy scripture and which did not. There were many commentaries found in the scrolls which highlight the community's distinctive beliefs and principles of interpretation. But the Dead Sea Scrolls also included copies of the books of Tobit, Jubilees and Enoch. The Catholic church later considered these books to be canonical yet we cannot determine if the Essenes did or didn't as they either didn't make a list of the books they considered canon or that list didn't survive. Yet, as one reads through the Scrolls found, it becomes more evident which books they considered canonical by which they quoted the most often over the two or three centuries of their existence. By the time of the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., there was considerable agreement between the three major sects of Judaism concerning the canon. (However, what is interesting is that the Sadducees which did not believe in angels or the resurrection, did not include Daniel in their canon as it speaks most plainly and often of angels and the resurrection.)

So then by these two historical facts, we can know that the Hebrew canon consisted of the 24 books that are currently contained within what we call the Old Testament. We also know this by the way Jesus appealed to Scripture as the basis for His statements and arguments against the religious leaders of His day. **[Matthew 12:1-7]** - "... have you not read..." The canon was certainly closed a few centuries before this and was generally agreed upon by the time Jesus confronted the Pharisees.

In addition to these historical facts, we also can learn something of the time of the canon's acceptance as divine revelation by the order of the Hebrew Bible. The first five books, the Pentateuch, are arranged chronologically. It is logical for Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings to come immediately after the Pentateuch as they come next in the history of Israel. Then there are the prophets which are set in sort-of chronological order but also making those which are longer come before those which are shorter in length. The writings don't really follow any order other than the Psalms usually comes first. Ezra and Nehemiah are placed towards the end as they take place after the return from the exile. But then there is the mystery. Why is Chronicles placed at the end of the Hebrew Bible? It is a book detailing the history of the kingdom of Israel in a rather round-about manner. Why isn't it listed among Samuel and Kings? It was written at a later date and was as a summation of the history of Israel from a priestly perspective. It was to give the reader a full picture and scope of the divine revelation as Chronicles begins with Adam and doesn't really start with history until the reign of Saul and his death but then ends with Cyrus allowing the Jews to return to Judea after the exile. In fact the Greek translation of the name for Chronicles means "things left over".

One other interesting point is that most of the early Hebrew Bibles are fairly consistent as to the order of the Law and Prophets, yet the section called "Writings" are not. The Writings tend to be in a different order in many of the most ancient copies of the Hebrew Bible.

Q: Does anyone have any idea why this was? *(The books were originally scrolls. Most of the books are historically arranged but the writings are separate and not based on any chronology. So these scrolls were randomly placed in a box along with all the other scrolls of "the Writings" and could be pulled out in any random order. Thus, it was just a matter of chance as to which Writings were placed first when the community organized their scrolls into a codex (book).*

There is one last set of questions we need to answer in order to fully understand how the Old Testament came into being. How were the books actually formed?

1) First there were authoritative utterances.

“Hear the word of the Lord” or “Thus says the Lord” - a person would receive a divine word and pass it along to those around him.

**[Isaiah 1:10]**

**[Ezekiel 5:5]**

2) These authoritative utterances were written down.

These utterances became formal documents. Sometimes the actual writing of the words of God down came nearly simultaneously with the utterance and other times it came much later. But since the words were of divine origin and the Holy Spirit was the One communicating the message, the written words were trustworthy and considered as reliable as the oral statements of God.

**[Exodus 24:3-4 & Joshua 1:8]** - The book Moses wrote down after receiving and proclaiming the utterance of the Lord became the book of the Law God spoke of in Joshua.

3. These documents based upon divine utterances were then collected.

Remember, this collection of books took around 1,000 years to come into what we know as the Hebrew Bible. Psalms alone represents about 500 years of writing based on the authors.

*(By the way, turn to Psalm 45 & Psalm 51 (and all the others with these small superscripts before v.1). Just before verse 1 you will see in small print a note. These notes are actually inspired from God. They are considered part of the canon. However, the larger editorial notes explaining giving the meaning of the Psalm are just man's work and different in each Bible.)*

Another interesting note is the some of the ancient sources quoted in the Hebrew canon have been lost to us. **[Numbers 21:14-15]**

Q: What is the book listed in that passage? *(The Book of the Wars of the Lord)*

**[Joshua 10:13]**

Q: What is the book listed in this passage? *(The Book of Jashar)*

We have no idea what these books contain as we have not found them. They are mentioned in Scripture but for whatever reason, the Lord did not deem them necessary to preserve for us. The thing is that even in that day and age when these books were written and available, they were not considered canon or they would have gone to great lengths to copy them for future generations.

The main point about collecting these scrolls and utterances and putting them into books

was for the sake of convenience and easy access. It's much easier to carry a book than 24 separate scrolls. What is important for our question of canonicity is that these books were seen as important enough to codify into book form. If they had not been important books, they would have not been copied and placed into books. The writings found in these collections deserved special attention.

#### 4. Sorting the written documents and fixing the canon.

Over the course of Hebrew history, the Holy Spirit guided Jewish religious leaders to make choices based on consensus that resulted in the canon. These men would have been the top religious leaders at the time who were capable of analyzing the texts and discerning which ones the Spirit was leading them to consider divine revelation.

What we do know is that by the time of Jesus, we are confident that the Hebrew canon had been set and that all the books (with the exception of Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon) were part of God's plan as Jesus Himself quotes them as Scripture. When Jesus and the early apostles appealed to Scripture to make their point, they appealed to an authority which was equally acknowledged by their opponents. The near unanimity means that this authority was widely accepted by diverse groups.

The Hebrew Bible became a brand new book. In the days of the early church, the early Christians used the Hebrew Bible as their own. However, as Christianity spread beyond the borders of Israel, the most common form of the Hebrew Bible, known simply as the Scriptures, was the Septuagint (the Greek translation). When Paul quoted Scripture while on his missionary journeys, it was the Septuagint he quoted. (Acts 17:2f) One author said that it was Greek Judaism with the Septuagint that ploughed the furrows for the gospel in the western world. However it was the Christian preachers who sowed the seed. And so thoroughly did the Christians appropriate the Septuagint as their version of the Scriptures that the Jews became increasingly disenchanted with it. One such rabbi compared the day that the seventy elders wrote the Law into Greek for the king to the day in which Israel made the golden calf. The reason for this Jewish disdain for the Septuagint was that Christians made the entire Hebrew Bible a book about a single person, Jesus.

#### **[Luke 24: 25-27]**

Christians saw the entirety of Scripture as a book about Jesus Christ. The divine revelation bore witness to Him in detail and they found the role of the Hebrew Bible was to further explain and bear witness to this fact. The early church preaching was marked by the appeal to the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture in the work of Jesus Christ.

#### **[Psalm 69:9]**

#### **[John 2:15-17]**

Q: What is happening in this verse? (*Jesus is cleansing the Temple - this is a quote from Psalm 69*)



## [Romans 15:1-4]

Q: What is taught in this verse about Christ? (*That He patiently endured the reproaches of others - again a quote from the same Psalm*)

Notice that the same verse is used to speak of Jesus in two different places with two different meanings in the New Testament. The front half of the verse was used in the John passage while Romans cited the last half of the verse. For the early church, they couldn't help see Jesus in the pages of the Scriptures. The early Christian found the Old Testament (whether the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint) to be a treasure map that led to the greatest treasure of all, Jesus Christ.

What is interesting is that the Jews had been reading the same material and recognizing it as divinely inspired for centuries yet lacked the key to a full interpretation of the texts. They lacked the Holy Spirit's insight and guidance. [Ephesians 3:1-5] The word mystery in the New Testament means something that was hidden about Christ in the Old Testament but is now made visible and revealed through the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of believers. One of the most extraordinary features of the early church was the sheer volume of people who converted to Christianity solely by reading the Old Testament and having it explained by a Christian. So, building upon last week, we see that the Scriptures are transforming lives, even the Old Testament when it is used to point to Jesus.

What is interesting is that Christians and Jews who used the exact same Scripture were unable to comprehend each other. Take for example when the Jew read the Law and it said that every male child was to be circumcised on the eighth day of life to be reckoned part of God's family. Yet Christians, to an increasing degree, who had been brought up to observe these ordinances (as the early church was completely Jewish) came to adopt a more relaxed atmosphere about these practices (including Sabbath worship and food regulations and seasonal ceremonial observances). The text had not changed but Christians' understanding of it had changed and some of this was even before Paul's ministry and constant strife with the Judaizers. The Jews saw the Christians as playing fast and free with the Scriptures while the Christians saw the Jews as missing the entire meaning of the Scriptures in Jesus Christ and His teaching, which was largely a reinterpretation of the Law. In short order, despite their shared heritage of a holy book, the two opposed traditions hardened against one another.

The important matter for our discussion is that by the time of the early church, the Hebrew canon had been fixed and was being used by the Jews in their worship as well as by Christians in theirs. As we'll see next week as we begin to look into the New Testament's formation, things get a bit more unsettled.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?