

ORIGINS OF THE BIBLE – LESSON 1

– The Old Testament Canon

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Introduction

I intend for our project to include a review of the origins of the Christian/Protestant Bible – hopefully hitting the “high spots” as much as possible, and staying out of the complicated “pot holes”. First we will deal exclusively with the Old Testament (or “OT”), which for me is an easier topic than the New Testament (or “NT”). After we become familiar with some of the terms, and are more comfortable with the confusing, difficult process entailed in developing our canons, we will “layer in” the very expansive and complex history of the origins of our New Testament – hopefully hitting “high spots” only.

Books of the Bible are listed differently in the canons of Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Greek Orthodox, Slavonic Orthodox, (take a breath), Georgian, Armenian Apostolic, Syriac, Ethiopian (take another breath), and many other established churches. I make no claim to be able to bring order to the chaos – and will not even try!

Why Have an Old and New “Testament” for Christians?

A “testament” is a covenant – or a treaty, using modern terminology. Old Testament is the name the first Christians gave the collection of Jewish holy books known as the Tanakh. We Christians consider it a covenant between God and the Jewish people. God promised the Hebrews land and safety in return for obedience and worship. The Old Testament tells the history of the Jewish people and of Israel. The covenant between God and the Israelites takes a central position having been first established after Noah survived the flood and extended several times – first with Abraham, and later with Moses in the Sinai.

Paul introduced the term “Old Testament” in his second letter to the Corinthians. The name “New Testament” is introduced in the gospel Matthew during the account of the

Last Supper. The OT is the foundation on which the NT rests. If Christians could have separated themselves from Judaism it would have been done long ago by rejecting the OT. But Christianity cannot do that and still have a foundation to the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. The prophecies of the coming of the Messiah are found in the Torah – and only there, as far as I know. The wonderful “marriage” of Christianity to Judaism is forever – and I am more than comfortable with that!

What is a “Canon”?

Most commonly, a canon describes writings which are officially accepted as scripture. They are considered authoritative in matters of faith and doctrine. These lists of writings, or canons, have been developed through debate and agreement by the religious authorities of those faiths. Believers consider these canonical books to be inspired by God, or to be an authoritative expression of the historical relationship between God and his people.

Although many canons are in agreement regarding most of the books of the Bible, there is variation regarding some books. Texts excluded from a particular canon are considered apocryphal; however, many disputed works considered “apocryphal” by some Churches are considered fully canonical by others. In the Hebrew canonic Bible there are significant separate manuscript traditions represented in the Septuagint, the Masoretic text, and the Dead Sea scrolls. And the “Samaritans” accept only their version of the Pentateuch as Scripture to this day – and the various differences don’t stop there.

There are differences between the Jewish and Christian OT canons, and between the canons of different Christian denominations. The differing criteria and processes of canonization dictate what the communities regard as the inspired books.

It seems that, quite logically, Christians have a method for determining canonicity that is more “developed” for the NT writings than for those of the OT. Many modern Protestants point to four criteria to justify the books that have been included in both the Old and New Testaments. These are:

- Apostolic Origin – from the first generation apostles or their close companions.
- Universal Acceptance – acknowledged by all major Christian communities in the ancient world up to the end of the fourth century.
- Liturgical Use – read publicly in gatherings of early Christians.
- Consistent Message – containing similar or complementary theological outlook when compared to other accepted Christian writings.

But I think this is too complex and overly analytical for our purpose. More simply, think of it this way: **Protestants hold to the Jewish canon for the Old Testament (the books are in a different order, and some books are combined into one for the Jewish canon). And Protestants adhere to the Catholic canon for the New Testament.**

A Brief Timeline (dates may be approximate)

1400 to 400 BC – This is accepted by many as the time the OT writers lived and worked. Early documents were written on leather or papyrus which had a very short “shelf life”, so time after time the manuscripts had to be meticulously copied. Generally, the exacting care and precision of the copying process was very dependable. (Another source attributes the writing to the period 1000 to 50 BC – so the timing is not unanimous.)

285 BC – The Hebrew Scriptures (Tanakh) were translated into Greek. The completed translation was known as the “Septuagint”. This version was very popular among the early Christians and other groups not familiar with the Hebrew language. This version ultimately included 46 books.

30 to 100 AD – Christians used the Septuagint as their Scriptures, which greatly upset the Jews.

95 AD – The historian Josephus identified the OT canon as the 39 books which would soon be canonized by the Jewish leadership.

100 AD – Jewish rabbis met at the Council of Jamnia and decided to include only 39 books in their canon since only those could be found in Hebrew (Was this an “in-your-face” response to the “upstart” Christians?).

400 AD – Saint Jerome translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin. This is known as the “Vulgate” (it does include the New Testament). Jerome wanted only the 39 books included in the Hebrew canon and would have referred to the other seven as the “Apocrypha” (or “hidden books”). But Pope Damasus wanted all 46 books included, so the official Vulgate includes all 46. The books of the Apocrypha at this point in history are: Tobit, Judith, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus), and Baruch. The Latin Vulgate remained the bible of the Christian Church until the 14th century AD.

1380 AD – An English theologian named John Wycliffe began a translation of the Bible into English. The project was completed by his friends after his death.

1456 AD – The Gutenberg Bible was printed. It was actually an edition of the Vulgate and was the first major work printed with movable type.

1525 to 1530 AD – William Tyndale, a scholar involved in the reform movement, translated the New Testament and the Pentateuch (the first five books of the OT) into English – He was martyred before he could complete the OT.

1536 AD – Martin Luther translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek to German. He assumed that, since Jews wrote the OT, theirs should be the correct canon. He put the extra 7 books in an appendix that he called the Apocrypha. Today many Protestants

explain the exclusion of these books as a response to the fact that they tend to support teachings peculiar to the Catholic Church.

1546 AD – The Catholic Council of Trent reaffirmed the canonicity of all 46 books (Was this an “in your face” reaction to the “upstart” Protestants?).

Up to Today – Now we have all sorts of history including: King James translation (dominant for 300 years); Aitken Bible (the first English Bible printed in America); the Revised Version, in the 1880s, using manuscripts previously unavailable; The American Standard Version; The New International Version; etc, etc. Regarding the OT Apocrypha, earlier I referred to the number as seven books, then I referred to 12 books, and I have seen a list of 14 OT apocryphal books, and we could find even more. But that is a discussion for another day (or two or three). I will only mention the following three books in addition to the 7 listed earlier: Prayer of Manasses, 1 Esdras (King James), and 2 Esdras (King James).

Reliability of the Texts

This can be challenged forever. I choose not to at this point. There is always reason to doubt – reason to bring in any nuance to argue various points. But for many scholars, there is widespread evidence for reliability. There are more than 14,000 existing OT manuscripts and fragments copied throughout the Middle East, Mediterranean and European regions that agree dramatically with each other. In addition, these texts tend to agree with the Septuagint version of the OT, which was translated from Hebrew to Greek. And the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in Israel in the 1940s and 50s, also provide phenomenal evidence for the reliability of the ancient transmission of the OT before the arrival of Jesus. While these sources do have differences, it is their similarity and dramatic agreement that is important.

Research and Discussion Topics (*For any of the following, the presenter is free to adjust the question or topic to make it more informative or interesting.*)

1. The Dead Sea Scrolls. What were they? OT? NT? Or what? Give any background you consider to be relevant.
2. Traditionally very important are the first five books of the OT. Give some background as to their origin. They are referred to as the books of Moses. Explain the discussion as to whether Moses is actually the author.
3. Give information and background for the OT translation known as the “Septuagint”.
4. Give information and background for the Jewish Council of Jamniah.

5. Give information and background for the OT portion of the “Vulgate” – Saint Jerome’s translation of the Bible into Latin.
 6. Martin Luther’s version of the Apocrypha included 7 books which he included in an appendix. Give some background on his thought process for excluding these from the canon, and present general information on these 7 books – their origin, etc. What is their status today for Protestants? For Catholics?
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Discussions of the following are not included here, but will be taken up at the end of the study of the New Testament Canon: Archeology, Ancient Historians.