

“The Canonicity of the Bible, part 1”

Various passages

In 1843, there was a young German scholar named Constantin von Tischendorf who grew tired of studying old texts in the musty libraries of Europe. So he packed his bags and set out on journey in which he made it his goal to discover and decipher the oldest surviving copies of Scripture. Think of him as the original Indiana Jones! In 1844, he arrived at Saint Catherine’s Monastery which was situated at the base of the traditional sight of Mount Sinai. While he was there, he made a remarkable discovery. The monks there had in their possession a 1,500 year old Greek version of the Bible known as the Septuagint. Scholars now refer to his discovery as Codex Sinaiticus, and it was one of the most significant discoveries in history. This ancient manuscript is especially prized because helps modern scholars see how ancient scribes labored to preserve the correct wording of the biblical text down through the centuries.¹ More than 3,000 years before Tischendorf, another man made multiple trips up and down Mount Sinai where he received direct revelation from God and was commanded to write it all down in a book. You and I know that man as Moses.

Tonight, I want to introduce a subject known as the canonicity of Scripture which looks to answer the question, “How do we know that we have the right books?”

First, what do we even mean when we refer to the ‘canon’ of Scripture?

The canon of Scripture is the list of all the books that belong in the Bible, the list of books recognized as those worthy to be included in the Old and New Testaments. The word ‘canon’ comes from the ancient world and basically

¹ Lawrence H. Schiffman & Jerry Pattengale, *The World’s Greatest Book* (Franklin, TN: Worthy Publishing, 2017), 17-22.

means a rule or a standard. It referred to a reed that was used to measure things, much in the same way that we would use a ruler today. We must not underestimate the importance of this issue, for the words of Scripture are the words by which we nourish our spiritual lives. We can reaffirm the comment made by Moses to the people of Israel in reference to the words of God's law:

Deuteronomy 32:46-47 - "Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess."

To minimize, to add to or subtract from God's words would be to prevent God's people from obeying Him fully, for commands that were subtracted would not be known to the people, and words that were added might require extra things of the people which God had not commanded.

Deuteronomy 4:1-2 - "And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you."

The canonicity of Scripture is crucial issue. Why?

If we are to trust and obey God absolutely, then we must have a collection of words that we are certain are God's own words to us. If there are any sections of Scripture about which we have doubts as to whether they are God's words or not, we will not consider them to have absolute divine authority and will not trust them as much as we would trust God Himself.

The word 'canonicity' comes from a Greek word 'kanon' which means rule or standard of measurement.

Galatians 6:16 - "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule."

You're familiar with the phrase 'rule of faith.' The rule of faith is the standard of sound doctrine. Over time, the canon also came to mean a catalog or list—used in this case to describe the authoritative list of books that make up the Bible. The word 'canonization' tells how the Bible received its acceptance as men recognized the authority of God's inspired writings. It is the process by which God's inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word was recognized as such by men of God and then collected and preserved by the people of God.

The Bible that you are holding in your hand contains 39 books in the Old Testament, and 27 books in the New Testament. How do we know that we have the right books? Consider:

- Why are the apocryphal books not included in our Bible?
- Why is the Book of Mormon not inspired Scripture?

These are questions that deal with the subject of canonicity. The books of the Bible were **inspired** by God's Spirit and **discerned** by God's people.

The first question that needs to be answered concerning the Bible's canonicity is how some writings were chosen to be included in the Scriptures, while others were excluded. The key word is the word 'discerned.' What the early church did was discern, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, which individual books already carried the stamp of the Spirit's inspiration and those which did not.

In other words, a body of church leaders did not sit down and read, for instance, the Gospel of Matthew, and then take a vote as to whether they thought it was

inspired or not, with the majority vote winning. The canon was not the result of a popular vote by men. They have divine authorship. Their inspired, authoritative nature was recognized by the church as they had already been in circulation within the church.

The books of the Bible clearly have their own **authority**.

This may sound somewhat confusing at first, because in fact the church did have to draw the line and either include or exclude particular books. But there is a huge difference between discerning what is already true, versus deciding whether it's true or not by human judgment and majority vote. The determining authority for the canon of Scripture was God Himself, not any church body or individual leader. God decided the canon of Scripture, while men of God simply recognized it.

Let's start by considering the canonicity of the Old Testament. To do that, I want us to consider a few questions that we'll seek to answer.

1—How did the Old Testament BEGIN?

In our examination of how we got the Bible, we need to go all the way back to where it all began. Who wrote the Old Testament? The very first writer of Scripture may very well have been the Lord God Himself. One of the earliest mentions of written revelation in Scripture was when “the finger of God” etched the Ten Commandments on stone tablets and gave them to Moses.²

From that point, the responsibility for recording all the words that God had for His people fell squarely on the shoulders of Moses. It was Moses who kept the records of God's words and thereby supplied the Israelites with what was

² Timothy Paul Jones, *How We Got the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Rose Publishing, 2015), 28.

referred to as the “Book of the Covenant” (see Exodus 17:14; 24:4, 7). The product of this revelation is the first five books of the Bible known as the Torah.

Deuteronomy 18:18—“I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put My words in his mouth...”

As far as the history of written revelation goes, Moses was the first in a long line of prophets who wrote down these inspired words from God. And so over the next one thousand years, God raised up a succession of prophets and priests and kings who continued to write as they were carried along by His Spirit. More than likely it was Joshua who took up the mantle after Moses, and Samuel after him. David wrote many of the Psalms. Solomon wrote much the Proverbs and other wisdom literature. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, were all commissioned by the Lord and various periods of Israel’s history.

Timothy Paul Jones —*“The authors of certain books are unknown to us, but this truth doesn’t diminish the authority of these texts. The authority of the Old Testament doesn’t depend on whether we know details about every human writer. The Old Testament is the divinely inspired history of the people that God chose to prepare the way for Jesus the Messiah. The authority of the Old Testament is rooted in God’s covenant with Israel and in Jesus’ recognition that these writings were the inspired revelation of His Father.”*³

2—How was the Old Testament WRITTEN?

So how did Moses, or any of the other prophets for that matter, actually write down the words that God revealed to them? It is not like they could run down to the local Office Depot and pick up a pack of pens and a ream of paper. So what method of writing did they employ?

³ Jones, 30.

The Old Testament writers possessed a wide range of writing tools. For starters, stone was one of the earliest writing surfaces. Stone slabs were often coated with plaster. Clay tablets provided another means. Another early means of writing involved the use of a wooden tablet covered in wax—the original iPad!

Papyrus served as an ancient form of paper. It was made by using needlepoints to separate it into strips that were pressed together and dried out. The Egyptians were writing on papyrus paper more than a thousand years before Moses was born.⁴ In addition to papyrus, leather that was taken from the skins of animals was stretched thin and used as a form of writing. This eventually gave way to the art of making parchment.

Timothy Paul Jones — *“It was around the second century B.C. that leather began to give way to parchment. That’s when the king of Egypt started withholding papyrus from Pergamum, a city in western Asia Minor. The Pergamenes didn’t despair about their sudden lack of smooth writing surfaces. Instead, they experimented with a process for producing smoother writing surfaces by stretching the animal skins. The smooth and durable product of their experiments became known as ‘parchment,’ from the Greek word for a resident of Pergamum.”*⁵

The early writers of Scripture wrote on tablets and papyrus and parchments. That’s what they wrote on. Well, what did they write with? When etching words in stone or wax, they would have used a stylus or sharp pointed instrument. When writing on the parchment paper, they used a thin reed that was frayed at the end so that it would form a stiff, tiny brush. They would dip in it ink.

⁴ Jones, 35.

⁵ Ibid.

It is important to keep in mind that the language of the Old Testament wasn't originally in English; it was originally in Hebrew. If you've never seen a word of Hebrew, I'm getting ready to show you. In fact, I'm going to pass around a copy of my Hebrew Bible. The first thing you'll notice is that Hebrew is read from right to left rather than left to right. That's why the book looks backwards to us. There is no vowels in Hebrew, nor are there distinct upper/lower case letters.

Not all of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. A few parts are in Aramaic, a language that's similar (Syrians). During their decades of exile, the Jews learned this language because it was common at the time. By the time the exile was over, many of the Jews spoke Aramaic as their first language. So it shouldn't be surprising that certain portions of the Old Testament end up in Aramaic, though it is minuscule (Jer. 10:11; Dan. 2:4-7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26).⁶

3—How was the Old Testament PRESERVED?

God revealed His Word to a succession of prophets who wrote it down beginning with Moses, and they wrote those words in Hebrew on parchments. A good question to consider at this point is preservation. The earliest copies of Scripture known as the 'autographs' decayed into dust thousands of years ago.

So how is it that we still have the Old Testament today?

Every ancient edition of the Old Testament that we have today is a copy. Since these copies come from an era prior to modern technology, they were all made by hand by meticulous copyists known as 'scribes.' (see Geisler, p. 169-192)

Now I'm not going to go into any great detail, but scribes emerged early on in the life of Israel, and these scribes made it their sole practice to copy Scripture.

⁶ Jones, 37.

These scribes developed very detailed practices for copying and counting letters to keep every syllable of the text pure. Have you ever heard of the Masoretes? They came along a couple hundred years after the time of Christ and added vowel marks to ancient Hebrew. “They knew how many words and letters belonged in every book of the Bible. They even knew which word and what letter should stand at the exact center of every book. As a result, the version of the Old Testament text preserved by the Masoretes—known today as the Masoretic Text—represents a supremely reliable reproduction of the final form of the Old Testament.”⁷

illus. of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovery in 1944

4—How is the Old Testament ARRANGED?

How do we know that we have the right books, and what determined such? The question is not, “Who created the canon?” Rather, the correct question to ask is, “How and when did God’s people recognize which books were authoritative?”

For a couple of centuries before Jesus was born, the Jews had long recognized specific texts as having been inspired by God.

Let’s start with the first five books of the Old Testament. Everything that follows in the subsequent books builds upon what has been revealed here. The truth that is later revealed is contained in seed form here in the ‘Torah’ which simply is a Hebrew word that means law or instruction:

- Genesis (‘Bereshith’; in the beginning)
- Exodus (‘Shemot’; names)

⁷ Jones, 40.

- Leviticus ('Vayikra'; and he called)
- Numbers ('Ba Midbar'; in the wilderness)
- Deuteronomy ('D'Varim'; words)

If you look in your table of contents in the Bible that you have in front of you, you'll find these names and the canonical order of the 39 books of the Old Testament. You will probably also see how the books are placed into four categories: Law, History, Poetry, and Prophets (Major, Minor). This appears differently in the Hebrew canon. We have the same books, but they are arranged differently.

The Hebrew Bible has three categories:

- Torah (Law)
- Neviim (Prophets)
- Ketuviim (Writings)

The books of the Law mingle God's law with history, from the creation of the world all the way to Israel's entrance into the land of promise. The Prophets record certain prophecies with history and tell Israel's story from their entrance in the land of promise all the way to their exile from the land. The Writings weave wisdom and poetry with scrolls that were read during Israel's festivals and worship gatherings. Since the Psalms are the longest book in this section, they stood near the beginning.

Not only are the books arranged differently in the Hebrew canon, but they are also numbered differently. If you count up the books in our Protestant Old Testament, you'll come up with a total of 39 books. When Jewish scribes sum up

those same texts, they count 24. How is that possible? Well, it is because Jewish scribes copied the prophecies of the twelve Minor prophets—beginning with Hosea and ending with Malachi—on a single scroll and counted them in a single book. Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book. 1-2 Samuel was a single book instead of two, and so were 1-2 Kings as well as 1-2 Chronicles. All together, this accounts for the difference between 39 and 24.⁸ Different arrangement, different numbering system—same books!

How did we get the arrangement that we have today? Great question...

Approximately two hundred years before Christ was born, seventy Jewish scribes in Alexandria, Egypt were commissioned to translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. Their translation was known as the 'Septuagint.' The editors of the Septuagint rearranged the books in chronological order and categorized them according to their literary genre. Latin translations followed this same sequence, as did our later English translations.

Timothy Paul Jones — *“What matters for our faith isn’t the order of the books but the testimony in the books.”⁹*

So when Jew refer to the ‘Tanakh,’ they are referring to the Old Testament according to the original Hebrew division—Law (T), Prophets (N), Writings (K).

Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1/2), Kings (1/2), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Minor Prophets (= one book: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

⁸ Jones, 55.

⁹ Ibid, 56.

Writings: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (= one book), Chronicles (1/2)

Thus, the canon of the Jews began with Genesis and ended with 2 Chronicles, not (as we have it today) with Malachi. Our order follows the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, but the earliest Christian witnesses as well as Josephus and Philo (who used the LXX but did not accord the Apocrypha authority) show that the Apocryphal books included in the LXX were not counted as canonical.

NT Pointers to the Existence of the Old Testament Canon

Paul assumed the legitimacy of the “Scriptures” that were being taught to Jewish children. He told the young pastor Timothy:

2 Timothy 3:14-15 - “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

There is no record of any dispute between Jesus and the Jewish leaders of his day over what the extent of the Scriptures was. He seemed to assume that their Bible was His Bible, and he made remarkable claims about its authority (“The Scripture cannot be broken,” John 10:35).

The three-part Jewish division (Law, Prophets, Writings) of the Old Testament was assumed by Jesus.

Luke 24:44 - “Now He said to them, ‘These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’”

Early Christian Witness to the Completed OT Canon

Melito, Bishop of Sardis, about 170 AD:

“When I came to the east and reached the place where these things were preached and done, and learnt accurately the books of the Old Testament, I set down the facts and sent them to you. These are their names: five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kingdoms, two books of Chronicles, the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon and his Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Job, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Twelve in a single book, Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra.” (cited in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 4.26.14)

No Apocryphal books are mentioned, and the only missing book from our OT canon is Esther, which was controversial for some time and may have been suppressed for political reasons at the time because it spoke of a Jewish uprising.