

# BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

## 4 THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

### A DEFINITION OF CANON

The English word ‘Canon’ is a direct translation from the Greek word *kanon*,’ meaning ‘a measuring rod.’ When the word is used in the New Testament, it is generally translated “rule” (as in “let us walk by the same rule” Phil 3:16), or “sphere” (like “within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us” 2 Cor 10:13). In other words, something is either within the boundaries set by a particular standard (or *kanon*), or it is without.

When the word is used in a phrase like ‘the Canon of the Old Testament,’ it is referring to the standard by which Scripture is measured. It is the measure used to determine which writings really have the right to be considered part of the holy literature of the ancient Jewish people. Once a book or scroll is recognized as belonging to the ‘Old Testament Canon’ (or ‘those writings which the Jews themselves consider to have been composed under divine inspiration’), then it is regarded as ‘closed’ and unalterable.

### THE CONTENTS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

There are 24 books in the Jewish Canon, and these have been traditionally divided up into three main sections as follows:

**1. The Law** ‘*Torah*’ (5 Books)

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

**2. The Prophets** ‘*Nebi'im*’ (8 books)

(1) The Former Prophets (4 books)

Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings.

(2) The Latter Prophets (4 books)

(i) Major (3 books)

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel.

(ii) Minor (1 book) ‘The Twelve’

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah,

Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai,  
Zechariah, Malachi.

**3. The Writings 'Kethubhim' (11 books)**

(1) Poetical (3 books)

Psalms, Proverbs, Job.

(2) Five Rolls (5 books)

Song, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther.

(3) Historical (3 books)

Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles.

Luke's Gospel records Jesus' knowledge of all three divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures in His words to His disciples after the crucifixion (about 33 AD). "**Then He [Jesus] said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.**" (Lu 24:44-45).

It is also important to recognise at this point, that the content of this canon is identical with the 'Old Testament' as it is preserved in Protestant Bibles. The order and organisation of the books is slightly different, with our bibles dividing up Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the Minor Prophets, to make 39 books instead of the original 24. But in every other way they are exactly the same

## **THE CANONIZATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

At the outset we should acknowledge that the Old Testament Scriptures were entrusted by God to the Jewish nation. Paul writes, "**What advantage then has the Jew? ..because to them were committed the oracles of God.**" (Rom 3:1-2). It was therefore the Jewish nation who ultimately had to decide what was and what was not contained in the Old Testament Canon.

The authenticity of Scripture was not decided by intellectual analysis or theological discussion. Rather it was by recognition of the divine commissioning of the authors, and the inspired nature of their writings. In general, the books of the Law and the Prophets were recognized as authoritative at their inception or delivery, and accepted by the Jewish people from that point on.

Moses is the first person we know of who wrote something down at the instruction of God (about 1275 BC). **“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write this for a memorial in the book’** (Ex 17:14). And from the beginning the Jewish people recognised the special commission that Moses had received from God. **“Then [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant [which he had just written; v4] and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient.’”** (Ex 24:7).

Later Joshua was compelled to acknowledge the divine inspiration behind Moses’ words, as he was preparing to instruct the children of Israel before they entered into Caanan (about 1235 BC). **“Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go.”** (Josh 1:7-8).

The continued recognition and reverence towards Scripture by the Jewish people is shown in King Josiah’s reign (about 620 BC), when the rediscovery of **“the Book of the Law in the house of the LORD”** led to significant religious reforms (2 Ki 22 & 23). Similarly under Ezra, the restorationist leader of those who returned from Babylonian Captivity (about 445 BC), the Jews showed their readiness to give priority to the Law and the Prophets in their nation’s affairs.

## **THE JEWS CLOSED THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON**

The recognition of Hebrew and Aramaic books known as ‘the Writings’ took a longer period, and was not always immediately unanimous - particularly in the case of “Song of Songs,” and “Ecclesiastes.” Eventually however, all 39 books of the Old Testament were accepted by the Jews as canonical.

Various assessments of the actual date of closure of the canon have been given, ranging from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC down to the Jewish Council meeting at Jamnia near Joppa in 90 AD. But the final date of the acceptance of all the Old Testament as canon, is not important. The fact remains that the Jews (who were the nation and people who had been entrusted with **“the oracles of God”**), had accepted all 39 books and closed the Old Testament as sacred canon, by the time of Jesus’ ministry on earth and the subsequent birth of the New Testament church.

Scripture proclaims itself to have been initiated and approved by God. **“Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven.”** (Ps 119:89). Once affirmed, it was settled and declared closed, or unalterable. **“You shall not add to the word”**

which I command you, nor take anything from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.” (Deut 4:2).

And Jesus’ own words confirm the authenticity of the Old Testament canon as it already existed during His ministry in Roman Palestine. He plainly considered it to be the closed and unalterable word of God, saying, **“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot [the smallest letter in the alphabet] or one tittle [the smallest stroke in a Hebrew letter] will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.”** (Matt 5:17-18).

***The Apocrypha*** To have already closed the canon is significant not only from the point of view of sealing those books which are within the canon. It is also important in establishing those books of pseudo-canonical status (ie they seem to have some of the elements which distinguish Scripture from ordinary books) that are now forever out. This is the case with a body of disputed literature known as ‘*the Apocrypha*,’ which consists of 14 books NOT found in the Hebrew Old Testament, and which therefore should not be considered as canon. These writings of inconsistent quality were the product of the Inter-Testamental period, when political turbulence and national turmoil spawned many counterfeits. They were later unlawfully added to Greek and Latin texts, and are still officially recognized by the Catholic Church (which continues to incorporate them in their own Bible versions).

## NEW TESTAMENT ACCEPTANCE OF THE OT CANON

In the New Testament there are 263 direct quotations and about 350 indirect allusions to the Old Testament. All but seven Old Testament books are directly referred to in the New Testament.

***Jesus*** constantly quoted from the Old Testament, as in this example, where He shows that He regarded it as unalterable cannon. **“Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your law (and the Scripture cannot be broken).”** (Jo 10:34, 35).

We know from the accounts of the early church that books from at least two of the three divisions were regularly read in Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath. **“..Paul and his party ... went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them..”** (Acts 13:13, 14-15). In his subsequent speech Paul mentions, **“the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath,”** before going on to quote from Psalms (Writings), and Isaiah and Habakkuk (Prophets).

*The apostle Paul* serves as a reliable authority in this area. He devoted much of his life to studying the Jewish Scriptures, describing himself at one point as “**..indeed a Jew, ... brought up in this city [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel** [‘a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people,’ Acts 5:34], **taught according to the strictness of our father’s law..**” (Acts 22:3). Paul not only quote from The Law and The Prophets in his letters to the young churches. He also cited extensively from The Writings, with verses from Psalms, Proverbs, and Job.

In his defense to King Agrippa, Paul showed that he believed the Law and the Prophets were also completely authoritative concerning the New Covenant and events to come. **“Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come-- that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”** (Acts 26:22-23).

Paul also recommended the relevance of Old Testament Scriptures for Christian instruction, saying, “**...these things happened [to the Jewish people] as examples, and they were written for our admonition..**” (1 Co 10:11). He reminded Timothy of the undiminished value of “**the holy Scriptures [‘that from childhood you have known’], which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.**” (2 Ti 3:15).

## **SUMMARY:**

Even though there are many conflicting opinions as to the time and process of its canonization, the Old Testament remains the inspired word of Almighty God, presented to us through His appointed and anointed servants.

That the Jewish canon was already closed by the time of Christ is affirmed in the New Testament by the testimony of Jesus Himself, as well as Paul. This means that we can be sure that we have access to all those books that the apostles and the early church relied upon (and no others).

Finally it is good to remind ourselves that the Old Testament published in Protestant Bibles is exactly the same text (although in a slightly different order) to that found in the Jewish Canon of Scripture.