



The History of the Bible

Session 03: Topic 1.3

The Origin of the Old Testament

Study by
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Detailed Study

1.3 When did the Old Testament come together as a collection of documents?

The answer to this question depends on which religious tradition is in view. Christian tradition followed one path, but Jewish tradition took a different direction.

1.3.1 Canonization in Christian tradition

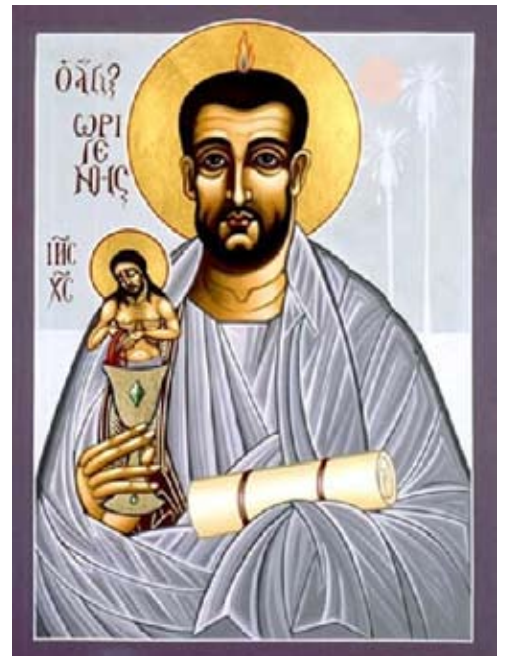
As mentioned at the beginning, this term, “canonization,” simply means the process of adopting a set of writings as sacred scriptures. For Christians, this has two aspects. At the beginning of the Christian era, the Jewish heritage and orientation of Jesus and the apostles meant following patterns of treating as sacred writings those commonly used in the Judaism of that time. In the centuries following the first one, the documents describing the ministry of Jesus, early Christian leaders and their writings gradually came to be regarded as sacred scriptures along side those of the Old Testament. By the time when canonization of scriptures reached a finalized stage in the fourth century AD Christians looked upon the Old Testament largely from a Greek speaking perspective, more than a Hebrew or Aramaic perspective. This pretty much meant that the documents in the Septuagint were regarded as sacred scriptures. Although many early Christian leaders and groups played a role in this process, three individuals not only discussed it at length but also offered their opinions about what should and should not be regarded as authoritative scripture.



1.3.1.1 Origen

He was one of the Church Fathers, lived and served the church from Alexandria Egypt in the early 200s of the Christian era. He developed quite a following of believers there until doctrinal differences with other Christian leaders forced him to relocate in Caesarea in 231 AD. According to some of his peers, he produced some 6,000 writings before his death around 250 AD. “These fall into four classes: text criticism; exegesis; systematic, practical, and apologetic theology; and letters; besides certain spurious works.” Unfortunately, most of those writings have been lost, and are not available today.

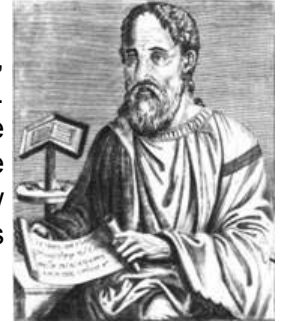
In regard to the Old Testament, Origen’s most important work was the Hexapla, which was a project designed to line up at least six versions of the Old Testament scriptures in parallel columns so that later texts in other languages could be compared to the base Hebrew text in the far left column. Primarily Hebrew and Greek texts were contained in this work. The existing text of the LXX were occasionally modified by Origen in order to bring it into closer conformity to the Hebrew texts. Only a few fragments of this massive project have survived to our day. Origen’s purpose was to clear up large amounts of confusion existing in his day about the



actual wording of the Septuagintal text of the Old Testament, since substantial versions of the Greek text were floating around at that time. The impact of his work was to stabilize the Greek text of the Old Testament and lay a foundation for Jerome a couple of centuries later when Jerome produced the Latin translation of the entire Bible known as the Vulgate.

1.3.1.2 Eusebius

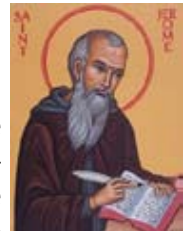
He was another Church Father, lived and also served in Caesarea in the early 300s, about a century after Origen. One of his major contributions was his *Ecclesiastical History*. In regard to the Hebrew scriptures, Eusebius, along with Pamphilus, continued to revise the Septuagint text by building on the work of Origen. By this point in Christian tradition, the unfortunate anti-Semitism that plagued early Christianity had pushed interest in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament to the back burner, while the Greek text became the central focus of attention.



1.3.1.3 Jerome

He lived from about 347 to 420 AD, and built on the foundation of earlier Christian leaders and accomplished something no one had been able to do up to this point in time. He produced a unified Latin translation of both the Old and New Testaments called the Vulgate.

Among other duties he undertook the revision of the text of the Latin Bible on the basis of the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament, in order to put an end to the marked divergences in the current western texts. Prior to Jerome's translation, all Old Testament translations were based on the Septuagint. Jerome chose, against the pleadings of other Christians including Augustine himself, to use the Hebrew Old Testament instead of the Septuagint.



The commission to translate the Bible into Latin determined the course of his scholarly activity for many years, and is his most important achievement. His translation of the Bible from Greek to Latin was called the Vulgate (vulgar) because it was in the common, or vulgar, tongue of the people. He undoubtedly exercised an important influence during these three years, to which, outside of his unusual learning, his zeal for ascetic strictness and the realization of the monastic ideal contributed not a little.

This translation brought a unified biblical text to Christianity in the western Mediterranean world and helped pull Christianity there into Roman Catholicism. In this region where Latin was more commonly used than Greek, this Latin translation of the Bible became the "King James Version" for the next thousand years. Gradually, Greek and Hebrew studies diminished in the Church and attention was focused almost exclusively on the Vulgate as the biblical source for understanding Christianity. Although Jerome attempted to go back to the Hebrew text for the Old Testament, the influence of the Septuagint on his translation is strong, especially in the inclusion of the Apocryphal documents as a part of the text. Thus, the Roman Catholic canon of the Old Testament reaches back to these roots and remains the official list of authoritative scriptures through our time.

Thus, in early Christian tradition the process of collecting the documents of the Old Testament into an authoritative list traversed through the Hebrew text through the Greek text and finally into the Latin text. At this final stage, the collection become set and has remained so through our day in Roman Catholic tradition.

1.3.2 Canonization in Jewish tradition

Jewish attitudes and approaches went a different direction. The composition of their religious heritage into written expression and the collection of that material found its impetus with Ezra-Nehemiah at the close of the Old Testament era in the Restoration, when Jewish people began trickling back to Judah from Babylon. The period of Exile began in 597 BCE with the first invasion of Palestine by the Babylonians. But for Judaism the path toward a collection of authoritative, divinely inspired scriptures is less clear, and the issues of inspiration etc. did not play as important a role as in Christianity. The Wikipedia article on "Biblical Canon" effectively summarizes this zigzagging path well:

The Jews recognize the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible as the Tanakh. Evidence suggests that the process of canonization of the Tanakh occurred between 200 BCE and 200 CE. The first suggestion of a Jewish canon comes in the 2nd century BCE. The book of 2 Maccabees, itself not a part of the Jewish canon, describes Nehemiah (around 400 BCE) as having "founded a library and collected books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings" (2 Macc 2:13). The book also suggests that Ezra brought the Torah back from Babylon to Jerusalem and the Second Temple as described in Nehemiah 8. Both I and II Maccabees suggest

that Judas Maccabeus likewise collected sacred books. They do not, however, suggest that the canon was at that time closed; moreover, it is not clear that these sacred books were identical to those that later became part of the canon.

Additional evidence of a collection of sacred scripture similar to portions of the Hebrew Bible comes from the book of Sirach (dating from 180 BCE and also not included in the Jewish canon), which includes a list of names of great men in the same order as is found in the Torah and the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and which includes the names of some men mentioned in the *Ketuvim* (Writings). Based on this list of names, some scholars have conjectured that the author, Yeshua ben Sira (Joshua son of Sirach) had access to, and considered authoritative, the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets. His list excludes names from Ruth, Song of Songs, Esther, Daniel, and Job, suggesting that he either did not have access to these books, or did not consider them authoritative. In the prologue to the Greek translation of ben Sirach's work, his grandson mentions both the Torah and the *Nevi'im*, as well as a third group of books which is not yet named as *Ketuvim* (the prologue simply identifies "the rest of the books"). Based on this evidence, some scholars have suggested that by the 2nd century BCE the books of the Torah and *Nevi'im* were considered canonical, but that the books of the *Ketuvim* were not.



The Septuagint (LXX) translation of the Hebrew language Bible into Koine Greek, probably in the 1st and 2nd centuries BCE, provided a text for the Greek speaking world and was used by the writers of the New Testament. In this text (actually scrolls rather than a book) the Torah and *Nevi'im* are established as canonical, but again, *Ketuvim* have not yet been definitively canonized (some editions of the Septuagint include, for instance I-IV Maccabees or the 151st Psalm, while others do not include them, also there are the Septuagint additions to Esther, Jeremiah, and Daniel and 1 Esdras).

The Dead Sea scrolls discovered at caves near Qumran refer to the Torah and *Nevi'im* and suggest that these portions of the Bible had already been canonized before 68 CE. A scroll that contains all or parts of 41 biblical psalms, although not in the same order as in the current Book of Psalms, and which includes eight texts not found in the Book of Psalms, suggests that the Book of Psalms had not yet been canonized.

In the first century, Philo Judaeus of Alexandria discussed sacred books, but made no mention of a tripartite division of the Bible; however, in *De vita contemplativa*², a disputed text, v.25, is stated: "studying ... the laws and the sacred oracles of God enunciated by the holy prophets, and hymns, and psalms, and all kinds of other things by reason of which knowledge and piety are increased and brought to perfection." Significantly, Philo quotes extensively from the Hebrew canon, including parts of the *Ketuvim*, but never from its apocrypha. Josephus refers to sacred scriptures divided into three parts: the five books of the Torah; thirteen books of the *Nevi'im*, and four other books of hymns and wisdom. The number of 22 books mentioned by Josephus does not correspond to the number of books in the current canon. Some scholars have suggested that he considered Ruth part of Judges, and Lamentations part of Jeremiah. Other scholars suggest that at the time Josephus wrote, such books as Esther and Ecclesiastes were not yet considered canonical.

Significantly, Josephus characterizes the 22 books as canonical because they were divinely inspired; he mentions other historical books that were not divinely inspired and that therefore do not belong in the canon.

The first reference to a 24-book Jewish canon is found in 2 Esdras 14:45-46, which was probably written in the first half of the second century:

"Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first, and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people." RSV

The "seventy" might refer to the Septuagint, apocrypha, or mystical works.

The Pharisees also debated the status of these extra-canonical books; in the 2nd century, Rabbi Akiva declared that those who read them would not share in the afterlife (Sanhedrin 10:1).

The Mishnah, compiled by the second century, describes some of the debate over the status of some books of

Ketuvim, and in particular whether or not they render the hands “impure”. Yadaim 3:5 calls attention to the debate over Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. The *Megillat Taanit*, in a discussion of days when fasting is prohibited but that are not noted in the Bible, mentions the holiday of Purim. Based on these, and a few similar references, Heinrich Graetz concluded in 1871 that there had been a Council of Jamnia (or *Yavne* in Hebrew) which had decided Jewish canon sometime in the late 1st century (c.70–90). This became the prevailing scholarly consensus for much of the 20th century. However, from the 1960s onwards, based on the work of J.P. Lewis, S.Z. Leiman, and others, this view increasingly came into question. In particular, later scholars noted that none of the sources actually mentioned books that had been withdrawn from a canon, and questioned the whole premise that the discussions were about canonicity at all, asserting that they were actually dealing with other concerns entirely.

Today, there is no scholarly consensus as to when the Jewish canon was set. Thus each religious tradition has taken its own distinctive path toward bringing the materials of the Old Testament together into a collection of sacred scriptures.

What is the relevance of this?

Several implications of this understanding of the formation of the Old Testament are present and have impact on how we understand the Bible.

First, from this assessment of the history of the composition and collection of the documents of the Old Testament we clearly see that the Old Testament is *a joint project between humans and God*. Through divine inspiration many individuals -- most all anonymous -- over a period of several hundred years produced the written scriptures from their sources -- both oral and written. These materials went through periodic revision and ‘re-application’ from time to time out of the conviction that the written record must reflect God speaking to people in each generation of Israelites. History is important, but only as it is relevant to today’s needs. At the close of the Old Testament era, the need for a permanent written record prompted different scribal schools to consolidate and unify the written records into widely accepted collections of sacred scriptures. The process of consolidation and collection continued through the Council of Jamnia in the late first Christian century.

In looking at this ‘human’ history of the origin of the Old Testament, the believer sees clearly the hand of God providentially working in and through this process to preserve the Israelite religious tradition that could be legitimately regarded as divine revelation. Thus the final product called the Old Testament represents not just the historical records of men, but the authentic ‘voice of God’ breathed into the human words and when read and studied prayerfully breathed out into the heart of the reader.

Second, from this assessment we clearly understand that *divine revelation is not a fanciful ‘magical action’* whereby sacred scriptures suddenly appear in supernatural fashion. Few, if any religions in our world today, claim a historical based origin for their sacred scriptures. Usually some imaginary tale of spectacular origin is put forth regarding their sacred writings. This supposedly put such writings above human scrutiny about the history of their origins, and serves as a supposed claim to divine authority for such writings. But such is not the case in Judaism and Christianity. God’s Word came to individuals living at specific times and places and spoke to their spiritual and moral needs in their world. The ongoing relevance of that message from God thus grows out of the original historical situation in which the word first came.



Third, from this assessment we realize that our approach to interpreting the Old Testament text has to be based on historical assessment of the text. The traditional Historical Critical method of Bible interpretation has an essential validity when two questions are raised about the abiding meaning of any scripture text: **1)** What did the text original mean to the first readers? and **2)** What does the text mean to the modern reader? Much more will be said in subsequent studies about this. But our understanding of the composition and collection of the documents of the Old Testament -- and the entire Bible for that matter -- mandates serious consideration of the historical method of interpreting the scripture texts: the “then / now” meanings of the text. The more we understand about the historical situation of the text the more accurate will be our interpretation of the text -- this is a fundamental axiom of biblical interpretation in the modern era.