



The History of the Bible
Session 01: Topic 1.1
The Origins of the Old Testament: Moses to Jesus

Study by
Lorin L Cranford

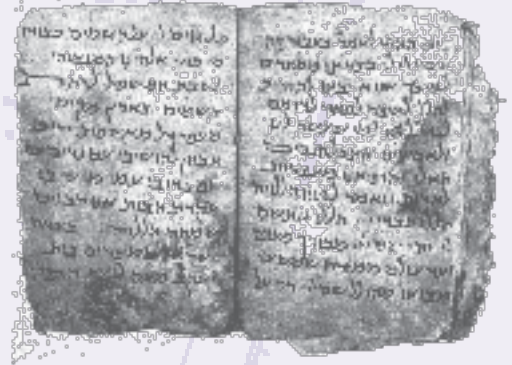
Overview of Session

- 1.0 How did the Old Testament come into existence?
 - 1.1 What is the Old Testament?
 - 1.1.1 Definition of “Old Testament”
 - 1.1.2 Different canons of the Old Testament
 - 1.1.3 Analyzing the Content of the OT documents.
 - 1.1.4 Why did these different versions of the Old Testament come about?

Detailed Study

1.0 The Hebrew Scriptures: Moses to Jesus

The Old Testament, as we Christians call it, is a complex set of documents whose existence dates back at least two thousand years, and perhaps further. In the first Christian century, Jesus and the apostles would sometimes allude to various passages as an authoritative source of spiritual insight. For the apostles, scripture texts from the Old Testament that could be interpreted to anticipate the coming of the Messiah provided a foundation for their understanding of the mission of Jesus as God’s anointed deliverer not just of the Jewish people but for all humanity.



Thus the Old Testament has played a vital role in Christian understanding. The period of its composition and canonization comes pretty much to a close by the end of the first Christian century. To be sure, the finalization of the list of authoritative documents (= the canon of the OT) remained somewhat fluid for about two more centuries both in Jewish and Christian circles. But by the Council of Jamnia toward the end of the first century Jewish attitudes were moving rapidly toward a unified list of documents that would be known as the Hebrew Bible.

This first study will attempt to address the beginning of the Christian Bible with a look at the Old Testament.

1.1 What is the Old Testament?

The answer to the question “What is the Old Testament?” has many facets.

1.1.1 Definition of “Old Testament.” One of the first answers has to be another question: *What Old Testament do you mean?* Although not every Christian realizes this, several different versions of the Old Testament have existed since before the beginning of the Christian era. During the period when the documents of the Old Testament were coming together as an authoritative list of books of sacred writings, differing listings developed. These lists fall under the label of canon of scripture. The word “canon” simply means “an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, mng. 3.a.), and comes from the Greek word “kanon” (ὁ κανών) which means “rule, standard of measurement.”



Additionally, one needs to understand *the different labels for the Old Testament*. The term “Old Testament” suggests a “New Testament” and thus implies a Christian label for these documents. For Jews who have no “New Testament,” a variety of labels will surface in modern Judaism through out the English speaking world. These include “Bible,” “Hebrew Bible,” or “Tanak.” Underneath both Christian and Jewish labels for the Old Testament will be the issue of the authoritative Hebrew language

text upon which modern translations are made. Most Jews and most Christians will agree here that the most authoritative Hebrew text is the Masoretic Hebrew text that was originally produced in the Middle Ages by Jewish rabbis. For a variety of reasons, most English translations of the Old Testament will also give consideration to both the Septuagint text and the Latin Vulgate text of the Old Testament when translations are being produced.

1.1.2 Different canons of the Old Testament. Particularly important is the role that the Greek translation of the Old Testament played in this process. Called the Septuagint, this translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Koine Greek in the early second century BCE contained several documents beyond what had usually been found in the Hebrew scripture texts. These documents typically are called the Apocrypha by Protestant Christians, or the Deutero-Canonical Scriptures by Roman Catholics. Since the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, most Protestant Christian groups do not recognize these dozen or so documents as sacred scriptures. But through the influence of the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible into Latin in the fourth Christian century, Roman Catholicism, and most eastern Orthodox Churches, accept some version of these documents as sacred scriptures, although normally at a lesser level of importance than the remainder of the Bible, thus the label “Deutero-Canonical” meaning secondarily authoritative. Thus the Old Testament will mean different things to different Christian groups. Judaism, however, has never accepted the Apocrypha as authoritative writings. Their tradition has moved very different directions from Christians regarding sacred writings.

For a very helpful chart listing of these differences, see the charts at Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary online site, reproduced with modifications below.

Books of the Old Testament

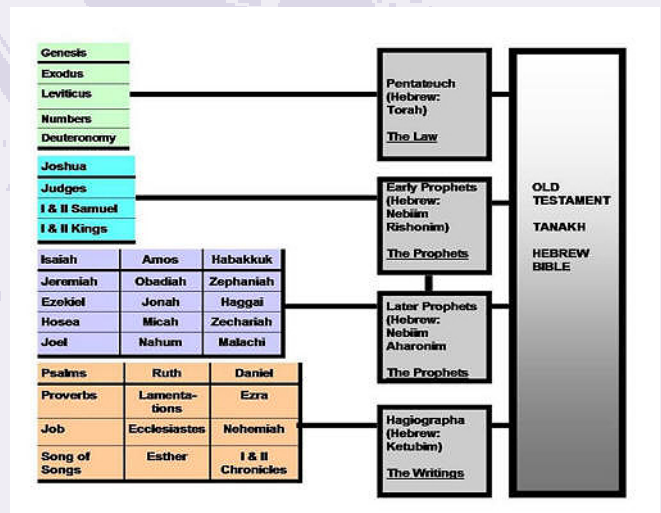
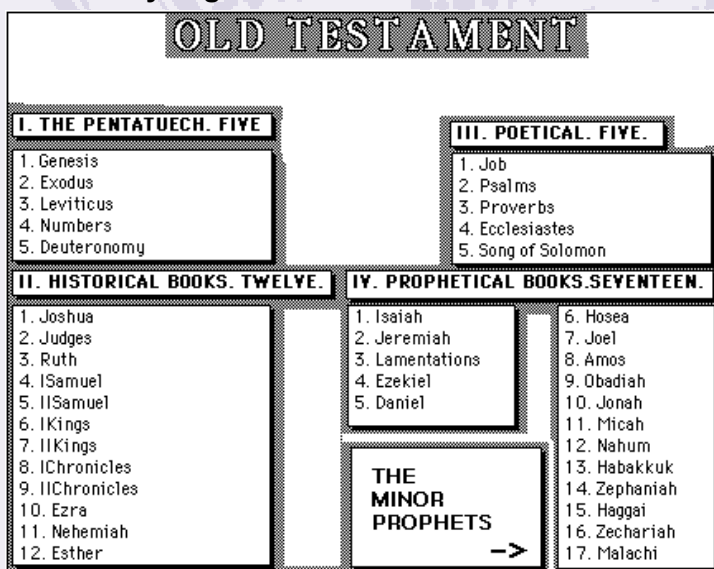
<i>Roman Catholic Canon</i>	<i>Protestant Canon</i>	<i>Jewish Scripture</i>
Genesis	Genesis	Law:
Exodus	Exodus	Genesis
Leviticus	Leviticus	Exodus
Numbers	Numbers	Leviticus
Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Numbers
Joshua	Joshua	Deuteronomy
Judges	Judges	Prophets:
Ruth	Ruth	Joshua
1 & 2 Samuel	1 & 2 Samuel	Judges
1 & 2 Kings	1 & 2 Kings	1 & 2 Samuel
1 & 2 Chronicles	1 & 2 Chronicles	1 & 2 Kings
Ezra	Ezra	Isaiah
Nehemiah	Nehemiah	Jeremiah
Tobit		Ezekiel
Judith		Hosea
Esther	Esther	Joel
Job	Job	Amos
Psalms	Psalms	Obadiah
Proverbs	Proverbs	Jonah
Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes	Micah
Song of Songs	Song of Solomon	Nahum
Wisdom		Habakkuk
Sirach		Zephaniah
Isaiah	Isaiah	Haggai
Jeremiah	Jeremiah	Zechariah
Lamentations	Lamentations	Malachi

Roman Catholic Canon	Protestant Canon	Jewish Scripture
Baruch		Hagiographa
Ezekiel	Ezekiel	Psalms
Daniel	Daniel	Proverbs
Hosea	Hosea	Job
Joel	Joel	Song of Songs
Amos	Amos	Ruth
Obadiah	Obadiah	Lamentations
Jonah	Jonah	Ecclesiastes
Micah	Micah	Esther
Nahum	Nahum	Daniel
Habakkuk	Habakkuk	Ezra
Zephaniah	Zephaniah	Nehemiah
Haggai	Haggai	1 & 2 Chronicles
Zechariah	Zechariah	
Malachi	Malachi	
1 & 2 Maccabees		

Protestant Apocrypha

1 & 2 Esdras	Baruch	1 & 2 Maccabees
Tobit	Prayer of Azariah	
Judith	Song of the Three Holy Children	
Additions to Esther	Susanna	
Wisdom of Solomon	Bel and the Dragon	
Ecclesiastes (Sirach)	Prayer of Manasses	

1.1.3 Analyzing the Content of the OT documents.



Another answer to the above question raises an additional question: Do Jews and Christians have the same content in their Bible (Old Testament)? The

answer to this question is both a yes and a no. It depends on which Christian group you are comparing to the Jewish Bible. Obviously the New Testament is not found in the Hebrew Bible. So the comparison has to be between the Hebrew Bible and differing versions of the Old Testament found in different Christian traditions. The content of material in the Hebrew Bible is virtually identical to that in the Protestant Old Testament. To be sure, that material is grouped differently, and often materials divided out into separate books in the Protestant Old Testament is included in a single document in the Hebrew Bible, as the chart -- similar to the one above --

that comes from Tel Aviv University illustrates. The three-fold division of the Hebrew Bible into Law, Prophets and Writings (Hagiographa, meaning 'holy writings') regroups these documents into a different order as well. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions will have different content largely through the addition of more documents. But in some isolated instances the content of overlapping books will be different. For instance, a longer version of the Book of Esther is found in the RC Old Testament.

In sum, the Hebrew Bible contains 24 books, the Protestant Old Testament contains 39 books, and the Roman Catholic Old Testament including the Deutero-Canonical Books contains 47 books. Different Eastern Orthodox churches will vary from the Roman Catholic number and is usually higher, because they define the listing of the Apocrypha to include a varying number of additional documents. Thus, the dominant Protestant Old Testament equals the Hebrew Bible in content but not in the dividing out of the contents into "books" and in the division of these books into divisions or groups. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox will come close to one another in content because of the inclusion of some version of the Apocrypha. All of the Old Testament versions -- Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant -- will divide out the contents into books, as well as the book names, on the basis of the Septuagint.

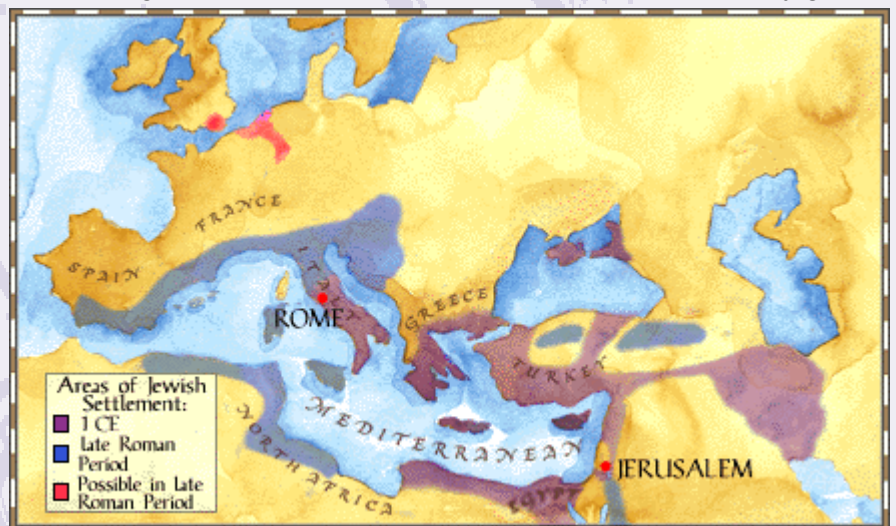
1.1.4 Why did these different versions of the Old Testament come about? A significant part of the answer to this question relates closely to topic 1.2 in the next session. But parts of the answer go beyond that topic.

One must never lose sight of the fact that "*authorship*" as we tend to understand the term has little connection to the process of writing in the ancient world. The composing of official religious documents in that world was mostly a 'group' project, rather than the result of one individual's actions. Physically writing on a writing material was difficult and laborious, as the detailed article in the Jewish Encyclopedia describes. Then, there was the Mt. Everest challenge of making hand written copies of those documents that had been composed. Then copies would be made of the copies. This process would be repeated innumerable times so that each successive generation of copies moved further and further away from the time of the original text composition. For the Hebrew Bible, the role of the Jewish scribe in this process was central. Countless numbers of Jewish men devoted their entire adult life to the copying of the sacred texts. Not until the time of the Masoretes in the Middle Ages did a dominant Hebrew text tradition become the standardized Hebrew text for the Old Testament. It remains so for both Jewish and Christian Bible translators today.



Add to this challenge the deeply held ancient tradition that an *orally spoken word* was far more powerful than a 'lifeless' written word. This view permeated the ancient world. For the ancient Israelites the oral word had divine associations as well. Remember the creation narratives in Genesis chapters one and two? God "spoke" and things happened. Both the Hebrew and the Greek words for 'spirit' also can mean 'breath.' Thus when God spoke, His spirit became the life creating and life-giving breath that brought the world into being. Thus, the 'recording' of their religious traditions began with oral formation and oral transmission. Only gradually were pieces of that recorded in written form. By the era of the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century BCE, the written texts of the Hebrew Bible came together in a cohesive collection of documents. The shift of the center of worship from the temple in Jerusalem to the local synagogue played an important role in this.

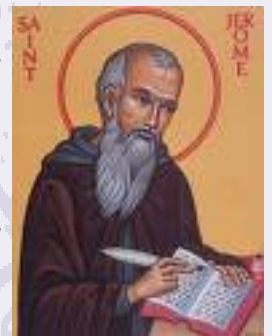
By the second century BCE, the Jewish people had spread all over the Mediterranean world. This was largely due to the changes in Jewish society brought about by the Babylonian cap-



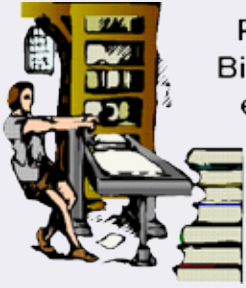


tivity. Because Greek, the Koine form established by Alexander the Great, had become the dominant, universal language of the eastern Mediterranean world, 'dispersed' Jews living outside Palestine gradually adopted Koine Greek as their main language. Increasingly, fewer and fewer spoke Hebrew, or even the modified form Aramaic that they had developed in Babylon. The demand then rose for the Hebrew Bible to be translated into Greek so that they could understand it when scripture texts were read during the weekly Friday evening synagogue sabbath services. Thus the Septuagint came into being around 175 BCE in Alexandria Egypt. Its use gradually spread across the Dispersion of Jews in the Mediterranean world. The process of copying these manuscripts in different locations and over a period of several centuries gradually produced different manuscript patterns of texts in the LXX, as the Septuagint is commonly designated. Thus different wordings of the Greek text emerged over time. Several text families of the LXX can be traced today. But this pattern is also true with the Hebrew Bible at this period of history.

Because of a number of factors, the dominant texts of the LXX included the additional documents that we call the Apocrypha. Later this played an important role for the Christian Bible. By the fourth Christian century, Western Christianity and Eastern Christianity had begun going their separate directions. Out of Western Christianity came the Roman Catholic Church, while out of Eastern Christianity the various Orthodox Christian churches emerged. In the western Mediterranean Latin increasingly became the exclusive language of the vast majority of people. Christians in that part of the world demanded translations of both the Old and New Testaments into Latin, where they could understand the scripture. A huge number of Latin translations of parts of the Bible began appearing. But the Christian scholar Jerome was the one who had a commanding knowledge of Greek, Hebrew and Latin. By 405 AD he had completed a translation of the entire Bible into Latin. This translation came to be known as the Vulgate. The name 'Vulgate' comes from the "*phrase versio vulgata*, i.e., 'the translation made public.'" In regard to the Old Testament, Jerome made the decision to follow the LXX more than the Hebrew texts that he had access to. This meant the addition of the Apocrypha to the Old Testament. Thus, the Greek OT tradition superseded the Hebrew OT tradition at this point and the Apocrypha established itself as a part of the Christian OT. This translation gained widespread popularity in Western Christianity and became the "Bible" for Western Christianity until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. It remained the base text for translation into other languages for Roman Catholics until the *Divino Afflante Spiritu* declaration of Pope Pius XII in 1943. Even for the English Bible, the Vulgate was essentially the base scripture text for translation until the late 1800s with the beginning of the Modern Bible Translation Era.



With the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s came a renewed focus on the Bible as the sole authoritative basis for Christian belief and practice; in Latin it is known as *sola scriptura*. One of the driving forces of the Reformation all across Europe was the translation of the Bible into the local language, e.g., German, French, English etc. The printing press was in existence by that time and made the copying process infinitely quickly



Printing the Bible changed everything.

and more accurate. Thus copies of these translations could be made quickly and then circulated widely.

With Protestants, one of the issues regarding the Bible was the matter of the "extra books" in the Latin Old Testament. Since Martin Luther was the first reformer to make a translation of the Bible (into German), his pattern became the model for other reformers in different language settings. Luther chose to reject the Apocrypha and thus did not include these documents in his German translation of the Old Testament. Several factors were the foundation for this decision. Included in them were the fact that these documents were never a part of the Hebrew Bible. Also, some of the critical doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, such as Purgatory, were based solely on passages in the Apocryphal books of the Catholic Old Testament. Luther did not find that a sufficient basis for either the doctrines or the supposed biblical source for them. Other reformers followed Luther's example and so the Catholic version of the Old Testament was rejected in favor of a return to the Hebrew Bible. But the division of text and the grouping of the remaining books did follow that found in the LXX, along with the LXX/Vulgate book titles.

Thus these different 'versions' of the Old Testament have come about over centuries and remain largely in place today among the different Jewish and Christian traditions. In the English Bible, the early translations of the Bible through the King James Version included the Apocrypha mostly because of the Church of England orientation of most of these translations. Even the King James Version contained the Apocrypha through the 1800s, when it began losing its association with the Church of England.

