

THE ORIGIN AND STRUCTURE OF OLD TESTAMENT

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The Old Testament, in the form that you and I know, with its 39 books, did not exist until near the end of the first century of the Christian era. Even though the various books existed—as well as many others—the process of compiling those books into some sort of scriptural canon was accomplished in the days of Ezra the priest following the Babylonian captivity. But, for various reasons, the Old Testament scriptural canon was not fully agreed upon until much later, and various writings were going in and out of favor.

The Hebrew Scriptures, as they existed before the days of Ezra were divided into three parts:

- The *Tanakh* (known as the **Torah** or the **law**). It is also called the **Pentateuch** (meaning the five-fold books)
- The *Nebiim* (the **prophets**)
- The *Kethubim* (the **literary writings**)

In fact, there were many different manuscripts available to the religious leaders that were not generally available to the common people. The Savior was familiar with these writing during his ministry and referred to them often as **the law and the prophets**.

For example, when he was asked, "Which is the great commandment in *the law*," he responded that it was "to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." He then went on to say that the second commandment, which was like unto it, was to "love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all *the law and the prophets*" (Matt. 22:35-40, emphasis added).

When Christ told His disciples the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31), he also referred to the ancient scriptures. When the dead rich man, recognizing the error of his mortal pursuits, asked Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers of the punishments awaiting them if they did not repent, Abraham said (verse 31), "If they hear not *Moses and the prophets*, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead" [emphasis added].

After the Savior's resurrection, he appeared to the eleven Apostles gathered in the upper room. After eating fish and honeycomb with them, he said, "These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in *the law of*

Moses, and in *the prophets*, and in *the psalms* [Psalms being the most important book of the literary writings], concerning me" (Luke 24:44, emphasis added).

The books of the Old Testament were not entirely settled on until late in the First Century AD. With regard to the three parts of the Old Testament record mentioned above, we should also note the following. The *Torah* (the law) was closed (i.e., nothing could be either added or removed) centuries before the coming of Christ, though there is some evidence that the book of Deuteronomy was actually written—or at least heavily edited—by a group of religious reformers that modern scholars call Deuteronomists. The Deuteronomists date back to about the time of King Josiah of Judah.

The other two parts of the Old Testament, however, the *Nebiim* (the prophets) and the *Kethubim* (the literary writings) were open and various writings (many from multiple manuscripts) were going in and out of favor. In fact, various writings that were not included in our Old Testament are mentioned in the Bible. Among these are:

- The "book of the wars of the Lord" (mentioned in Numbers 21:14)
- The "book of Jasher" (mentioned in Joshua 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:18)
- The "book of the acts of Solomon" (mentioned in 1 Kings 11:41)
- The "book of Samuel the seer" (mentioned in 1 Chronicles 29:29)
- The "book of Nathan the prophet" (mentioned in 2 Chronicles 9:29)
- The "book of Shemaiah the prophet" (mentioned in 2 Chronicles 12:15)
- The "story of the prophet Iddo" (mentioned in 2 Chronicles 13:22)
- The "book of Jehu" (mentioned in 2 Chronicles 20:34)
- The "sayings of the seers" (mentioned in 2 chronicles 33:19)

There are other terms relating to the origin and structure of the Old Testament that should be mentioned here. One of these is **Septuagint**. The *Septuagint* was a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, made in the third century before Christ. Its name came from the tradition that it was translated in 70 (actually 72) days by 70 Palestinian Jews, at the order of Ptolemy Philadelphus, for use by the Greek-speaking Jews in Alexandria. The Septuagint was used by the Jews during New Testament times. It was of immense value to them because they could not read the Hebrew language. Old Testament scriptures quoted in the New Testament are from the Greek *Septuagint*.

We should also mention The **Talmud** (which means "learning." It is a compilation of text (called **Mishnah**) and of commentaries (called **Gamara**). The *Mishnah* was a collection or digest of oral

Jewish traditions that had developed through the centuries and was still in the process of compilation two or three centuries AD. The earliest writings date from about 200 BC. These writings and the oral tradition behind them were used to interpret the scriptures and were what made Jewish law at the time of the Savior so cumbersome, even a burden to the people. These traditions of the fathers exaggerated everything, defining every jot and tittle so that it was actually a hedge, or a fence, around the law. They went far beyond the law given to Moses by Jehovah so that there was not even a remote possibility that a person could break the law. Everything was carefully defined, including how far one could travel on the Sabbath or what was not an acceptable Sabbath activity. Jesus, you will recall, was severely criticized because he healed the sick on the Sabbath.

Jesus was referring to these Talmudic traditions in his Sermon on the Mount when he said, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time" (Matthew 5:27 and 33). The Talmud was nothing more than a collection of commentaries by dead rabbis, the ultimate example of the traditions of the fathers.

The *Gamara* is of more recent origin and consists of the **Halakah** and the **Haggada**. The *Halakah* was the authoritative unwritten law of the Jews (their oral Torah). The *Haggada*, on the other hand, is a collection of illustrative stories, written in a scriptural style in the late middle ages—probably about the Thirteenth Century—in Spain.

The **Apocrypha** should also be noted. The word, coined by St. Jerome in the Fifth Century, means "secret" or "hidden" and refers to fifteen sacred books and parts of books from the Greek *Septuagint* that were not included in the Hebrew scriptures when the canon was closed. Twelve of these records, however, were accepted by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches and were included in the Douay Version of the Bible by the Council of Trent in 1546). They were also included in the 1611 version of the King James Translation but were afterward excluded. The books of the apocrypha are:

1 Esdras

2 Esdras (AKA 4 Ezra)

Tobit

Judith

Esther (additions to)

Wisdom of Solomon

Sirach (AKA Ecclesiasticus)

Letter of Jeremiah

Baruch

Prayer of Azariah (AKA Song of the Three Hebrew Children)

Susanna (Daniel 13)

Bel and the Dragon (Daniel 14)

Prayer of Manasseh

1 Maccabees

2 Maccabees

The two books of Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh are not included in the Douay Version of

the Bible. These are called deuterocanonical apocrypha because experts do not consider them inspired. These same uninspired writings are today referred to as **pseudepigrapha** because they are believed to be falsely attributed to Biblical characters.

It is interesting to note that our Old Testament contains no writings from some very significant prophets, such as Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha. Instead, we have only accounts of these prophets and their lives in the Bible's historical writings. Many modern Biblical scholars think that the Deuteronomists, mentioned earlier, took the writings of the prophets and rewrote them in the various historical accounts that they compiled in order to satisfy their own perspectives. The books of Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings—in addition to Deuteronomy—are believed to have been either written by, or heavily edited by, the Deuteronomists to satisfy their own interpretations.

The Old Testament was not compiled with the books in chronological sequence, nor are there clear divisions between the parts. The five books of Moses are at the beginning, but the books containing the prophets and the literary writings are not separated. Today most Bible scholars divide our Old Testament into five categories:

- **The Law**: (including *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*)
- **History**: (including *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*)
- **Literary writings**: (including *Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*)
- **Major Prophets**: (including *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*)
- **Minor Prophets**: (including *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*)

The Major Prophets differ from the Minor Prophets only in the volume of their writings, not their importance.