

## **Formation of the Biblical Canon, Old Testament**

### **The Torah or Law of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)**

The Hebrew Bible took shape gradually over centuries. In Exodus 24:7 we read of “the book of the covenant” which seems to refer to Exodus chapters 20:22 to 24:18. This is arguably the first authoritative book in the Bible. It does not date from the time of Moses, but from several centuries later, perhaps in the eighth century BCE. (The laws clearly presuppose a settled rural population). The book of the covenant is quite narrow in scope. A much more extensive book of the covenant is found in Deuteronomy, which is often called “the book of the law.”

According to a story in 2 Kings, chapter 22, King Josiah of Judah was having repair work done on the temple in 621 BCE. In the course of the repairs, the High Priest claimed to have found “the book of the Law in the house of the Lord.” This was presented to the king, and he had a prophetess, Huldah, check it for authenticity. When she confirmed it, the king made a covenant before the Lord and instituted several reforms in accordance with the book. It is generally agreed that this book was some form of the book we know as Deuteronomy. One of its key provisions was that the Israelites should offer sacrifice in only one place. It is apparent that no such law was known or in force before the time of Josiah.

Not long after the time of Josiah, Judah was overrun by the Babylonians and Jerusalem was destroyed. The Law now became very important, because the people no longer had a Temple as the focal point of their religion.

During the Babylonian Exile (586-539 BCE) Deuteronomy was combined with other writings to make up the first five books of the Bible, the Torah or Pentateuch as we now

know it. According to the Book of Ezra, the Law or Torah was brought back to Jerusalem by Ezra. (Ezra is dated to the seventh year of the Persian king, Artaxerxes, which could be either 458 or 398 BCE. Most scholars favor the earlier date). Ezra allegedly went to the king and asked for permission to go to Jerusalem to see whether people were observing the Law, and was given permission to do so. When he got there, he found that the people did not know the Law at all. He attempted to enforce some of its provisions concerning the festivals, and also to compel those who had married non-Jewish women to divorce them. Ezra's law seems to have included Deuteronomy and much of Leviticus, but the liturgical calendar was not yet finalized. He did not have the Day of Atonement in what came to be its proper place.

From the time of Ezra onward, the Torah or Law of Moses was acknowledged as the ancestral law of the Judeans, even if it was not always observed. So when the Greeks conquered Jerusalem, they confirmed the right of the people to live in accordance with their ancestral laws, and there is no doubt that these were the laws of Moses in the Torah. By the Hellenistic period (roughly after 300 BCE), the Pentateuch was practically complete; but we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that scribes were still making changes down to the turn of the era.

### **The Prophets**

The second division of the Hebrew Bible is that of the Prophets. The first great prophets (Amos, Isaiah, Hosea) were active in the eighth century BCE. The last of the prophets were active in the Persian period (late sixth and fifth centuries BCE) after the Babylonian exile. The prophets did not write books. They delivered short oracles. These were collected by their followers, and eventually edited. Much of the editing was done

after the Exile. The scribes often expanded the words of the prophets. Only a fraction of the words found in the prophetic books is likely to go back to the prophets themselves.

The prophets claimed to be inspired. They typically began their oracles by saying “this is the word of the Lord.” The idea that Scripture is inspired was an extrapolation from the inspiration of the prophets.

The collection of the prophets was complete by the early Hellenistic period. We know from its references to current events that the Book of Daniel was written about 164 BCE, around the time of the Maccabean revolt. Daniel is classified as a prophet in the Christian Old Testament, but the book is placed with the Writings, the third section of the canon, in Jewish tradition. The most plausible reason for this difference is that the collection of the prophets was closed before Daniel was written. The Dead Sea Scrolls, which date from the first century BCE, assume that the Torah and the Prophets are authoritative, although it is not always certain what they include in those categories. The Scrolls, interestingly enough, refer to Daniel as prophet, and also treat the Psalms as a prophetic text.

### **The Writings**

The third segment of the Hebrew Bible is known as the Writings. This includes the Psalms, Wisdom books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), and the remaining books of the Bible such as Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Song of Songs. (The earlier historical books, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, are regarded as “the former prophets” in the Hebrew Bible). The category of the Writings was the last one to take definitive shape. The Dead Sea Scrolls include a wide range of writings that are not qualitatively different from the Writings in the Hebrew Bible. Some of the “biblical” books, such as Chronicles,

are barely attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the book of Esther is not attested at all. In contrast, many books that were not included in the Bible, such as the books of Enoch and Jubilees, were preserved in multiple copies in the Scrolls. The Scrolls do not set a limit to the number of sacred books that were authoritative. The Psalms were regarded as prophetic (and David as a prophet), but the collections of Psalms found in the Scrolls differ somewhat from those that were later regarded as biblical. They included some extra psalms, and arranged the psalms in a different order.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are generally believed to have been collected by the Essenes, a Jewish sect that flourished around the turn of the era. Their collection of sacred books was not necessarily the same as that of the Pharisees, or other Jews of the time. Unfortunately, we have no explicit evidence as to what books the Pharisees accepted as authoritative. Some scholars think that the books that make up the Hebrew Bible as we know it were those that were accepted by the Pharisees. Others think that the canon consisted of the books in the library of the Jerusalem temple. In any case, by the end of the first century CE, a consensus was emerging that the number of authoritative books was either 22 (according to the Jewish historian Josephus, writing towards the end of the first century, who also tells us about the Essenes) or 24 (the number given in the apocalypse, 4 Ezra, also written towards the end of the century). Most scholars think that Josephus and 4 Ezra were referring to the same books, but counting them differently. (For example, Judges and Ruth, Jeremiah and Lamentations, Ezra and Nehemiah, were each sometimes counted as one book). Even after the first century, however, there were still disputes about the status of some books.

## **The Deuterocanonical books**

In the Hellenistic and Roman periods (after 300 BCE) many Jews lived outside the land of Israel and used Greek as their primary language. The Law of Moses was translated into Greek in the third century BCE, and the Prophets and Writings sometime after that. There was also an extensive Jewish religious literature composed in Greek.

In the Diaspora (that is, the places where Jews lived outside of Israel) as in the Dead Sea Scrolls, no limit was set to the number of authoritative books. When the biblical books were eventually gathered together in large manuscripts, the Greek manuscripts included a larger collection than those included in the Hebrew Bible. Some of the additional books were translations of books that had been written in Hebrew. The long wisdom book of Ben Sira also known as Ecclesiasticus was written in Hebrew, but apart from a few quotations in rabbinic sources it was preserved only in Greek, Latin and Syriac (Aramaic), until Hebrew fragments were found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and also at Masada in the mid-twentieth century. A particularly interesting case is provided by the First Book of Maccabees, which was certainly written in Hebrew. It was a Jewish nationalistic book, written to glorify the Maccabees, who led the revolt against the Seleucids, the Greek kings of Syria in the 160's BCE, and their descendants. Yet First Maccabees was not preserved by the rabbis. Nor is it found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Apparently, some religious Jews did not like the Maccabees, who were known to take the law into their own hands, so to speak. So ironically, First Maccabees was preserved as scripture by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches but was not preserved in Jewish synagogues. Other books, such as 2 Maccabees and the Wisdom of Solomon, were composed originally in Greek.

In the early Church, no one seems to have been too concerned about the exact limits of the biblical canon. No two manuscripts contain all the same books. Even lists of canonical books differ. Saint Jerome (347-420 CE) translated the Bible into Latin. Jerome professed belief in *Hebraica veritas*, the truth, or superiority, of the Hebrew, so he based his translations on the Hebrew rather than on the Greek. He also believed that only those books found in the Hebrew Bible should be canonical. He did, however, translate the other books found in the Greek manuscripts, although he regarded them as of lesser status. Some of these translations were rushed, and done badly, but nonetheless the additional books were made available in Latin.

Down through the Middle Ages, the Greek rather than the Hebrew tradition prevailed. At the time of the Reformation, however, Martin Luther went back to Jerome's principle, and held only the books that were found in the Hebrew Bible as canonical. The Roman Catholic Church, in contrast, affirmed the larger collection at the Council of Trent (1545-63). The Council, however, distinguished between the Protocanonical books, which were found in the Hebrew Bible, and the Deuterocanonical (or secondary canonical) ones, which were not. The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books are Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sira), 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit, Judith, Baruch, and some passages in Esther and Daniel.

### **Catholic and Protestant Bibles**

Ever since the Reformation and the Council of Trent, Catholics and Protestants have had different Old Testaments. The distinction, however, is often blurred. Modern Protestants often have Bibles that include the Apocrypha. Apocrypha means hidden away

and “the Apocrypha” are the books that had been transmitted with the Bible but were rejected by the Reformers. Even Luther, however, acknowledged that the Apocrypha were “good to read,” in effect, approved spiritual reading but not Scripture.

The Apocrypha, however, do not correspond entirely to the Catholic Deuterocanonical books. The Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha includes the following books that are in the Greek Bible but not in the Catholic canon: 1 Esdras, Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, 3 Maccabees. 2 Esdras is in the Slavonic Bible and in the appendix to the Latin Vulgate. (It is known as 4, 5, and 6 Ezra in the Vulgate). 4 Maccabees, which is found in manuscripts of the Greek Bible, is also often included in the Apocrypha. Finally, the Greek Orthodox Bible includes the Psalms of Solomon, which date from the first century BCE, but these are not included in any Catholic or Protestant Bible.

## **Conclusion**

From all of this it should be clear that the Bible did not drop from heaven in a tidy package. Rather it is made up of writings that won acceptance in Judaism or in the Christian churches over a long period of time. The contents of the Bible have always been contested. Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians all have different Bibles. Fortunately, at this point in time these differences are no longer invested with life and death significance, at least for most people. The Biblical canon has always had fuzzy edges, and there has always been a penumbra of books of related literature that is not qualitatively different, at least in any clear sense. The study of the Bible is actually

enriched by attention to this penumbra, which helps to fill out the context in which the biblical books were written.

**For further reading:**

John J. Collins, “The Penumbra of the Canon. What do the Deuterocanonical Books Represent?,” in Géza G. Xeravits, József Zsengellér, Xavér Szabó, eds., *Canonicity, Setting Wisdom in the Deuterocanonicals* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014) 1-17.

Timothy H. Lim, *The Formation of the Jewish Canon* (Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven: Yale, 2013).

Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds. *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002).

Alvert C. Sundberg, *The Old Testament of the Early Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1964).