

*From God to Us:
How We Got Our Bible*
by
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Chapter 7

The Development of the Old Testament Canon

The history of the canonization of the Bible is a most fascinating story. It is a book written and collected over almost two millennia without each contributing author being aware of how his "chapter" would fit into the overall plan. Each prophetic contribution was offered to the people of God simply on the basis that God had spoken to them through the prophet. Just how that message was to fit into an overall story was unknown to the prophet and even to the believers who first recognized it. Only the reflective consciousness of later Christians was able to perceive that the hand of God which moved each individual writer was almost moving through them to produce an overall redemptive story of which God alone was the author. Neither the prophets who composed the books nor the people of God who collected them were consciously constructing the overall unity in which each book was to play a part.

SOME PRELIMINARY DISTINCTIONS

God inspired the books, the original people of God recognized and collected them, and later believers categorized the canonical books according to the overall unity they perceived in them. This in brief is the story of the canonization of the Bible. Let us explicate some of the more important distinctions implied in this process.

The Three Basic Steps in the Process of Canonization

There are three basic steps in the overall process of canonization: inspiration by God, recognition by men of God and collection by the people of God. A brief look at each of them will indicate that the first step in the canonization of the Bible (inspiration) was God's; the next two (recognition and preservation) were committed by Him to His people.

Inspiration by God. God took the first step in canonization when He inspired the writings.

Thus, the most fundamental reason why there are thirty-nine books in the Old Testament is that only that many books were inspired by God. It is evident that the people of God could not recognize the divine authority of a book if it did not possess any.

Recognition by men of God. Once God authorized a writing, men of God recognized it. This recognition was given immediately by the community to which it was addressed. Once the book was copied and circulated with credentials to the whole Christian community, it was recognized by the church universal as canonical. The writings of Moses were received in his day (Ex 24:3), as were those of Joshua (Jos 24:26), Samuel (1 Sa 10:25) and Jeremiah (Dan 9:2). This recognition is further confirmed by New Testament believers as well as by Jesus Himself (see chap. 3).

Collection and preservation by the people of God. The Word of God was treasured by His people. The writings of Moses were preserved by the ark (Deu 31:26). Samuel's words were put "in a book and laid . . . before the LORD" (1 Sa 10:25). The Law of Moses was preserved in the temple in Josiah's day (2 Ki 23:24). Daniel had a collection of "the books" in which were found "the law of Moses" and "the prophets" (Dan 9:2, 6, 13). Ezra possessed copies of the law of Moses and the prophets (Neh 9:14, 26-30). New Testament believers possessed the whole of the Old Testament "scripture[s]" (2 Ti 3:16), both law and prophets (Mt 5:17).

The Difference Between Canonical and Other Religious Literature

Not all Jewish religious literature was considered canonical by the believing community. There was certainly religious significance to some of the earlier books such as the Book of Jasher (Jos 10:13), the Book of the Wars of the Lord (Num 21:14) and others (see 1 Ki 11:41). The books of the Jewish Apocrypha, written after the close of the Old Testament period (c. 400 B.C.), have a definite religious significance but were never considered canonical by official Judaism (see chap. 8). The crucial difference between canonical and noncanonical literature is that the former is normative (authoritative) and the latter is not. Inspired books have divine binding authority on the believer; the latter may have some value for devotion and edification, but they are not to be used to define or delimit any doctrine. Canonical books provide the truth criteria by which all noncanonical books are to be judged. No article of faith may be based on any noncanonical work, regardless of its religious value. The divinely inspired and authoritative books are the sole *basis* for doctrine. Whatever complementary support canonical truth derives from other books, it in no way lends canonical value to those books. The support is purely historical and has no authoritative theological value. The truth of inspired Scripture alone is the canon or foundation of the truths of faith.

The Difference Between Canonization and Categorization of Biblical Books

The failure to distinguish between the *sections* into which the Hebrew Old Testament has been divided (law, prophets, and writings) and the *stages* or periods in which the collection developed has caused a great deal of confusion. For years the standard critical theory has held that the Hebrew Scriptures were canonized by sections, following the alleged dates of their composition, into law (c. 400 B.C.), prophets (c. 200 B.C.), and writings (c. A.D. 100). This theory is built on the mistaken notion that the threefold *categorization* of the Old Testament represents its stages of *canonization*. As we shall see shortly, there is no direct connection between these categories and events. The books of the Jewish Scriptures have been rearranged since their composition. Some of them, from the writings especially, were clearly written and accepted by the Jewish community centuries before the date ascribed to them by critical theorists.

PROGRESSIVE COLLECTION OF OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS

The first and most basic fact about the process of Old Testament canonization is that it is not threefold but at most twofold. The earliest and most repeated descriptions of the canon refer to it as "Moses and the prophets," the "prophets," or simply "the books." Nowhere in Scripture or in the extrabiblical literature into the early Christian period is there any proof of a so-called third canonical stage comprised of writings which were written and collected after the time of the law and prophets. As far as canonicity is concerned, the so-called writings were always a part of the canonical section commonly called the prophets.

The Evidence of a Twofold Canon

A threefold classification. Even before New Testament times, however, there was a growing tradition which made a third section of the Old Testament books. In the Prologue to the apocryphal book, Sirach (c. 132 B.C.) speaks of "the law and the prophets and the other books of our fathers" read by his grandfather (c. 200 B.C.). Around the time of Christ the Jewish philosopher Philo made a threefold distinction in the Old Testament speaking of the "[1] laws and [2] oracles delivered through the mouth of prophets, and [3] psalms and anything else which fosters and perfects knowledge and piety" (*De Vita Contemplativa* 3. 25). Jesus Himself alluded to a threefold division when He spoke of "the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms" (Lk 24:44). A little later in the first century, Josephus, the Jewish historian, referred to the twenty-two books of Hebrew Scripture, "five belonging to Moses . . . the prophets . . . in thirteen books. The remaining four books [apparently Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes] containing hymns of God, and the precepts for the conduct of human life" (*Against Apion* I. 8). By the fifth century A.D. the Jewish Talmud (*Baba Bathra*) listed eleven books in a third section called the Writings (*Kethubhim*). The Hebrew Bible lists them the same way to date (see chap. 1).

Several very important conclusions may be drawn from this data. First, the facts do not show that the present classification of writings, containing eleven of the twenty-two books, is earlier than the fifth century A.D. Second, the earliest reference which enumerates the books in a third division is Josephus who lists them as four. This is strong evidence against the claim of the critics that Daniel, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah were late books, listed among the writings which were not canonized until the first century A.D. Third, the number of the twenty-two books which were placed in the writings grew from four to eleven between the first and fifth centuries. None of these facts support the view that there was a group of books, inclusive of Daniel, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah, which were not brought into the Jewish canon until the first century A.D. There was, to be sure, an early tendency to arrange the Old Testament into a threefold classification (for reasons not fully known), and the number of books in this section grew over the years. But the number and rearrangement of these books had no essential connection with the basic twofold division and development of the Old Testament canon.

The twofold canonization. The earliest and most persistent references to the canon of the Old Testament indicate that it is one collection of prophetic books with two divisions, the law of Moses and the prophets who followed him. Let us trace the evidence historically.

Even before the time of the Exile (sixth century B.C.) there were hints of a separate classification of Moses from the prophets after him. This was by virtue of the fact that special accord was given to Moses as the great lawgiver and because of the establishment of a community of prophets after Moses (1 Sa 19:20). By the time of the Exile, Daniel had referred to "the books" as containing both "the law of Moses" and "the prophets" (Dan 9:2, 6, 11). The postexilic prophet Zechariah (sixth century B.C.) mentions "the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets" (Zech 7:12). Nehemiah makes the same distinction (Neh 9:14, 29-30).

During the intertestamental period, this same twofold distinction continues. God spoke out of "the law, and the prophets" (2 Maccabees 15:9). The *Manual of Discipline* of the Qumran community consistently refers to the Old Testament as the law and the prophets (1. 3; 8. 15; 9. 11). Finally, in the New Testament the twofold distinction of law and the prophets is made at least a dozen times.

Several significant facts emerge from a study of the New Testament references to "the law and the prophets." First, it is a phrase inclusive of all the books in the Hebrew canon. It will be remembered (see chap. 3) that some eighteen of the twenty-two books of the Hebrew Old Testament are cited authoritatively in the New Testament (all except Judges, Chronicles, Esther, and Song of Solomon). Although there are no clear citations of these four books there are allusions to them. When Jesus said, "All the law and the Prophets prophesied until John" (Lk 16:16, 29, 31), He included every inspired writing prior to New Testament times in that phrase. Matthew 22:40 carries the same implication: "On these two [love] commandments depend *all* the law and the prophets." Jesus used the same

phrase when stressing the comprehensive Messianic truths of the Old Testament: "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in *all the scriptures* the things concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). Luke informs us that "the law and the prophets" were read in the synagogue on the sabbath (Ac 13:15). When attempting to convince the Jews of his complete orthodoxy, the apostle Paul said that he believed "everything laid down in the law or written in the prophets" (Ac 24:14; cf. 26:22). The reference to the Old Testament as the law and the prophets in the Sermon on the Mount is crucial (Mt 5:17; cf. Rom 1:2). Jesus declared, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until *all* is accomplished" (Mt 5:17-18). Such a forceful pronouncement could scarcely refer to less than the totality of the Jewish Scriptures.

From these facts, we conclude that the standard description of the whole canon of Old Testament Scripture is built on a distinction between Moses and the prophets after him. This was begun in preexilic times and carried through consistently to the time of Christ. Since the New Testament specifically cites virtually all of the twenty-two books of the Hebrew canon recognized by first-century Jews, we also conclude that the limits or extent of that canon have been defined for us. This Hebrew canon contains all twenty-four of the books later (fifth century A.D.) listed in a threefold categorization: law, prophets, and writings. Thus, whatever the origin of the tendency to divide the nineteen "prophets" into two sections of eight "prophets and eleven writings," it is definitely not the basis for a progressive three-stage development of the canon not completed until the writings were accepted in the first century A.D.

The Development of the Old Testament Canon

There is not enough data to form a complete history of the Old Testament canon. Sufficient material is available, however, to provide an overall sketch and to illustrate some crucial links. The rest must be projected as a result of the exercise of reasonable judgment. The first significant factor in the development of the Old Testament canon was the immediate and progressive collection of prophetic books. These books were preserved as divinely authoritative writings.

The evidence of a progressive collection of prophetic books. From the very beginning the inspired writings were collected by the people of God and revered as sacred and divinely authoritative. Moses' laws were stored by the ark in the tabernacle of God (Deu 31:24-26) and later in the temple (2 Ki 22:8). Joshua added his words "in the book of the law of God . . . and set it up . . . in the sanctuary of the LORD" (Jos 24:26). Samuel informed the Israelites of the duties of their king "and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the LORD" (1 Sa 10:25).

Samuel headed up a school of the prophets whose disciples were called "sons of the prophets" (1 Sa 19:20). According to Ezekiel there was an official register of prophets and their writings in the temple (Eze 13:9, ASV). Daniel refers to "the books" which contained the "law of Moses" and "the prophets" (9:2,6,11). The writers of the books of Kings and Chronicles were aware of many books by prophets which covered the whole of preexilic history (see under "The evidence of a prophetic continuity").

This general evidence of a growing collection of prophetic books is confirmed by specific usage of the earlier prophets by later ones. The books of Moses are cited throughout the Old Testament from Joshua (1:7) to Malachi (4:4), including most of the major books between (1 Ki 2:3; 2 Ki 14:6; 2 Ch 14:4; Jer 8:8; Dan 9:11; Ezra 6:18 and Neh 13:1). Both Joshua and events in his book are referred to in Judges (1:1, 20-21; 2:8). The books of Kings cite the life of David as it was told in the books of Samuel (see 1 Ki 3:14; 5:7; 8:16; 9:5). Chronicles review Israel's history recorded from Genesis through Kings including the genealogical link mentioned only in Ruth (1 Ch 2:12-13). Nehemiah 9 reviews Israel's history as it is recorded from Genesis to Ezra. A psalm of David, Psalm 18, is recorded in 2 Samuel 22. Reference is made to Solomon's Proverbs and Songs in 1 Kings 4:32. Daniel cites Jeremiah 25 (Dan 9:2). The prophet Jonah recites parts from many Psalms (Jon 2). Ezekiel mentions both Job and Daniel (Eze 14:14, 20). Not every prior book is cited by a later one, however; but enough are cited to demonstrate that there was a growing collection of divinely authoritative books available to and quoted by subsequent prophets.

The evidence of a prophetic continuity. In addition to the continuous collection of prophetic writings presented in the Old Testament there appears to be a continuity among the writings themselves. Each of the leaders in the prophetic community seems to have linked his history to that of his predecessors to produce an unbroken chain of books.

Since the last chapter of Deuteronomy does not present itself as prophecy, it would seem that Moses did not write about his own funeral. It is more likely that Joshua, his God-appointed successor, recorded the death of Moses (Deu 34). The first verse of Joshua links itself to Deuteronomy saying, "After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun." Joshua added to the Mosaic law and put it in the tabernacle (Jos 24:26). Judges picked up at the end of Joshua saying, "After the death of Joshua the sons of Israel inquired of the LORD," but the record was not completed until Samuel's time. This is repeatedly shown by the statement, "*In those days there was no king in Israel*" (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

At this point the prophetic continuity was established in a school directed by Samuel (1 Sa 19:20). From its ranks came a series of prophetic books which cover the entire history of the kings of Israel and Judah, as the following sample illustrates:

1. The history of David was written by Samuel (cf. 1 Sa), Nathan, and Gad (1 Ch 29:29),
2. The history of Solomon was recorded by the prophets Nathan, Ahijah, and Iddo (2 Ch

9:29),

3. The acts of Rehoboam were written by Shemaiah and Iddo (2 Ch 12:15),
4. The history of Ahijah was added by the prophet Iddo (2 Ch 13:22),
5. The story of Jehoshaphat's reign was recorded by Jehu the prophet (2 Ch 20:34),
6. The reign of Hezekiah was written by Isaiah (2 Ch 32:32),
7. The life of Manasseh was recorded by unnamed prophets (2 Ch 33:19),
8. The other kings also have their histories recorded by prophets (2 Ch 35:27).

Anyone familiar with the biblical books which cover the period from David to the Exile will see that the prophetic books listed above are not identical with the Samuels, Kings, and Chronicles. Each time, a cue is given in the repeated phrase, "and the *rest* of the acts" of king so-and-so are written "in the book" of prophet such-and-such. The biblical books appear to be prophetic abridgments edited out of the more complete histories recorded by the prophetic succession beginning with Samuel.

It is interesting to note that Jeremiah, who wrote just prior to and during the Jewish Exile, is not mentioned as having written one of these histories. Yet Jeremiah was a writing prophet, as his books (Jeremiah and Lamentations) indicate, and as he explicitly claims on numerous occasions (cf Jer 30:2; 36:1, 2; 45:1-2; 51:60, 63). In fact the scribe Baruch tells us that Jeremiah had secretarial help. Speaking of Jeremiah, he confessed, "He dictated all these words to me, while I wrote them with ink on a scroll" (Jer 36:18; see also 45:1). Further, the last chapter of the Kings parallels the material of Jeremiah 52, 39, 40 and 41. This is still another indication that Jeremiah was responsible for both books. Later in the Exile, Daniel claims to have had access to the books of Moses and the prophets. From them he not only names Jeremiah but quotes his prediction of the seventy-year captivity from chapter 25 (cf. Dan 9:2, 6, 11). On the basis of these facts, it is reasonable to suppose that the abridgment of the prophetic writings which took the form of the biblical books of the Kings was the work of Jeremiah. Thus, the continuity of the preexilic prophets from Moses, Joshua, and Samuel would be completed with the works of Jeremiah.

During the Exile, Daniel and Ezekiel continued the prophetic ministry. Ezekiel vouched to an official register of prophets in the temple records. He declared that false prophets "shall not be in the council of my people, neither shall they be written in the register of the house of Israel" (Eze 13:9, ASV margin). Ezekiel referred to Daniel by name as a noted servant of God (Eze 14:14, 20). Since Daniel possessed a copy of the books of Moses and the prophets, including Jeremiah's book, we may reasonably assume that the Jewish community in the Babylonian Exile possessed Genesis through Daniel.

After the Exile, Ezra the priest returned from Babylon with the books of Moses and the prophets (Ezra 6:18; Neh 9:14, 26-30). In the Chronicles he undoubtedly carried his own priestly account of the history of Judah and the temple (see Neh 12:23). Chronicles is connected with Ezra-Nehemiah by the repetition of the last verse of one as the first verse of the other.

With Nehemiah the chronology of prophetic continuity is complete. Each prophet from Moses through Nehemiah contributed to the growing collection which was preserved by the official prophetic community stemming from Samuel. As with the prophetic continuity, the canon of prophetic writings is complete with Nehemiah. All twenty-two (twenty-four) books of the Hebrew Scriptures are written by the prophets, preserved by the prophetic community, and recognized by the people of God. So far there is no evidence to demonstrate that other books, called "the writings," were written and canonized after this time (c. 400 B.C.).

The evidence that the Old Testament canon was completed with the prophets. To this point we have indicated that the complete Hebrew Testament was collected in two main sections: the five books of Moses and the seventeen (or nineteen) prophets who followed him. We have also shown that there was a continuity in those of prophetic writings, with each prophet making authoritative use of the former prophets and adding his contribution to the growing collection of sacred writings. By the time of Nehemiah (c. 400 B.C.) this prophetic succession had produced and collected the twenty-two books of the Hebrew canon. We must now substantiate this last point and show that no third section of the canon was written and recognized after this time. Briefly, the evidence is as follows:

1. The so-called Council of Jamnia (c. A.D. 90), at which time this third section of writings is alleged to have been canonized, has not been explored. There was no council held with authority for Judaism. It was only a gathering of scholars. This being the case, there was no authorized body present to make or recognize the canon. Hence, no canonization took place at Jamnia.
2. The book of Daniel, said by the higher critics to belong in the writings section because it was supposed to be a late (second century B.C.) and nonprophetic book, was clearly listed among the books of the prophets by Josephus. Of the twenty-two books, said Josephus, only four books, probably Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, were in the third section. Daniel, being one of the other books, must have been listed with the prophets by Josephus. Both the discovery of an early fragment of Daniel among the Dead Sea Scrolls (see chap. 12) and the reference by Jesus to Daniel the prophet confirm this position.
3. The New Testament cites almost every book of the Hebrew canon, including those called writings. Nevertheless, it clearly lists them all under the twofold classification of law and prophets (cf. Mt 5:17; Mk 13:11 and Lk 24:27).
4. The book of Psalms, listed in the third section by Josephus, was clearly part of the prophets. Jesus used the phrase, "the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms" as a parallel to the phrase "Moses and all the prophets" (Lk 24:27, 44). Jesus spoke to the Jews and quoted a psalm as what is "written in your law" (Jn 10:34-35), and then He identified it as the Scripture and the Word of God. All this clearly indicates that the Psalms were part

of the canonical Jewish Scriptures known as "the Law and the Prophets." Indeed, the New Testament authoritatively quotes the Psalms as Scripture more than any other book in the Old Testament. This too verifies that they were held to be canonical before A.D. 100.

5. According to both Josephus (*Against Apion*, I. 8) and the Talmud, the succession of prophets ended in Nehemiah's day with Malachi. The Talmud records, "After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel." In addition, the New Testament never quotes any book as authoritative after the time of Malachi.

Our investigation shows that as far as the evidence is concerned, the canon of the Old Testament was completed about 400 B.C. There were two main sections: the law and the prophets. Virtually all twenty-two (twenty-four) books in both sections are cited as Scripture by the New Testament. There is no scriptural nor historical support for the theory that a third division, known as "the writings," awaited canonization at a later date. Instead, the inspired books were brought into the canon as law and prophets. This *canonization* was a twofold process. Whatever the factors are which led to subsequent or parallel threefold *categorization* of these Old Testament books, this much seems clear--the complete canon of the Old Testament is consistently referred to as the law and the prophets.

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Note: No change of any kind has been made to the text.