

What Qualifies a Book To Be In the Old Testament? A Series on the Development of the Bible's Canon: Part 1

Relevant to today is the question, which books of the Old Testament did God inspire and how was that determined? While "inspiration" describes how a book of the Bible received its authority, "canonization" is the term that describes how a book was accepted into the Bible. It reflects why the people of God collected and preserved this collection of books.

The English term "canon" comes from the Greek term "kanon," which means "rod", "ruler" or "measuring rod." The Greek term is likely a translation of the Hebrew term "kaneh," which means "reed" or "measuring rod."

So He brought me there; and behold, there was a man whose appearance was like the appearance of bronze, with a line of flax and a measuring rod (H: **kaneh**) in his hand; and he was standing in the gateway. (Ezek 40:3)

From a theological perspective, the Greek term "kanon" took on the figurative meaning of "standard" or "norm" and ultimately to mean "rule of faith" or "authoritative Scripture."

But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule (G: **kanon**), peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. (Gal 6:14-16)

The early Christian Church Fathers would refer to the Bible as "The Kanon of the Church", "The Kanon of Truth," and "The Kanon of Faith."

1. Is the book divinely inspired, a process that includes both the writer and his writing; in essence is the author a man of God?

When the Old Testament was being composed, the nation of Israel did not use any of the above terms for "canon" as a reference to their authoritative writings. Instead, as primary witnesses, the writings were clearly recognized as the very words of God and therefore considered sacred and treated with deep reverence.

Known the Ark of the Testimony, the Ark of the Covenant contained the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. When Moses finished recording "all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances" (Ex 24:3-4), the Book of the Law was placed in the Ark of the Covenant which was kept in the Tabernacle whenever it was constructed.

Then he took the testimony and put it into the ark, and attached the poles to the ark, and put the mercy seat on top of the ark. He brought the ark into the tabernacle, and set up a veil for the screen, and screened off the ark of the testimony, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. (Ex 40:20-21)

It came about, when Moses finished writing the words of this law in a book until they were complete, that Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying, "Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you. (Deut 31:24-26)

While the Hebrew canon began as a single book, the Ark would become the library for canonical books.

After the Temple was built, the Scriptures were kept within it.

Then Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, "I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord." And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan who read it. (2 Ki 22:8)

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When Moses recounts God's prophecy of the nation of Israel's future request of a king when they enter and possess the land (Deut 17:14), he repeats God's command of the king's responsibility to the book of the law because of its supreme authority over the king and as a reminder of his covenant responsibilities.

"Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel." (Deut 17:18-20)

God's command of making a copy of the original words of God is introduced to the first generation recipients of God's word and for their king's use no less. From this a formal process of copying would develop to maintain the accuracy and integrity of the copies.

This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him. (Ezra 7:6)

After the death of Moses, God speaks to Joshua about the essential importance of His word. Because of their divine inspiration and authority, the collection of writings that would become the Hebrew canon became the rule for a Believer's faith and conduct.

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. (Josh 1:8)

2. Is the author confirmed by a supernatural act of God?

Because the word from God was for the people of God, prophets following Moses were recognized as God's means for speaking to His people. Their messages were public and served to teach something to God's people including history; thus, anyone who was the mouthpiece of God had the prophetic gift of inspired writing which qualified its absolute authority and canonicity. A spokesman for God often used characteristic phrases like "and the word of Lord came to the prophet" (2 Sam 24:11; 1 Ki 13:20), "the Lord said" (Hos 1:2; Amos 7:8), or "thus says the Lord" (Ex 4:22; 32:27). However, these phrases alone did not validate their canonicity.

God's first prophet, Moses, was given miraculous powers (Ex 4:1-9), which established that he did indeed meet with God and was His messenger. In another example, God's words through the prophet Elijah was validated by a supernatural event (1 Ki 18).

God tells the nation of Israel that He determines who is a prophet and how they can discern who is genuine: 1) I will put My words in his mouth and he shall speak all that I command him, and 2) he who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak shall die.

I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him. But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. You may say in your heart, "How will we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?" When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him. (Deut 18:18-22)

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Thus when a genuine prophet of God foretells of the future, its fulfillment confirms the prophet. The prophet Jeremiah foretells of 70 years of captivity and the fall of Babylon (Jer 25:11-12). The prophet Nahum foretells the fall of Nineveh when its soldiers are drunk (Nah 1:10) and destruction by fire (Nah 3:15).

3. Does the author tell the truth about God?

When the prophet reveals the truth of God's word, he does not contradict the revelations by other prophets of God. Because God does not contradict Himself nor tell anything that is false, any teaching about God that is contrary to what God's people already know is true is rejected.

The initial acceptance of a book by the people to whom it was addressed to influences its canonicity. The people of God, who were contemporaneous to the prophet and witnessed any supernatural events validating him and the truth of his words, would be able to know whether he was a genuine man of God. As seen earlier, when Moses wrote his books, they were immediately accepted as the word of God and placed in the Ark (Deut 31:26).

A book can be considered canon when it is accepted by other genuine prophets. For example, a portion of a book may be used as a basis for further revelation (i.e. Dan 9:1-2). Another example may be a quotation from another prophet such as Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-3; however, of these two contemporaneous prophets, it is not known who quoted who, or if both independently received the same revelation.

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of Median descent, who was made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, observed in the books the number of the years which was revealed as the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. (Dan 9:1-2)

Not all genuine prophets of God had their writings included in the Hebrew canon. While other prophets and their writings are mentioned, they are not authors of any book of the Old Testament. In these instances, inspired writings were more than just the history of the nation of Israel.

Now the acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the chronicles of Samuel the seer, in the chronicles of Nathan the prophet and in the chronicles of Gad the seer, (1 Chron 29:29)

Now the acts of Rehoboam, from first to last, are they not written in the records of Shemaiah the prophet and of Iddo the seer, according to genealogical enrollment? And there were wars between Rehoboam and Jeroboam continually. (2 Chron 12:15)

4. Does the book come with the power of God?

Ezra is often seen as a great example of the prophet scribe with a deep love for God and commitment to serve Him. It is through Ezra's devotion to God and His word, that Cyrus trusts and freely offers silver and gold to the God of Israel. God's word indicated that God was living and active.

He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel. Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the Lord and His statutes to Israel: (Ezra 7:8-11)

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Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand, and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, with all the silver and gold which you find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem; with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. Whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God. (Ezra 7:14-18)

Notable in the Old Testament is the continuous history of God's covenant relationship with human beings. From beginning to end (the past, present, and future), God's successive prophets has recorded God's lovingkindness to His covenant promises and man's failure to appropriately respond to it. In failing to be governed by theocracy and in so doing profaning the name of God, the nation of Israel is given a New Covenant, because God wants to vindicate the holiness of His name (Ezek 36:22-23).

Each successive prophet wrote, in most cases, with a link to another to provide a continuous account of this prophetic history. For example:

Ruth was originally appended to Judges, which is not seen in the order of the Hebrew canon.

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. (Ruth 1:1)

Samuel and Kings are linked as a historical unit.

David built there an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus the Lord was moved by prayer for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel. (2 Sam 24:25)

Now King David was old, advanced in age; and they covered him with clothes, but he could not keep warm. (1 Ki 1:1)

The book of Chronicles ends with the same two verses that Ezra-Nehemiah begins with.

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia—in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah—the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up!'" (2 Chron 36:22-23)

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying: "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. (Ezra 1:1-2)

Through this process, the continuity of prophetic writing is recognized to have ended with Malachi (Mal 4:5). The Babylonian Talmud records the same view.

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After the last prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi died, the Divine Spirit of prophetic revelation departed from the Jewish people. (Babylonian Talmud [Yomah 9b], 500 A.D.)

In consideration of Malachi, the Old Testament canon was completed around 400 B.C.

At the time of canonization, the Hebrew Old Testament was arranged in two divisions, the Law and the Prophets, which is confirmed in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Later the books of the Hebrew Old Testament were classified into three groups and by 400 A.D., the modern form of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings was accepted.

The older form of the three division Hebrew Bible may total 22 books with Ruth within the book of Judges and Lamentations within the book of Jeremiah. The current modern form of the Hebrew Bible totals 24 books with the recognition of Ruth and Lamentations as separate books. The English Old Testament has 39 books.

The three division arrangement of the books of the Modern Hebrew Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) as seen today with its 24 books. The Hebrew Bible book titles contrasts sharply with the English version, because it names the books according to their first significant word; the English book titles were derived from the Greek translation of the rabbinical name for the book.

Hebrew (English Translation)	English Old Testament Book
Torah (The Five Books of Moses)	
1. B ^e r'ēshîth (In beginning)	1. Genesis
2. Sh ^e Mōth (Names)	2. Exodus
3. Wayyigrā (And He called)	3. Leviticus
4. B ^e mīdbar (In the wilderness)	4. Numbers
5. D ^e vārîm (Words)	5. Deuteronomy
Nevi'im (The Eight Books of the Prophets)	
6. Y ^e hōshūa' (Joshua)	6. Joshua
7. Shōphētîm (Judges)	7. Judges
8. Sh ^e mû-'ēl (Asked of God)	8. 1 Samuel / 9. 2 Samuel
9. M ^e lchîm (Kings; kingdoms)	10. 1 Kings / 11. 2 Kings
10. Y ^e sha'-yāhû (Jehovah is salvation)	12. Isaiah
11. Yirm ^e yāhû (Jehovah will raise or lift up)	13. Jeremiah
12. Y ^e hezqēl (God strengthens)	14. Ezekiel
List continues...	

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13. Trei-Assar (The Twelve [minor prophets])	
Hosh ^a (Salvation)	15. Hosea
Yô'êl (Jehovah is God)	16. Joel
Amos (Burden)	17. Amos
'ôbedyâ (Servant of Jehovah)	18. Obadiah
Yônah (Dove)	19. Jonah
Mîkâyâhû (Who is like Jehovah?)	20. Micah
Nâhûm (Consolation; counselor)	21. Nahum
H ^e bâkûk (Embrace; embracer)	22. Habakkuk
S ^e panyâ (Jehovah hides; Jehovah has hidden)	23. Zephaniah
Hâggaï (Festive; festal)	24. Haggai
Z ^e chârîah (God remembers)	25. Zechariah
Malachiah (The messenger of Jehovah)	26. Malachi
Ketuvim (The Eleven Books of the Writings)	
14. T ^e hillîm (Praises)	27. Psalms
15. Mish ^e lê (Proverbs; parables)	28. Proverbs
16. 'llyôb (Job)	29. Job
17. Shîr hash-shîrîm (Song of Songs)	30. Song of Songs
18. Rût (Ruth)	31. Ruth
19. 'êkâ (Ah, how! Alas!)	32. Lamentations
20. Qôhelet (One who assembles)	33. Ecclesiastes
21. Hadassah (Myrtle)	34. Esther
22. Daniël (God is my judge)	35. Daniel
23. Edsra (Ezra) - Nêh ^e mîah (Nehemiah)	36. Ezra / 37. Nehemiah
24. Dibrê hayyâmîm (The affairs of the days)	38. 1 Chronicles / 39. 2 Chronicles

References:

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