



Where did the Old Testament canon of books come from? The term “canon” is used to describe the list of books approved for inclusion in the Bible. It stems from a Greek word meaning “rod,” as in a straight stick that serves as a standard for measuring. Hence, to speak of the biblical canon is to speak of authoritative books, given by God, the teachings of which define correct belief and practice. Obviously, only books inspired by God should be received as canonical. The Bible before you includes 39 books in the Old Testament (OT). Are these the right books? Who wrote them? What were their sources of information? These questions are asked by friends and foes of biblical faith. This article touches on such issues with an aim to bolster confidence in the Old Testament Canon of books as the **“inspired” “word of God”** (**1 Thessalonians 2:13 NLT**; **2 Timothy 3:16 NLT**).

Sources for the Earliest Histories of the Old Testament Canon of Books

Genesis chapters 1-11 are referred to as “primeval history” because they cover events that occurred far back in the shadows of earliest time. **Genesis chapters 12-50** are in turn called “patriarchal history” since they recount the lives of Israel’s founding fathers from Abraham down to Joseph. From the creation of the world to Joseph’s establishment in Egypt, all the events retold in Genesis occurred long before Moses was born. This is significant because the Bible and long-standing Jewish tradition assert that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch). Most likely he composed them between the late 1500’s

and early 1400's BCE, while he and the Israelites traveled outside of Canaan. Many events in Exodus through Deuteronomy coincided with Moses' lifetime, and so he authored these largely as an eyewitness. But what about Genesis? How did Moses know details about events and people that preceded him by many centuries?

Some suggest Moses knew the ancient histories because God revealed them to him supernaturally. In this scenario, God's inspiration of Moses would include God supplying Moses with historical details about far gone people, places, times, and even conversations—information Moses would not have known had God not told him. This possibility cannot be ruled out in principle since God is capable of working such miracles, but careful analysis reveals the Pentateuch nowhere hints that the historical narratives were given to Moses in this manner. For instance, Genesis never says anything like, "The word of the Lord came to Moses, saying, 'This is the history of Abraham.'" Instead, the Genesis narratives about Abraham and other historical figures read like straightforward accounts that have been handed down in the usual way: through oral and written records, with the oral records presumably originating soon after the events occurred. In this case, we would add that God superintended the transmission of the early oral and written accounts so that Moses received reliable histories worthy of inclusion in Genesis.

That Moses possibly used such sources may seem surprising at first. People often assume the Bible is the product of divine dictation, but it is more accurate to view Bible composition as having involved both supernatural and natural means, with the result that the original Bible manuscripts were fully reliable and stemmed simultaneously from divine inspiration as well as regular human approaches to writing. This model is supported by **Luke 1:1-4**, where Luke says he did a lot of research before writing his Gospel. A similar example is found in **Numbers 21:14**, where a quote is lifted from the now lost "Book of the Lord's Wars." From these examples we see that Bible writers were free to draw reliable historical data from non-biblical sources. Thus it seems Moses was able to write about historical events that occurred long before his birth by drawing upon information found in pre-existing sources, all while God's Spirit inspired him in penning Genesis.

How did these written sources come down to Moses? For the primeval history, it is reasonable to suggest that from earliest times people passed down carefully preserved oral accounts about key events and significant persons. Later, when elementary writing arose, many of these would have been committed to writing. The transfer to written format may have happened earlier than is commonly supposed. Rudimentary alphabets are known to have circulated in the early second millennium b.c., and with the discovery of the Palermo Stone we have solid evidence that the Egyptians wrote detailed historical records (in hieroglyphic text) at least as far back as 2600 BCE, a time that predated Moses by over 1,100 years. The rich details inscribed on the Palermo Stone reach back toward the very dawn of Egypt, naming kings from 3100 BCE and even earlier. In light of this example it is fitting to suppose that key remembrances of early human history were preserved and passed down to later generations.

That the very earliest writings have not survived to our day is no surprise, for they would have been rare to begin with and would have perished long ago as the acids of time worked their destruction. But they survived long enough to bequeath vital facts to later societies who learned to write the histories in more permanent formats. Some of the greatest modern archeological digs have uncovered ancient nonbiblical texts that resemble the biblical accounts of Noah's flood and the Tower of Babel. These texts date from 1600 BCE and earlier, and in broad strokes they corroborate Genesis. Their points of departure from Genesis may reflect corruptions that slipped in as cultures pulled farther and farther away from knowledge of God. By contrast, people who kept alive a faith like Noah's preserved the stories uncorrupted, and it is these accounts that came down to men like Moses in later generations.

As for the patriarchal histories, it goes without saying that men such as Abraham would pass down close accounts of their remarkable experiences with God. Once God interrupted Abraham's life and promised to create a nation through him, he knew his life was unique. This heritage was repeatedly confirmed to his descendants as God kept up His habit of revealing Himself and confirming His covenant of blessing. Somewhere down the line

Abraham's descendants began writing down these stories. This may have begun most earnestly with Joseph, the son of Israel who became a great political figure in Egypt. Writing was a very old art in Egypt by the time Joseph ascended to power. Having achieved a royal-like status and having married a well-placed Egyptian, Joseph and his family would have had every opportunity to learn the Egyptian writing craft. As a chief bearer of Abraham's lineage, Joseph would have been keen to preserve the family traditions and the link to the one true God.

In the years after Joseph's death, the Hebrews grew in number but came to be suppressed by the Egyptians. This suppression highlighted the need to preserve the histories. One theory holds that one of the Israelite families, possibly the Levites, became the official preservers of the old stories. If so, these materials would have been available to Moses (a Levite) when he became leader of the Hebrews. This inheritance, plus God's commission of Moses and the fact that he was raised and educated in Pharaoh's household, put Moses in a fine position to write an early history of humankind from the Hebrew perspective. A possible exception would be the portions of the creation accounts (**Genesis 1-2**) that could not stem from human eyewitness testimony. These accounts bear close resemblance to visionary revelations that were later given to prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel, as well as John in the book of Revelation. Hence, it is plausible to suggest that God gave Moses a revelatory vision for the first two chapters of Genesis. But in his writings generally, whether he was making use of oral accounts, written histories, or relying on God's Spirit for the unveiling of the creation accounts, Moses often wrote more than he knew. In other words, Moses could not plumb the depths of everything he wrote, for an Author greater than he breathed profundity and prophecy into the works of his pen.

Who Wrote the Books and When?

The Old Testament canon of books do not have copyright dates on them, and few of them explicitly identify their author. Nevertheless, by aid of biblical testimony and Jewish history we know the approximate time at which the books were composed. We also know in many

cases who the author was, or who was likely to have been, chiefly responsible for a book's content. For thousands of years now scholarly people of faith have studied the matter and have concluded that the Old Testament Canon of books and their earliest recipients have reliably portrayed the authorship and dates for the sacred writings, yet today critics say the Old Testament canon books were written many hundreds of years after the dates and authors traditionally assigned to them. For instance, it is claimed that the Pentateuch was actually written nearly 1,000 years after Moses. In its extreme version, this theory even says men such as Moses and Abraham never existed; they and their histories were allegedly invented by priests who sought to provide hope-inspiring stories during the tough years when the Hebrews were exiled in Babylon in the sixth century BCE.

Such theories are chiefly built on the slim supports of (1) skepticism, which presupposes that God does not exist and/or that the Bible is just a human book, and (2) the occasional anachronisms scattered throughout the early portions of the Old Testament Canon of books. Skepticism is itself a faith of sorts, for the assertions that God does not exist, or did not inspire the Bible if He does exist, cannot be proven from the data at hand. Ironically, skeptics, who insist we should form beliefs only on the basis of evidence, contradict their own mantra. But what about the anachronisms found in the Old Testament canon of books? It is true that the Pentateuch occasionally includes such things as place names or vocabulary that did not belong to the era described. In other words, some of these only came into usage hundreds of years after men like Abraham died. Skeptics take this as proof that the books (and all the stories they contain) originated much later than popularly believed, and that the priests who invented these stories occasionally slipped up and placed contemporary names and words into ancient settings.

But this radical theory is firmly against the evidence. In reality, the early Old Testament canon books consistently bear the mark of ancient contexts—contexts that suit times long before national Israel arose. For instance, the laws, customs, and political situations described in the Pentateuch fit very naturally with the second millennium BCE and earlier. This is proven by the discovery of many nonbiblical texts and artifacts from that era. It is

unlikely that unethical priests a thousand years or more removed from the historical situations described in the Pentateuch could have gotten things so right. Also, the concerns that dominated the Hebrew mindset during the Babylonian exile are not addressed by the Pentateuch. Hence, how could priests hope to encourage their downtrodden fellow Hebrews in Babylon by inventing stories that bore no semblance to their situation? Further, it is unimaginable that the mass of Hebrews would fall for such a ruse, choose to base their entire worldview on false histories passed off on them by a band of inventive clergymen, and then succeed in selling the hoax to their children for generations to come. So what should we conclude about the anachronisms? Simply this: in the years after the Pentateuch was written, inevitable changes in place names, vocabulary, and political situations made these Old Testament canon books harder to comprehend. To alleviate this problem, priestly guardians of the sacred oracles updated the texts at key junctures to reflect contemporary word usage and geopolitical situations. Such changes as these (e.g., **Judges 1:10; 1 Samuel 9:9**) would have been undertaken soberly and with great care to preserve the meaning and intention of the holy text. Thus, under strict guidelines the books underwent helpful editing, with the result that the texts remained accessible with the passage of time.

On the whole, however, virtually all the scribes who ever touched the sacred scrolls did so only to read them, or copy them word for word. Literary copying was an important skill in the ancient world since there was no means of rapid duplication, such as modern printing presses or photocopiers. Believing that the writings in their care were authoritative and inspired by God, the Hebrew scribes took exceptional care when copying the scrolls.

While the Hebrew Scripture canon was closed by circa 400 BCE, the earliest documented proof of the existence of what we today call the Old Testament canon of books is from the apocryphal book called **Ecclesiasticus**, or **The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach**, or simply **Sirach**, which was written about 180 BCE:

“Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the other books that followed them . . . my grandfather Jesus, who had

devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors” (Prologue to Ecclesiasticus NRSV). We notice that the books of the Hebrew Scriptures are divided into three sections, the same three sections that Jesus mentioned: **“The Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44 NIV).** The writer of Ecclesiasticus considered the Hebrew scripture canon closed by his grandfather’s day which would have been in the 200’s BCE.

In conclusion, we can be confident in the traditional beliefs about the date and authorship of the OT books. We can also rest assured that the books were carefully copied and preserved, and that all editorial updates of the books were done in a strictly conservative fashion.

Do We Have the Right Books?

Are the 39 books of our Old Testament canon really the ones God meant for us to revere? The first step to answering this question is to address the issue of collection: who was it that originally collected the sacred writings together? Solid evidence indicates that the priests undertook this duty. In **Deuteronomy 31:24-26**, Moses commanded that the book of the law be kept with the ark of the covenant, where the Ten Commandments were stored. This put Moses’ writings at the very center of Jewish religious life just as soon as they were complete. Further, in **Deuteronomy 4:2** we read the command to preserve the commandments of God faithfully. Taken together, these passages indicate that the priests were to keep charge of God’s written revelations, and that these were to be safeguarded against perversion.

Since Moses was the author of the earliest biblical books, and since Moses himself charged the priests with the duties to store and protect God’s words, the high value of identifying, collecting, and protecting the sacred writings was established when the Pentateuch originated. When other prophets and holy men arose in Israel subsequent to Moses and were given revelations by God, their teachings (whether written by them or by their close associates) would have been gathered quickly by the community of the faithful. At some later

point the books came to be stored at the Jerusalem temple. We know this because in a time of national backsliding the unused books collected dust in the temple's storerooms (**2 Kings 22:8-13**). At a much later time in history the books were still kept in the temple, for Josephus (a reputable Jewish historian) received the Scriptures from his Roman benefactors who had sacked the temple in 70 CE.

We have seen that the Jews identified, collected, and preserved the sacred writings as a matter of course. Next we must ask if or when they believed the production of sacred writings had ceased. Josephus is helpful for elucidating this matter. He tells us (*Against Apion* 1.37-43) that the Jews widely recognized that the succession of the prophets ended in the time of Artaxerxes, when Latter Prophets such as Haggai and Malachi fell silent and left no successors. Hence, says Josephus, books written after about 400 BCE were not regarded as Scripture, even if they were valuable on other terms. In 164 BCE Judas Maccabaeus reconsolidated the Scriptures in the temple after the fires of the Antiochene persecution died out, and it appears that the scrolls were harbored there in a long stretch of safety that did not end until the abovementioned Roman aggressions. There can be no doubt of the identity of the Scriptures held at the temple throughout this time: there were 22 books (or 24, depending on how they were divided and counted), and they were lumped into three major divisions: the Law (Pentateuch), the Prophets, and the Writings. Though we divide them into 39 books rather than 22 or 24, the Protestant Old Testament canon of books is identical to those books that were safeguarded at the temple before the time of Christ. The two most significant religious bodies in Israel (Pharisees and Sadducees) both accepted this body of books as the canon of Scripture, though one often hears it mistakenly asserted that the Sadducees accepted only the Pentateuch.

“Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first [the inspired 39 book Old Testament], **and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last** [the uninspired Apocryphal books], **in order to give them to the wise among your people”—2 Esdras 14:45,46 NRSV**

What about the books of the Apocrypha? This is a diverse set of books—most of which were written in Greek, not Hebrew, between 200 BCE and early in the first century CE—that treat various aspects of Jewish religious and national life in the Intertestamental period, which ranged from 400 BCE. to the time of Christ. Only the books of **1 Maccabees** and **2 Maccabees** offer important windows into the Jewish historical context, and some Jews of that time regarded them as valuable religious literature. However, they were never received as Scripture by mainstream Judaism, and even fringe groups such as the Essenes reckoned them valuable, but not scriptural. The books of the Apocrypha were never stored in the temple, a sure sign that they were not thought to be inspired by God. Please see the two articles on this site about the Apocrypha for more details about what these writings were, why these writings are not part of, **“All Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Timothy 3:16 NAB).**

This is not to say there were no struggles among the Jews about the identity of the canon. In fact, five of the books that were counted as canonical had a hard time winning unilateral acceptance. The books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Song of Songs, and Ezekiel were subjected to scrutiny because they seemed secular in outlook or else promoted teachings that initially seemed inconsistent with the Pentateuch. Jewish leaders debated the merits of these books from time to time, as Christian leaders would do in the centuries to come, but all in all their status in the canon was well established. The Apocryphal books were added to the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament canon of books) because Greek speaking Jews wanted access to Jewish holy books plus important non-biblical books. The early Church widely used the Septuagint, but the Apocrypha was rightly rejected. Seeing the need to clarify the status of the Apocrypha, the Reformers elected to separate it from the canonical books. Thus the Apocrypha came to be excluded from Protestant Bibles.

Following Jesus' example, early Christians adopted the Jewish consensus on the Old Testament canon of books. During His ministry Jesus showed that He was in line with the standard Jewish assessment of the canon by quoting from all three divisions of the OT. Furthermore, He demonstrated that the OT included many prophecies and veiled allusions to

Himself, the Messiah. Thus, Christians learned to read the Jewish holy books with a view to seeing Jesus in them. In fact, for the first few decades of the church the majority of Christians had little access to the New Testament (NT) writings that were starting to emerge. The OT was the only Bible many of them knew, and they valued it greatly as they read it from a Christ-centered vantage point. Interestingly, they tended to hold the Apocrypha in high esteem as well—higher than most Jews did, in fact. A little background information helps us understand how this situation arose.

Several centuries before Christ the Jews living in Alexandria commissioned a Greek translation of the Hebrew OT. They did this because they increasingly spoke and read Greek rather than Hebrew. Known as the Septuagint, this Greek translation was the Bible of choice for many Jews and early Christians. In addition to the authoritative Holy Scriptures, the Septuagint included Greek translations of some key Jewish apocryphal books. The reason they were added is clear: Jews living in predominantly Greek-speaking areas wanted access to all the important Jewish writings, both canonical and noncanonical. As the early church grew and experienced ever greater tensions with traditional Judaism, Christian and non-Christian Jewish communities were increasingly isolated from one another socially and religiously. The Jewish assessment that the Apocrypha was noncanonical was also the view of the early Church. Additionally, early Christians noted that the NT authors most often quoted from the Septuagint, not the Hebrew OT. In summary, the early church automatically adopted the Jewish OT canon, most often read the Septuagint version of the OT rather than the Hebrew.

Jesus never quoted any of the books of the Apocrypha, and neither did His disciples in their writings. While [Jude 9 on the surface seems to allude to an event described in a minor non-canonical book, nowhere in the entire New Testament is any book of the Apocrypha cited. In fact, there is no proof that Jude 9 alludes to anything in the Apocrypha, since he does not cite it as a source. Given the fact that neither Jesus nor his apostles quoted from the Apocrypha, it would be remarkable if early Christians trumped their example and counted these books as Scripture.](#)

Even the early Reformers included the Apocrypha in their English and German translations of the Bible, though they set it off in sections that were separate from the canonical OT books and introduced it with a note saying that throughout church history the Apocrypha had not been received as Scripture. Thus the Reformers initially kept alive the old tradition of packing the Apocrypha into the Bible, though as in a seatless balcony reserved for bystanders. As they continued to debate Roman Catholic leaders over the proper bases for doctrinal formation, the Reformers eventually concluded that for the sake of clarity the Apocrypha should be dropped altogether from the Bible. Protestant Bibles today rightly exclude the Apocrypha, signifying that they are nonbiblical.

Conclusion

We have solid reasons for believing that the Old Testament canon o books include only true history and that they were written by men who were appointed by God to deliver Spirit-inspired writings to humanity. Further, it is clear that the Jews of old received these books with awe and a sense of responsibility. Hence, the sacred books were identified, collected, preserved, and transmitted through the generations by men approved for such high tasks. The 39 books of the Protestant Old Testament canon are assuredly the books God would have us venerate as scriptural. The books of the Apocrypha are rightly excluded.

ONE SOURCE: HCSB Study Bible