

Are The Right Books In The Old Testament

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Should Any Books Be Added Or Subtracted?

By

Don Stewart

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Published by EOW (Educating Our World)
www.educatingourworld.com

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Part 1

What Is The Canon Of Scripture?

The living God has revealed Himself to the human race by means of a book—the Bible. It is a collection of writings that God has uniquely inspired. The Bible is God's only written revelation of Himself to humanity. It tells us everything that we need to know about who He is, who we are, and how we can have a relationship with Him.

The Scriptures have not come down to us in one book but rather in a collection of books. The fact that God has revealed Himself to the world by means of a number of sacred writings naturally leads to certain questions: Since there were many religious and historical works written during biblical times, which books should be recognized as coming from God? Is it possible that any sacred books are missing from the Bible? Are there any books included in Holy Scripture that should not be there?

How can we be certain that the correct books are in Holy Scripture? Who made the decision concerning which books were placed in Scripture? How do we know they made the right choices?

Since God has chosen to reveal Himself through a limited number of sacred writings, it is necessary that we know exactly which are His. This first section introduces us to such questions.

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Question 1

What Is The Canon Of Scripture?

The Bible is the complete written revelation of the living God to the human race. The most popular term that is used in describing the books that belong in the Bible is the word “canon.” The word has the idea of a “closed” collection of books that has God’s authority behind it. It describes the literary limits of Scripture. While there was a time when the canon was open and books were still being added, today the canon is closed.

The Canon Is The Rule Or Standard

The English word canon, derived from the Latin, comes from the Greek word *kanon*, which means, “a rule or standard for testing straightness.” The Greek word seems to be derived from the Hebrew word *qaneb*. This term originally meant a “reed” or a “stalk.” For example, it says in First Kings:

And the LORD will strike Israel, so that it will be like a reed [*qaneb*] swaying in the water. He will uproot Israel from this good land that he gave to their forefathers and scatter them beyond the River, because they provoked the LORD to anger by making Asherah poles (1 Kings 14:15 NIV).

Here the word is translated, “reed.”

We also find the plural form of the word used in the Book of Job. In speaking of a creature known as the behemoth, it says the following:

Under the lotus trees he lies, hidden among the reeds [*qaneb*] of the marsh (Job 40:21 NIV).

This is the plural form of the word.

Reeds Were Used As Measuring Sticks

In the ancient world, there were certain reeds that were used as measuring sticks. This is one of the meanings of the word *qaneb*. In some contexts, it referred to a measuring reed that was about six feet, or two meters, long.

We find the following examples of this use of the word in the Book of Ezekiel. It says:

As he brought me nearer, I saw a man whose face shone like bronze standing beside a gateway entrance. He was holding in his hand a measuring tape and a measuring rod [*qaneb*]. . . . I could see a wall completely surrounding the Temple area. The man took a measuring rod [*qaneb*] that was 10- 1/2 feet long and measured the wall, and the wall was 10-1/2 feet thick and 10-1/2 feet high (Ezekiel 40:3,5 NLT).

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The Greeks later incorporated this Hebrew word into their language with the idea of a “standard” or “guideline” by the Greek word *kanon*. The Greek word *kanon* is used four times in the New Testament, always by Paul. For example, he wrote to the Galatians about the rule, or standard, they were to follow:

May God’s peace and mercy be upon all who live by this principle [*kanon*] (Galatians 6:16 NET).

Today the word *canon* is used to describe those limited number of books that are recognized as divinely inspired of God and are authoritative Scripture. Therefore, a canonical book is one that measures up to the standard of Holy Scripture.

Important Observations About The Canon

A number of important points need to be made about the need for a canon of Scripture. They include the following.

1. The Word Canon Was Originally Used Of Doctrines

Historically, the word “canon” was first used by the church of those doctrines that were accepted as the rule of faith and practice. The canon was the “rule of faith” by which Christians lived. It was a summary of Christian teaching.

For example, the early church father Origen used the term *kanon* to refer to the rule of faith, or the rule of truth. Commenting on John 4:21, he wrote:

And we take the words, “Nor will you worship the Father in Jerusalem” to refer to the Church’s rule of faith [*kanon*] so far as most people are concerned.

Over time, the word came to be used as a synonym for the Greek word for list: *katalogos*. This is where the English word “catalogue” is derived.

The terms “canon” and “canonical” came to be applied to either a divinely inspired writing, or to the entire collection or list of sacred books that were recognized as belonging to God’s authoritative Word. A book with God’s unique authority behind it was part of the canon.

The rule of faith had now been forever memorialized in a limited number of sacred books—the canon of Scripture. These books provided the standard for all belief and all conduct.

Thus, by the fourth century A.D., Greek Christians had given the word a technical religious meaning—the canon of Scripture consisted of the list of sacred books that God had divinely inspired and given to humanity—the Old and New Testament.

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Therefore, the term canon, or canonical, can be used to describe a single biblical book, a group of biblical books, the Old Testament, the New Testament, or the entire Bible.

2. The Idea Of A Canon Of Scripture Is Not Unusual – Other Religions Have Sacred Writings

It must be recognized that the idea of a collection of sacred writings is not something unusual. Indeed, all of the major world religions have their own sacred texts which they consider authoritative. These texts form the basis for the faith and practice of the particular religion. Those loyal to the faith follow the practices set down in the book. In fact, Muslims refer to Jews and Christians as “people of the Book.”

Therefore, the idea that there is a canon of sacred books for the Old and New Testaments is consistent with the practices of other world religions. The difference between the biblical canon and the collection of sacred writings of other religions is that the biblical canon represents the only divinely inspired books that God has revealed to humanity.

All of the other sacred books are human attempts to understand God. Scripture is God’s own revelation of Himself to the human race!

3. The Concept Of A Collection Of Scripture Goes Back To Moses

The idea of a collection of sacred documents, that contained a permanent and authoritative record of God’s revelation, goes back to the time of Moses. While the canon continued to grow until it was completed at the end of the first century, the concept of divinely inspired writings was there from the beginning. The writings of Moses were considered to be God’s Words the moment they were written. The Bible records the following:

And Moses came and told the people all the LORD’s words and all the decisions. All the people answered together, “We are willing to do all the words that the LORD has said.” Then Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. Early in the morning he built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve standing stones—according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls for peace offerings to the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. And he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “We are willing to do and obey all that the LORD has spoken.” So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it over the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Exodus 24:3-8 NET).

Thus, the idea of a group of writings that were divinely inspired was there from the beginning.

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The people were supposed to teach their children these truths. We read the following command in the Book of Deuteronomy:

Or what other great nation has such fair laws and rules as all these teachings I am giving you today? However, be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you don't forget the things which you have seen with your own eyes. Don't let them fade from your memory as long as you live. Teach them to your children and grandchildren (Deuteronomy 4:8,9 God's Word).

Obviously, they had to have something objective with which to teach them. The standard was the sacred writings.

4. The Canon Was Divinely Inspired Of God But Recognized By Humanity

The people of God have recognized the various books of the Bible as authoritative Scripture. It must be stressed that the books that are found in the biblical canon were authoritative before they were placed in any collection of sacred books or before any council recognized them as authoritative.

In other words, the fact that an "official" list of authoritative writings was drawn up by the church does not make the various books more sacred or divinely inspired than when they were originally written.

Consequently, the Bible is not an authoritative collection of sacred books—it is a collection of books that were authoritative when they were written. This is an important distinction. If one calls the canon an authoritative collection of books, then someone, or some group, must give them that authority.

However, if the canon is a collection of authoritative books, then it is not necessary to look to some outside authority to confer some status on these books.

5. God Alone Determined The Extent Of The Canon

Although we will examine the historical process as to how certain books came to be accepted as Holy Scripture and how others were rejected, ultimately, we believe that it was God who decided this question. He was the final determiner of which books belonged and which did not. Humans merely recognized the books that God had divinely inspired.

We have a number of examples in Scripture of God's people recognizing His Word.

On one occasion, we find the people listening to the Word and pledging themselves to obey it. We read the following in Second Kings:

The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD—to follow the LORD and keep his commands,

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regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant (2 Kings 23:3 NIV).

When Ezra read the words of the Scripture to the people who had returned from the Babylonian captivity, they cried when they heard it. The Bible says:

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priestly scribe, and the Levites who were imparting understanding to the people said to all of them, “This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping when they heard the words of the law (Nehemiah 8:9 NET).

These examples show that the people believed the words were divinely authoritative and should be believed and obeyed. We also read:

Elsewhere, the Lord said the following. See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it (Deuteronomy 12:32 NIV).

While the recognition of the canon grew over time, the divine inspiration of the books that make up the canon was there from the beginning as these examples indicate.

These canonical books were used by believers to determine beliefs and practices long before any official group recognized them. Many of them were immediately recognized as authoritative. Consequently, the church would want to preserve these words.

6. There Is A Difference Between The Canonizing Of Scripture And Its Collection

Therefore, a distinction needs to be made between canonizing and collecting. The canon of Scripture is not a result of authoritative pronouncements made by the Jewish nation during the Old Testament period or by the Christian church during and after the New Testament period.

No nation, no human being, no council can pronounce a work canonical or scriptural, yet humans were responsible for collecting and preserving such works. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the church because they were formally included in some list—the church included them in the canon because they already regarded them as divinely inspired by God. They were accepted as God’s Holy Word long before any council or church authority recognized them. Neither church councils, nor the application of certain tests, made any book authoritative.

Indeed, there are statements found within the New Testament writings that would cause the churches to want to preserve them. We can cite the following examples. Paul wrote:

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For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed *it* not *as* the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13 NKJV).

The words of Paul were, in actuality, the words of God.

Paul was conscious that he was writing words directed by the Holy Spirit. He wrote the following to the Corinthians:

These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual (1 Corinthians 2:13 NKJV).

The Message puts it this way:

We don't have to rely on the world's guesses and opinions. We didn't learn this by reading books or going to school; we learned it from God, who taught us person-to-person through Jesus, and we're passing it on to you in the same firsthand, personal way (1 Corinthians 2:13 MsgB).

Later in First Corinthians, Paul made the following claim about the authority of his written words. He said:

If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:37 NKJV).

Paul gave the following solemn warning to the church at Galatia about the gospel he preached and wrote about:

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:6-8 NKJV).

The authoritative nature of these claims would motivate the churches to hold the writings to be sacred and thus preserve them. The writings would have continually been used in their worship services.

In addition, they would also have been appealed to in order to solve any doctrinal issue that would arise. Eventually, these sacred writings would have been collected into an authoritative list. Therefore, the books we possess as Scripture were first divinely inspired by God, and then recognized as such by humanity.

In sum, these writings were divinely inspired by God and then recognized by the majority of believers at the time of their composition.

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7. The Canon Is The Same As The Scripture

The books that belong to the canon are the books that are authoritative Scripture. Some people in the past have viewed the canon as containing all those books that the church found edifying, or helpful—not necessarily books that are Holy Scripture. The problem with this approach is that it confuses people as to which books speak with divine authority, and which books are merely helpful. It is much better to have the canon equated with only the sacred books that God has revealed to humanity.

8. The Canon Of Scripture Is Now Closed

It is of the utmost importance to note that the idea of a canon means a “closed” canon. The canon of Scripture is a group of authoritative writings with precise literary limits. God has given the human race only a certain number of divinely inspired books.

The process of revealing these books occurred during a limited period of time—one thousand years of the Old Testament period, and at the time of Christ and His apostles. The Old Testament books were written from about 1400 to 400 B.C. while the New Testament books were composed from approximately A.D. 45-90. There has been no divine revelation since then. The writer to the Hebrews makes this point clear:

When in times past God spoke to our forefathers, he spoke in varied ways through the prophets. But in this the final age he has spoke to us in his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things; and through him he created the universe (Hebrews 1:1,2 REB).

The books that make up the Old Testament canon had all been written long before Christ appeared. Indeed, the Old Testament canon had been closed for four centuries before Jesus Christ came into the world.

The New Testament documents were all written by those who lived at the time of Christ. It was only from the first generation of Christians that God chose the people to author the New Testament. Because God gave His revelation to humanity over a limited period of time, we should not look for, or expect any further divine revelation.

Some Concluding Observations On The Canon

There are a number of concluding observations that need to be made about the canon. They are as follows.

Other Books Could Be Added To The Canon While It Was Open

The canon was not something that was created at a particular time in history. The writings which God divinely inspired were authoritative the moment they were written. This was a process. It began with the first book of the Old Testament and ended with the last book of the New Testament.

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The fact that certain writings were accepted by believers as authoritative, such as the Law of Moses, does not mean that other works could not be added after it. While the canon was open, the possibility existed for other writings to be added.

Therefore, the canon could still be considered as open or incomplete even though a number of writings had been recognized as divinely authoritative and an absolute standard for belief and practice.

All Other Written Works Are Excluded From The Canon

The concept of a canon, by definition, excludes *all* other writings as being authoritative Scripture. Other writings which were composed at the time of the canonical books were excluded from Holy Scripture.

God did not divinely inspire any of these writings and the believers did not recognize them as divinely inspired or authoritative. Therefore, the idea of a canon limits the number of sacred writings.

No Other Books Had *Divine* Authority

We must recognize that certain other writings, apart from the Holy Scriptures, had some sort of authority among the Jews. However, these writings were never considered to have had divine authority. Therefore, we can say that the Jews recognized two collections of writings—one collection was divinely authoritative while the other collection, while having some sort of authority, was never recognized as having God's authority behind them.

A Canonical Book Can Never Lose Its Status

Once a particular writing was received and accepted as canonical, it could not be later excluded from the canon. No one has the authority to overrule the status of a writing which was divinely inspired and recognized as authoritative. In other words, a canonical book can never lose its status.

A Writing Cannot Gain Canonical Status After Being Passed Over

In the same way, no one has the authority to add to the canon a book which had been previously rejected or passed over. For example, nobody today has the right to add any ancient writing to Holy Scripture no matter what the reason may be. The canon has been closed since the death of the last of the apostles. Once the believers of a particular generation rejected the authoritative nature of any writing, it is not possible for believers of a later generation to declare the book canonical.

The Canonical Writings Were Recognized By The Great Majority Of The Believers

The books which are included in the canon of Scripture were recognized, and have been recognized, by the great majority of believers. The fact that a few individuals in the church may have had some peculiar beliefs about

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certain books in the canon does not mean that no canon existed, or that the canon was still open when they made their remarks.

We must not let the beliefs of a few eccentric individuals be the standard by which we judge whether the canon was open or closed at a particular time in history.

God Closed The Canon When He Chose To Do So

Since God has divinely inspired certain written works as authoritative, He, and He alone, chose when no more authoritative writings were to be given and the canon would be closed. Once this occurred, nothing should be added to the canon or deleted from it. Until this happened, certain writings still could be added to the canon of Scripture.

The Canon Summed Up

Therefore, we can sum up the idea of a canon as follows. The canon of Scripture refers to the collection of divinely inspired and authoritative writings which God have to humanity through human writers. These writings were accepted and recognized by a majority of God's people—the Jews in the Old Testament period and the church in the New Testament era. The books are authoritative for all generations; not just the generation which received them.

However, there is an important point we must make. While the books that make up the canon of Scripture are authoritative for every generation, we must make the distinction between the authority that the sacred writings had for the nation Israel, and the authority it has today.

Today we accept the Law of Moses as authoritative Scripture but not in the same way as ancient Israel accepted its authority.

For example, New Testament believers are no longer bound to offer animal sacrifices. On the cross of Calvary, Jesus Christ suffered once and for all for sin. Consequently, the sacrifices commanded in the Old Testament are no longer necessary. They pointed to the time Jesus would come and sacrifice Himself for sin. New Testament believers can learn many valuable lessons from this part of Scripture but the specific commands are not binding on us as they were on ancient Israel.

These are some of the introductory points to be remembered about the canon of Scripture.

Summary To Question 1: What Is The Canon Of Scripture?

The fact that God has revealed Himself to humanity by means of a limited group of sacred writings leads us to consider the question as to the extent of these sacred books, or the “canon.”

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While the word canon originally referred to the rule of faith for believers, it came to mean a series, or list, of standard books that contained the rule of faith. The term “canon,” or “canonical,” can refer to a single book, a group of books, the Old Testament, the New Testament, or the entire volume of Scripture. The important thing to note is that God divinely inspired various books while humanity recognized what God has done. Humans have no authority to pronounce any book as being divinely inspired. This can only come from God Himself.

Therefore, the canon is not a result of authoritative decisions by the nation Israel during the Old Testament period, or decisions made by leaders of the Christian Church in New Testament times and afterward. God’s people, in the nation of Israel and in the church, merely recognized the divine authority of these writings; they themselves did not give these writings any authoritative status. The idea of a collection of sacred writings is something that is found in all of the major world religions. Therefore, the canon of Scripture is in keeping with the practice of other major faiths. The difference is that the canon of Scripture is the only divine revelation that has come from the living God—all other sacred books are pretenders.

The idea of a collection of sacred writings is something we find going all the way back to the time of Moses. His writings were considered authoritative when they were written. The writings were not considered what men like Moses had said—they were considered to be what God had said.

While some people in the past have viewed the canon as more than divinely authoritative books, it is best to equate the canon with Holy Scripture. This way there will be no confusion as to the authority of the books which we recognize as the canon.

It must also be remembered that the canon is now closed.

A few final thoughts include the following. The idea of the making of the canon was a process. This took about one thousand years. By definition, the concept of a canon excluded all other outside writings as having any divine authority. While the Jews may have given some other writings a certain degree of authority, they made the distinction between these writings and the divinely inspired books of the canon.

Once a writing was recognized as canonical, it could never lose its status. Neither could a book be inserted later into the canon once it was rejected by the people living at the time of its composition. Indeed, a canonical book was received by the great majority of believers at the time of its composition. Also, we must appreciate the truth that the canon was closed when God alone decided to close it.

Finally, the canon is authoritative for all people of all times. However, some of the laws and rituals which the Old Testament commanded are not binding today because they were fulfilled by the coming of Christ to the earth. He is the One whom the books of the canon testify to.

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Question 2

Why Is The Issue Of The Canon So Important?

Before we look into any of the specifics about the biblical canon and its history, there is a primary issue which needs to be addressed. Why should we study the subject of the canon? Isn't this a mere academic issue? What does this have to do with what we ultimately believe or how we lead our lives? Aren't there better things which we could do with our time?

Since professing Christians agree that the canon is now closed, why take the time and effort to study something that is not that meaningful?

We can answer these questions about the relevance of studying the issue of the canon by making the following points.

1. Not All Professing Christians Have The Same Canon

While professing Christians do agree that the canon of Scripture is now closed, there is still the issue as to its extent. Not everyone who is a professing Christian agrees as to which books belong in the Bible. While all agree that God has revealed Himself to humanity, there is no agreement as to the exact number of writings which are to be considered as Holy Scripture.

Though there is basically unanimous agreement as far as the New Testament canon is concerned, there are major differences with respect to the Old Testament canon.

For example, the Roman Catholic Church has a number of books added to the Old Testament Scripture which Protestants reject as authoritative. The Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Russian Orthodox also adds these books to their Old Testament.

In addition, they add a few other books that Roman Catholics reject! Finally, the Ethiopic Church adds two additional books to the Old Testament that no other Christian community accepts. With these differences, the issue of the extent of the Old Testament canon has to be addressed.

2. There Are Differences As To How The Canon Is Determined

There is something else. Not only are professing Christians in disagreement as to the extent of the Old Testament canon, there is a basic disagreement among them as to how the canon is to be determined.

The Roman Catholic Church, as well as some other Christian communities, believe that it is the authority of the *church* which determines the extent of the Old Testament and New Testament canon. Interestingly, though a number of different Christian groups believe this, each of these groups teaches that *it* alone has this authority to determine the extent of the canon.

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However, in contrast to those various communities who look for pronouncements of the church to determine the canon, the Protestant Church believes that the extent of the canon is not a matter that was left for the church to determine. Rather it was something which God determined and the church merely recognized. The authority is not with the church but rather with God Himself. He gave sufficient testimony as to which books belong and which do not.

Thus, the issue of the extent of the canon is related to the matter of ultimate authority. Where does the ultimate authority come from to? The Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church or the Ethiopic Church? Or are Protestants correct when they say the authority comes from God's written Word and from it alone?

Who is correct? We can only determine this by the study of the subject of the canon.

3. The Bible Is Different From All Other Books

This leads us to our next point. The primary reason for the importance of the study of the canon has to do with the nature of the Bible—it is the Word of the living God. The Bible has a different status from any other book ever written. This is true for books that are written by Christians as well as non-Christians. No other writing, no matter how valuable, can compare with Holy Scripture. The Scriptures are *the* authoritative standard for all matters of belief and practice. In fact, the purpose of a canon is to distinguish truth from error.

Because of the sacred nature of the writings which God divinely inspired, Moses wrote the following:

Do not add to or subtract from these commands I am giving you from the LORD your God. Just obey them (Deuteronomy 4:2 NLT).

We do not want to read and study books that do not have the Lord's authority behind them. On the other hand, we do not want to miss anything that God has divinely revealed to us. This makes the issue of the canon of the highest importance.

If God has revealed Himself to humanity in written form in a limited number of books, then it is of supreme importance to know exactly which writings come from Him; for His words are the words of life. In Deuteronomy, we read of the importance of the words of the Lord. It says:

They are not just idle words for you—they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess (Deuteronomy 32:47 NIV).

The Message reads this way:

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Yes. This is no small matter for you; it's your life. In keeping this word you'll have a good and long life in this land that you're crossing the Jordan to possess (Deuteronomy 32:47 MsgB).

Jesus said that His words were “spirit and life.” We read His words in the Gospel of John:

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life (John 6:63 ESV).

The New Living Translation translates the verse as follows:

It is the Spirit who gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life (John 6:63 NLT).

Since the words of God are the words of life it is crucial that we know exactly what these words are. His words are the words which guide our lives as well as determine our belief system.

Consequently, it is essential that we know exactly what His words consist of. We do not want to be guided by words which do not come from Him.

Therefore, the question of the extent of the canon is a valid one for there is no Bible without a canon.

Thus, these three reasons make the serious study of the canon of Scripture something that is of the utmost importance.

Summary To Question 2: Why Is The Issue Of The Canon So Important?

The issue of the canon of Scripture is of the highest importance—it is not merely an academic issue. To begin with, professing Christians differ on the extent of the Old Testament canon. The Roman Catholic Church, along with a number of other Christian churches, adds a number of books to the Old Testament which Protestantism rejects. Therefore, the extent of the canon is not a question that Christians agree upon.

Furthermore, a number of Christian communities, the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Russian Orthodox Church each assert that *it* alone has the right to determine which books are to be found in the biblical canon.

Protestants reject this idea that the church has any power to say which books belong in the canon. They believe the Bible itself, along with other sources, gives us the extent of the Old Testament canon. Who is right?

The importance of this issue is highlighted by the nature of the Bible itself. It is not merely a human book but rather the Word of the living God. It is the only standard for humans to know who we are, who God is, and what

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He requires of us. Consequently, we want to know His exact words; no more, no less.

The words of Scripture are also called the “words of life.” They are to be studied and obeyed. However, with any human-made work, we have no guarantee of its truthfulness.

Therefore, the writings which we study and obey must be those which have been divinely inspired by God. To do this, we must know exactly what these writings are. Therefore, the issue of the canon of Scripture is of the utmost importance.

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Question 3

If God Divinely Inspired Certain Books, Then Should We Expect Them To Be Preserved?

If God has given the world a number of books through divine inspiration, then should we expect the providential preservation of these books? Should we expect these books to be accurately preserved throughout history? Is the idea of a canon of Scripture something reasonable?

A Divine Standard Is Absolutely Necessary For A Number Of Reasons

Not only is the idea of a “canon” or a fixed number of sacred books reasonable, it is an absolute necessity for humanity. Without a fixed number of books as a divine standard, we would be left to our own devices to determine what is God’s truth is, and what is *not* God’s truth. In that case, everyone would make his or her own personal decision. This would result in chaos.

With respect, to the idea of a canon, there are a number of important things that must be kept in mind.

1. God Has Revealed Himself To Humanity

First, we must recognize that it is the testimony of Scripture that the Bible is God’s revelation of Himself to humanity. There are two important passages to consider: 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 and 2 Peter 1:20, 21.

Second Timothy 3:16,17

Second Timothy 3:16, 17 teaches that all Scripture is God-breathed. It is variously translated as follows. The English Standard Version says:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16, 17 ESV).

The New International Version translates these verses in this way:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16,17 NIV).

2 Timothy 3:16,17 clearly says that all Scripture originated from God. These verses also teach that the divinely inspired Scripture is profitable.

2 Peter 1:20,21

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Next, we want to look at 2 Peter 1:20,21. Peter stated that the prophetic words of Scripture did not originate with human beings, but rather with God:

But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is *a matter* of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Peter 1:20, 21 NASB).

The New International Version translates these verses as follows:

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21 NIV).

Second Peter 1:20,21 teaches that Scripture ultimately originated from the living God—not from a human source.

These two passages echo what is found elsewhere in Scripture. From the first page of the Bible until the last, we have the record of God revealing Himself to humanity. This revelation was recorded in a number of sacred books.

Therefore, from the testimony of the Bible itself, we find that God has revealed His Person, that is, who He is, as well as His plan, what He is doing on planet earth, to the human race.

2. God Is Able To Preserve His Revealed Word

Furthermore, we know that God is certainly able to preserve the books that He has divinely inspired. It has been estimated there are a quintillion stars in the universe (that is one followed by eighteen zeros!)

The Bible says that God calls each of them by their name. If God is able to do this, He certainly is able to preserve intact His written Word for the benefit of humanity. As Jeremiah the prophet recorded the Lord saying:

See, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me? (Jeremiah 32:27 NRSV).

The New Living Translation renders the verse in this manner:

I am the LORD, the God of all the peoples of the world. Is anything too hard for me (Jeremiah 32:27 NLT).

Certainly, God is able to accurately preserve the books that He has divinely inspired. It is not beyond His power.

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3. God Has Preserved Some Scripture—The Old Testament

This brings us to our next point. We know that God has preserved some Scripture—the Old Testament. Jesus said the following to the religious leaders of His day:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me (John 5:39 ESV).

Jesus believed that there was a distinct group of writings which were called “the Scriptures.” The Scriptures had a known number of books with clearly defined limits. There was no doubt as to which writings did belong and which did not belong.

For example, on the day of His resurrection, Jesus proclaimed that He Himself fulfilled the Old Testament predictions about the coming Messiah. Luke writes:

He [Jesus] said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44 NIV).

Jesus, who speaks with ultimate authority, confirmed the existence of a fixed group of writings as “Scripture”—the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Therefore, we know that God has preserved *some* sacred writings.

4. The New Testament Scripture Is A Logical Necessity

The formation of the New Testament Scripture would have been a logical step for the early Christians. These first believers in Jesus Christ were Jews. They already had a written Scripture—the Old Testament. It would be necessary for another group of sacred writings to complete the Old Testament. Therefore, the idea of a New Testament is both logical and necessary.

The first generation of Christians used the Old Testament in their worship—the same Old Testament as the Jews. They went to the temple and the synagogue along with the Jews. For example, we read of Peter and John going up to the temple:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon (Acts 3:1 NRSV).

The Apostle Paul, upon his conversion, immediately began to preach in the synagogue. We read about this in the Book of Acts:

And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is indeed the Son of God!” All who heard him were amazed. “Isn’t this the same man who persecuted Jesus’ followers with such devastation in Jerusalem?” they asked. “And we understand that

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he came here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests” (Acts 9:20-21 NLT).

Soon, however, they began to be persecuted by the Jews. This forced them to meet separately. We find them meeting at the house of Mary the mother of John Mark:

And when he realized *this*, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying (Acts 12:12 NASB).

Persecution from certain Jews also occurred in Thessalonica. The Bible says:

Some who listened were persuaded and became converts, including a large number of godly Greek men and also many important women of the city. But the Jewish leaders were jealous, so they gathered some worthless fellows from the streets to form a mob and start a riot. They attacked the home of Jason, searching for Paul and Silas so they could drag them out to the crowd (Acts 17:4-5 NLT).

Persecution from the Jewish religious leaders demonstrated that their beliefs could not co-exist. Someone had to be wrong.

Either Jesus was the promised Messiah, as Christians believed and taught, or He was not, as the Jews believed and taught. For the Christians, the fact that the Messiah had come to the world necessitated a “New Testament” to add to previous Holy Scripture.

5. We Should Expect God To Preserve The New Testament Scripture

This leads us to our last point. If God gave humanity a New Testament, like He had given the Old Testament, then we should expect His providential care in preserving it as He did with the Old Testament. This only makes sense. It would be of no help to believers if God only preserved the Old Testament Scriptures but did not supernaturally look after the New Testament.

However, the evidence is that His providential care extended to the New Testament as it did to the Old Testament. Therefore, the idea that God would providentially preserve the entire Scripture makes complete sense.

Summary To Question 3: If God Divinely Inspired Certain Books, Then Should We Expect Them To Be Preserved?

The idea of a canon of Scripture is a logical necessity. The Bible emphasizes that God has revealed Himself to humanity with eternal, unchanging, truths. Since these eternal truths have been committed to writing, it is only reasonable to assume that God would preserve these writings for the

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benefit of humanity. Otherwise, no one would know which truths were from God and which were not.

In addition, we know that God is certainly able to accurately preserve His words once they had been committed to writing. He has the power to do this.

Furthermore, we know that God has revealed and preserved some Scripture—the Old Testament. At the time of Jesus, the Old Testament was a well-known fixed group of divinely authoritative writings. Jesus confirmed their existence. This set the stage for a new group of authoritative writings—the New Testament.

Since God had already set a precedent by giving a clearly defined limit to the sacred books written during the Old Testament period, it is reasonable to assume that He would do so for the New Testament.

Hence the idea of having a completed canon of Scripture with known limits is not something that is unreasonable. In fact, it makes perfect sense.

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Question 4

Why Didn't God Give A Divinely Inspired List Of The Exact Contents Of Scripture?

If God has revealed Himself to humanity in a number of divinely inspired books, then why didn't He provide for us a Bible with a divinely inspired table of contents? Why didn't He clearly set the limits of His authoritative Word? Does the Bible have anything to say on the matter?

There are a number of observations that we can make about this question.

We Are Not Told Why God Did Not Give Us A Divinely Inspired List Of Books

To begin with, we are not told as to *why* God did not clearly provide a list of books that are to be included in Holy Scripture. There are a number of things, that for some reason, God has not revealed to us. This is one of them. For reasons known only to Him, He did not give any authoritative list.

Consequently, any answer would only be speculation, and Scripture is clear that we should never speculate about the ways of God. The Lord has said:

For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8,9 KJV).

Paul wrote the following to the church at Rome:

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable *are* his judgments, and his ways past finding out! (Romans 11:33 KJV).

The New Living Translation translates the verses in this manner:

Oh, what a wonderful God we have! How great are his riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his methods! (Romans 11:33 NLT).

God's ways are beyond our understanding. It is not wise to try and comprehend the reasons as to why God does, or does not, do something. Instead, we should admit our ignorance.

What We Do Know

While we do not know exactly why God did not give humanity a divinely inspired list of Scripture, there are certain things that we do know. They include the following:

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1. The Books Of The Bible Were Not All Produced At Once

There is an important point to remember. All of the books in the Bible were not produced at once. The various books were originally written on individual scrolls. This process was about 1,500 years in the making.

The only practical way such a list could come about is that either God predicted in advance the exact number of books along with their title and author or, that in the very last book written, there could have been some exhaustive list of the books that He divinely inspired. God did neither of these things.

We must realize that the books were accepted as authoritative at the time they were written. Each of them was then added to the canon until God Himself closed the canon by giving no further divine revelation.

2. Early On, There Was No Need For A Fixed List Of Scripture

During the New Testament era, there did not seem to be a need for such a list. This is because the extent of the Old Testament was seemingly clear to everyone. While the New Testament was being written, the apostles of Jesus were still living and were able to give eyewitness and authoritative testimony to His words and deeds. The need for a fixed list only arose after the completion of the New Testament and the death of the last of the Apostles.

3. The Extent Of Scripture Has Been Given By God

However, the extent of the Scripture has been given. The limits of the Old Testament were clearly established at the time of Christ. There was no real debate over which books were divinely inspired and which were not.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, there is sufficient evidence available that the books that now make up this part of Scripture are the correct books with nothing added and nothing lacking. Consequently, though God has not provided us with a list, we do have sufficient reasons for being convinced that the right books are indeed in the Bible.

4. There Are Three Categories Of Books Written During The Old Testament Period That Have Authority Claimed For Them

Our next point looks at the way the various writings of the Old Testament period are catalogued. We can list books that claim divine authority into three different categories—there were the books that were accepted by all, the books that were accepted by some, and the books that were rejected by all.

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The Books Accepted By All: The Hebrew Scripture

The books accepted by all would include the present thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. These are the exact same books that the Jews also received as Holy Scripture. There is no debate about the right of any of these books to be part of the Old Testament canon.

The Books Received By Some: The Old Testament Apocrypha

The books accepted by some would be the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha. The Roman Catholic Church includes a number of additional books in the Old Testament that are rejected by Protestants and Jews. These books are known as the “Apocrypha” by Protestants and “Deuterocanonical books” by the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants, while rejecting these additional books, differ on their usefulness.

The Greek Orthodox Church accepts the Old Testament Apocrypha as Scripture. They also add three other books that the Roman Catholic Church does not accept—First Esdras, Psalm 151 and Third Maccabees.

The Russian Orthodox Church also accepts the Old Testament Apocrypha as Holy Scripture. They also put a number of books in an appendix to the Holy Scripture. These books include First Esdras, Second Esdras, Psalm 151 and Third Maccabees.

The Ethiopic Bible includes two other books that are rejected by Protestants, Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Jews. They are First Enoch and the Book of Jubilees (We look at this subject in detail in our book, *Does The Old Testament Apocrypha Belong In the Bible?*)

Books Rejected By All: The Forgeries

There is a third category of books that are rejected by all branches of Christendom as well as by the Jews. The books rejected by all would be the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (forgeries).

These are books written with the name of an important biblical figure but, in actuality, are forgeries.

There are also other writings which do not claim authorship by a biblical character but have been given some sort of divine status by certain fringe groups. These books are also rejected by all. This includes Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Ethiopic Christians.

5. The New Testament Has Three Categories Of Books That Has God’s Authority Claimed For Them

The books that have had divine authority claimed for them in the New Testament period can also be divided into three categories—books

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accepted by all, books accepted for a short period of time by some, and books rejected by all.

The Books Accepted By All

In the New Testament, the books accepted by all would be our present New Testament writings. The church, throughout its history, has had only these twenty-seven books as its Holy Scripture.

However, for a short period of time, the canonicity of seven of the books—namely Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation, was questioned by some Christians.

Yet, the case for the canonicity of all these books is solid. The problems concerning each of these books were finally resolved.

Books Accepted For A Short Period Of Time But Now Rejected

There were also a number of books that were received by a small minority of Christians for a short period of time in limited geographical areas. This includes works such as the “Shepherd of Hermas” and “Third Corinthians.” However, their canonical status was short-lived.

Books Rejected By All

There were also a large number of books that were never given serious consideration of being Holy Scripture. These include the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Philip. They were always rejected as Scripture by the genuine believers.

6. There Was Unanimous Agreement On The Thirty-Nine Old Testament Books And The Twenty-Seven New Testament Books

Therefore, among Jews and Christians, with respect to the divine inspiration of the Old Testament, there is unanimous agreement upon the thirty-nine Old Testament books.

These thirty-nine books were not only accepted as canonical without any real dispute, their place was never later challenged to any degree by Christians or Jews.

The only exception to this is the Samaritans, who are half-Jew and half-Gentile. They accept only the Law of Moses as being authoritative Scripture. They reject the remainder of the Old Testament.

While they have their own edition of the Book of Joshua, and a few other writings, it is only the Law of Moses which is authoritative to them. The Samaritans have produced an edited version of the Law that keeps in line with their unique beliefs and traditions.

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However, the Samaritans only constitute a small minority of people and their eccentric views should not be taken seriously.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, among Christians there is no doubt concerning the authority of the twenty-seven New Testament books. The only exception is some branches of the Syrian church which reject 2 Peter, 2,3 John and the Book of Revelation.

Apart from these two obscure groups, the Samaritans and some branches of the Syrian church, there is unanimous agreement on the divine authority of the sixty-six books of Scripture among Bible believers. Present controversies that do exist are not about these books but rather whether some other books should also be added to the Old Testament canon of Scripture.

Consequently, though God has not provided us with a written list of books that belong in Scripture, we can be confident that we do possess the correct books.

Summary To Question 4: Why Didn't God Give A Divinely Inspired List Of The Exact Contents Of Scripture?

The Scriptures do not contain any divinely inspired table of contents. God has not told us why this is so. Since He has not told us, it would only be fruitless to speculate.

Seemingly, the only way in which He could have done so was to predict ahead of time the exact number of books as well as their titles and authors, or to have an exhaustive list in the last book in which He did divinely inspire. He chose to do neither. However, He did not leave us in darkness. The Old Testament had been complete for about four centuries before the time of Christ and had clearly defined limits.

The evidence also demonstrates that the New Testament contains exactly those writings that God intended to be added as Holy Scripture along with the Old Testament. Therefore, we are not in darkness when it comes to the recognizing the extent of the canon of Scripture. With respect to the Old Testament canon, we can classify the books into three categories: books that were accepted by all, books that were accepted by some, and books that were rejected by all.

Regarding the New Testament, there were books accepted by all, books accepted by some, as well as books rejected by all. Seven of the books of the New Testament have been disputed at one time or another during church history but there are no strong reasons to doubt their divine inspiration. This is true of all of the books that are found in Holy Scripture. While there is no divine table of contents, all of the books found in Holy Scripture clearly belong there.

Hence the idea of having a completed canon of Scripture with known limits is not something that is unreasonable. In fact, it makes perfect sense.

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Part 2

The Old Testament Canon Are The Correct Books In The Old Testament?

From the very beginning of human existence, God has revealed Himself—He has not been silent. He has let humans know who He is, who we are, and what our purpose is here upon the earth. Before Jesus Christ came into the world, some two thousand years ago, this revelation of the living God was found in only one Book—the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament period, God did not reveal His Word to humanity by means of just one book, but rather by a number of books that were written over a one-thousand-year time span. It is important to know which books belong in the Old Testament since it makes up three fourths of the Bible—the written Word of God.

The New Testament recognizes that the Jewish people were given the oracles, or the spoken words of God. The Apostle Paul wrote the following to the Romans:

So what advantage does the Jew have? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Considerable in every way. First, they were entrusted with the spoken words of God (Romans 3:1,2 HCSB).

Therefore, it is to this one group of people, the Jews, that God has revealed Himself by means of a number of sacred writings.

However, there were many books written during the Old Testament period. The question that naturally arises is, “Which of these books should be recognized as coming from God?” Is it possible that there are books in the Old Testament that do not have God’s authority behind them?

Are any divine writings missing from the Old Testament Scripture? Who made the decisions with respect to these books? Can we be certain that the correct choices were made? Did Jesus have anything to say on the matter of which books belonged in the Old Testament?

We will now turn our attention to these and other related issues as we discuss which books deserved to be recognized as God’s Holy Word in the Old Testament canon of Scripture.

We will discover that there is compelling evidence that our present Old Testament contains the exact number of books that God gave to humanity during that time in history. Consequently, we can have the utmost confidence that when we read the Old Testament Scripture, we are reading God’s Word.

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Question 5

Who Were The People Who Spoke For God During The Old Testament Period? (The Old Testament Prophets)

The Bible says that during the Old Testament period, God's revelation to humanity came through a group of people known as the prophets. Scripture tells us a number of things about the Old Testament prophets. They include the following.

1. The Prophet Speaks For Another Person

The English word prophet comes from two Greek words, *pro* which means "before, in front of, or in place of," and *pheme*, which means "to speak." A prophet, therefore, is someone who speaks in place of someone else. For example, Aaron spoke on behalf of his brother Moses.

The Bible says:

So the Lord replied to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet" (Exodus 7:1 NET).

The Bible says Aaron performed the job of Moses' spokesman. We also read about this in the Book of Exodus. It says:

And Aaron told them everything the LORD had said to Moses. He also performed the signs before the people (Exodus 4:30 NIV).

The New Revised Standard Version translates this verse as follows:

Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people (Exodus 4:30 NRSV).

Aaron was the one who spoke for his younger brother Moses.

2. The Prophet Spoke God's Word

The biblical prophet was one who spoke forth the word of God. While every prophet spoke forth God's Word, not every prophet spoke of the future. The title "prophet" has the main idea of receiving and delivering the message of God on any subject.

3. The Prophet Says What The Lord Said

The prophets were spokesmen for the Lord. They spoke to the people on behalf of God. The Lord said to Moses:

I will raise up a prophet like you for them from among their fellow Israelites. I will put my words in his mouth and he will speak to them whatever I want (Deuteronomy 18:18 NET).

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The prophets said what the Lord said. The Old Testament prophets spoke the words of God. The Lord told the prophet Ezekiel the following:

You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious (Ezekiel 2:7 NIV).

The prophet Amos wrote:

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared—who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken—who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:7,8 NIV).

Balaam the prophet made the same type of admission. We read the following in the Book of Numbers:

“Spend the night here,” Balaam said to them, “and I will bring you back the answer the LORD gives me.” So the Moabite princes stayed with him (Numbers 22:8 NIV).

The biblical prophets unanimously testified that the words they spoke were not their own but were ultimately derived from the Lord.

4. God’s Way Of Designating Prophets: Visions And Dreams

The Bible says that God’s way of designating prophets was through visions and dreams. The Lord said the following to the children of Israel:

And he said, “Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams” (Numbers 12:6 NRSV).

Visions and dreams are the way in which God has made himself known to the prophets.

5. Not All Prophets Held Prophetic Office

Not all people who prophesied held the office of a prophet. For example, David was a king who also made prophetic utterances. The Bible says:

These are the last words of David: The oracle of David son of Jesse, the oracle of the man exalted by the Most High, the man anointed by the God of Jacob, Israel’s singer of songs: The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue (2 Samuel 23:1,2 NIV).

There is also the example of Daniel. Although Daniel was a leader in the Babylonian government, Jesus called him a prophet. We read the following in the Gospel of Matthew:

So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel - let the reader understand (Matthew 24:15 TNIV).

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The New Revised Standard Version translates the verse as follows:

So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand) (Matthew 24:15 NRSV).

Daniel is an example of a man of God to whom was given prophetic gifts without being specifically called a prophet.

6. There Were A Group Of Prophets

Scripture speaks of a group, or company, of prophets. We read about this in Second Kings:

Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent” (2 Kings 2:2,3 NRSV).

This seems to indicate that there were a number of prophets in Israel at that time.

7. There May Have Been An Official Registry Of Prophets

There seemed to be an official registry of the Old Testament prophets. The Lord said to Ezekiel:

My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will not belong to the council of my people or be listed in the records of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD (Ezekiel 13:9 NIV).

The fact that Scripture says their names would not be listed in the records of the house of Israel has caused some to conclude that there was an official registry of the prophets.

While this could be referring to an official registry of prophets, it may simply refer to those who were God’s genuine people as opposed to the false prophets who would not qualify as spokesmen for God.

8. Some Prophets Wrote Down Their Prophetic Words

Sometimes the prophets were told to write down the things that God had revealed to them. For example, the Lord told Isaiah to write down certain things:

Then the LORD said to me, Take a large tablet and write on it in common characters (Isaiah 8:1 NRSV).

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In another place, the Lord told the prophet Isaiah to write things down. We read:

Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness (Isaiah 30:8 NIV).

Jeremiah the prophet was told to write down the words that the Lord gave to him. The Lord commanded him in this manner:

Take another scroll and write on it all the words that were on the first scroll, which Jehoiakim king of Judah burned up (Jeremiah 36:28 NIV).

The Lord testified to the authority of Jeremiah's writings:

I will bring upon that land all the things I have spoken against it, all that are written in this book and prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations (Jeremiah 25:13 NIV).

Daniel the prophet wrote down a dream that the Lord had given to him:

In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream (Daniel 7:1 NRSV).

We also find the prophet Habakkuk was commanded to write down the words of the Lord:

The Lord responded: "Write down this message! Record it legibly on tablets, so the one who announces it may read it easily (Habakkuk 2:2 NET).

The prophets, therefore, not only spoke God's words, they also wrote them down on occasion.

9. No One Was Allowed To Change Even One Word Of Scripture

The people were commanded not to change even one word that God had revealed to them. Moses recorded the Lord saying the following:

Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you (Deuteronomy 4:2 NIV).

Consequently, the people were given no authority to originate Scripture. They were ordered to keep the commandments that the Lord had given. This implies their ability to exactly identify those commandments to which they were to be obedient.

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10. Some Of The Writings Of The Prophets Were Preserved

The writings of the prophets were written to be preserved. They were first placed in the tabernacle, and then later in the temple in Jerusalem. These writings were to be preserved for future generations. Moses said to the people:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life (Deuteronomy 6:1,2 NIV).

The Message translates these verses as follows:

This is the commandment, the rules and regulations, that God, your God, commanded me to teach you to live out in the land you're about to cross into to possess. This is so that you'll live in deep reverence before God lifelong, observing all his rules and regulations that I'm commanding you, you and your children and your grandchildren, living good long lives (Deuteronomy 6:1-2 MsgB).

The writings of the prophets were authoritative for people of later generations.

11. Even The King Must Obey The Prophets

The Scripture also commanded how the king was to relate to God's written Word. The Lord made the following command to the people:

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees (Deuteronomy 17:18, 19 NIV).

This passage was written about five hundred years before Israel had its first king. The Law of Moses anticipated the office of the king and commanded how the king should view the written Word of God.

While the king had authority by which he could put to death anyone whom he desired, the king was not allowed to tamper with the Scripture. He, like everyone else, was to be under the authority of the written Word of God.

12. Sometimes The Message Of The Prophets Was Sent Elsewhere

At times, the message of the prophet was sent to another place. We read in the Book of Jeremiah about this occurring:

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Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the remainder of the elders who were carried away captive—to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon (Jeremiah 29:1 NKJV).

Elijah the prophet sent a letter to the king. This is reported in Second Chronicles:

And a letter came to him from Elijah the prophet, saying, Thus says the LORD God of your father David: Because you have not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat your father, or in the ways of Asa king of Judah (2 Chronicles 21:12 NKJV).

It was not uncommon to send the written message of the prophet to another destination.

13. The Prophets Recorded Israel's Sacred History

Another crucial role of the prophets was to record the history of the nation Israel. This was extremely important because Israel was like no other nation on the earth. They had a special calling and commission from the Lord:

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

We also read the following in Second Chronicles:

As for the other events of Solomon's reign, from beginning to end, are they not written in the records of Nathan the prophet, in the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite and in the visions of Iddo the seer concerning Jeroboam son of Nebat? (2 Chronicles 9:29 NIV).

Therefore, the sacred history of the nation was recorded by God's specially chosen representatives.

14. The Message Of The Prophets Was Also Read Out Loud

In the Book of Jeremiah, we find that Baruch read Jeremiah's message out loud to the people. The Bible says the following:

Baruch the son of Neriah did according to all that Jeremiah the prophet commanded him, reading from the book the words of the LORD in the LORD'S house (Jeremiah 36:8 NASB).

This custom was practiced a number of times in the Old Testament period. In fact, on three different occasions in the Old Testament, we are told that the Scripture was read aloud to the people.

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For example, Moses read the Book of the Covenant to the people at the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai:

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey” (Exodus 24:7 NIV).

Later, before the Babylonian captivity, the Book of the Covenant was read to the people:

Next, the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant in the presence of the Lord to follow the Lord and to keep His commandments, His decrees, and His statutes with all his mind and with all his heart, and to carry out the words of this covenant that were written in this book; all the people agreed to the covenant (2 Kings 23:3 CSB).

After the Babylonian captivity, the Book was again read to the people. This is recorded in the Book of Nehemiah:

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law (Nehemiah 8:9 NIV).

On each of these occasions, the writings were assumed to have divine authority.

15. There Were False Prophets Who Existed

While God raised up His true prophets, Scripture also warns of the existence of false prophets. The Lord said the following to the nation of Israel before they entered into the Promised Land:

But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death (Deuteronomy 18:20 NIV).

God judged the false prophets during the time of Moses. In the Book of Numbers, we find God judging them as follows:

The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them along with Korah, whose followers died when the fire devoured the 250 men. And they served as a warning sign (Numbers 26:10 NIV).

God also judged the false prophets of Baal. This happened at the command of the prophet Elijah:

Then Elijah commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there (1 Kings 18:40 NIV).

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False prophets assume the existence of true prophets.

16. The Old Testament Prophets Continued Until John The Baptist

The Old Testament prophets continued until John the Baptist. Jesus made this clear when He said the following:

For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John (Matthew 11:13 NASB).

John was the last of the Old Testament prophets. When Jesus came into the world, a new prophetic era began.

Summary To Question 5

Who Were The People Who Spoke For God During The Old Testament Period? (The Old Testament Prophets)

The Old Testament recognizes a number of people known as “prophets.” These people spoke in the place of the Lord. Their words were God’s words when they were speaking for the Lord. God’s way of designating prophet was by way of visions and dreams.

The Old Testament also spoke of a group of prophets. There may have been an official registry of prophets.

The prophets not only spoke the Word of the Lord some of them committed their prophecies to writing. The prophets wrote down the things that God had revealed to them, and their writings were preserved for future generations.

All the people, including the king, were commanded not to change a word that the prophets wrote. At times, the words of the prophets were sent elsewhere and read out loud to the people. Obedience was always expected.

Along with the genuine prophets were a number of false prophets. They were severely judged for prophesying falsely.

The Old Testament prophets continued until John the Baptist—he was the last prophet of the old era. Jesus Christ brought in a new age of prophetic truth.

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Question 6

How Were The Old Testament Prophets Described?

The Bible describes the Old Testament prophets in a number of specific ways. They include the following:

1. The Prophet Is Called A Man Of God

One designation of the prophet was “a man of God.” We read about this in First Samuel:

Now a man of God came to Eli and said to him, “This is what the LORD says: ‘Did I not clearly reveal myself to your father’s house when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh?’” (1 Samuel 2:27 NIV).

Of course, this designation would only refer to the male prophets—not the female ones.

2. The Prophet Is A Servant And Messenger Of The Lord

The prophet was also called the “messenger” and “servant” of the Lord. Isaiah the prophet wrote the following:

Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD? (Isaiah 42:19 NIV).

The prophet brought the message of the Lord as well as serving Him.

3. The Prophet Was Called A Seer

The prophet was also called a “seer.” Isaiah wrote:

They say to the visionaries, “See no more visions!” and to the seers, “Don’t relate messages to us about what is right! Tell us nice things, relate deceptive messages” (Isaiah 30:10 NET).

A seer is another word for prophet.

4. The Prophet Was A Man Of The Spirit

A prophet was known as the “inspired man” or a “man of the spirit.” We find this title used in the Book of Hosea. Scripture says the following:

The days of punishment are coming, the days of reckoning are at hand. Let Israel know this. Because your sins are so many and your hostility so great, the prophet is considered a fool, the inspired man a maniac (Hosea 9:7 NIV).

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The New Revised Standard Version calls the prophet “the man of the spirit:”

The days of punishment have come, the days of recompense have come; Israel cries, “The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is mad!” Because of your great iniquity, your hostility is great (Hosea 9:7 NRSV).

The Spirit of God controlled the behavior and words of the prophets.

5. The Prophet Was A Watchman For The People

A prophet was also a watchman who helped protect and warn the people. The Lord made this clear to Ezekiel:

At the end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel, and whenever you hear a word from my mouth and you must give them a warning from me (Ezekiel 3:16,17 NIV).

The prophet, along with other duties, watched out for the spiritual life of the people.

Summary To Question 6: How Are The Old Testament Prophets Described?

In the Old Testament Scripture, we find a number of designations for God’s chosen spokesmen: the prophets. They were called such things as a “man of God,” a “servant or messenger of the Lord,” a “seer” a “man of the spirit” and a “watchman.”

These are the various ways in which the Biblical prophets are described. Each of these descriptions gives us an idea of who they were and what they were supposed to do.

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Question 7

Were All Of The Books Of The Old Testament Written By Prophets?

The Bible gives testimony that most of the books of the Old Testament were written or edited by prophets. Men, such as Solomon, who were given special wisdom by God, wrote the other books.

The Old Testament evidence is as follows.

1. Moses Was A Prophet

Moses, the writer of the first five books of the Old Testament, was called a prophet. He wrote the following:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you—from your fellow Israelites; you must listen to him (Deuteronomy 18:15 NET).

The prophet Hosea later said of Moses:

The LORD used a prophet to bring Israel up from Egypt, by a prophet he cared for him (Hosea 12:13 NIV).

Moses was assumed to be prophet by all of the people of Israel.

There Were Other Prophets In Moses' Lifetime

There were other prophets, both male and female, in Moses' lifetime. We read in the Book of Exodus about a female prophetess—Miriam, the sister of Moses:

Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a hand-drum in her hand, and all the women went out after her with hand-drums and with dances (Exodus 15:20 NET).

Other prophets were assumed to be operating. Moses recorded the Lord saying the following to the children of Israel:

And he said, "Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams" (Numbers 12:6 NRSV).

This set the stage for prophets who were to come after Moses.

There Were Prophets After The Time Of Moses

Later, in Deuteronomy, we read about other prophets that existed. However, none of them had a ministry like Moses. The Bible makes this very clear:

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Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel (Deuteronomy 34:10-12 NIV).

All of this assumes that there would have been prophets after the time of Moses.

2. Joshua

Joshua was the successor to Moses as leader over Israel. He is the one who lead the people into the Promised Land. While Joshua was not called a prophet, he was a man filled with God’s wisdom. We read about this in Scripture:

Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded Moses (Deuteronomy 34:9 NIV).

The people listened to Joshua in the same way as they did to Moses—he had the authority of the Lord behind him.

3. Judges

Although prophets existed immediately after Moses, it seems they did not write down their prophetic words until the time of Samuel, several centuries later.

We do know that there were earlier prophets in the days of the Judges. For example, we read about Deborah:

Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time (Judges 4:4 NIV).

In another account in the Book of Judges, we find God sending prophets to Israel:

When the Israelites cried to the LORD because of Midian, he sent them a prophet, who said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Judges 6:7,8 NIV).

There may have been others during this time. However, these prophets did not leave behind any written Scripture. They spoke the Word of God to the people but, as far as we know, did not write anything.

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4. Samuel

Samuel, the probable author of First and Second Samuel, was called a prophet, or a seer. We read about this designation of him in Chronicles. It says:

As for the events of King David's reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer (1 Chronicles 29:29 NIV).

The prophets recorded the history of Israel. Their writings served as a basis for the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.

The prophet Samuel may have also written the Book of Judges and the Book of Ruth. However, we cannot be certain of this.

5. Kings And Chronicles

We do not know who put together the books of Kings and Chronicles. They are the collections of the writings of various prophets. Indeed, Chronicles lists some seventy-five different sources for the information contained within the Book!

6. Ezra, Nehemiah

While neither Ezra nor Nehemiah was called a prophet, each of them was a man whom God gifted with special wisdom. Most likely, each of these books was written by the ones whose names are on the writing.

7. Esther

The author of the Book of Esther is unknown. Any attempt to know his exact identity is pure speculation. Scripture does not tell us anything.

8. Job

Although the author of the Book of Job is not stated, we do have God's Words summarizing what occurred:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" (Job 38:1,2 NIV).

After God called the previous discussion, "words without knowledge" He then added His divine truth. Therefore, we have God's truth mixed with human ignorance in the Book of Job.

The Lord later mentions Job along with Daniel and Noah to the prophet Ezekiel:

Ezekiel, son of man, suppose an entire nation sins against me, and I punish it by destroying the crops and letting its people and livestock

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starve to death. Even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were living in that nation, their faithfulness would not save anyone but themselves (Ezekiel 14:14 CEV).

Job was considered to be a man of faith.

9. Psalms

David, who had a prophetic gift, wrote many of the psalms. He testified that the word of the Lord was upon his tongue. Indeed, God spoke through him:

These are the last words of David: “The oracle of David son of Jesse, the oracle of the man exalted by the Most High, the man anointed by the God of Jacob, Israel's singer of songs: The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue” (2 Samuel 23:1.2 NIV).

David acknowledged that the Lord spoke through him.

10. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song Of Solomon

The Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are attributed to King Solomon. His authorship, however, is not certain. The Bible speaks of Solomon as a man in whom God gave special wisdom. We read in First Kings:

The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be” (1 Kings 3:10-12 NIV).

While not specifically called a prophet, Solomon was given unique wisdom from the Lord.

11. Isaiah

Isaiah was recognized as a prophet of the God of Israel. We read about this in Second Kings:

He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary and the leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz (2 Kings 19:2 NIV).

His status as a prophet was not ever questioned.

12. Jeremiah

Daniel recognized Jeremiah as a prophet:

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In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years (Daniel 9:1,2 NIV).

Like Isaiah, it was clear that Jeremiah was a true prophet of the Lord.

13. Ezekiel

While no other prophet confirmed Ezekiel's status as a prophet of God, there are claims from the Book of Ezekiel that demonstrates his prophetic call. Ezekiel said that he had visions of God. In the first verse of the book he wrote, we read the following:

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God (Ezekiel 1:1 NIV).

Ezekiel testified that the Lord also told him to write down certain things. According to Ezekiel, the Lord said to him the following words:

As for you, mortal, describe the temple to the house of Israel, and let them measure the pattern; and let them be ashamed of their iniquities. When they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the plan of the temple, its arrangement, its exits and its entrances, and its whole form—all its ordinances and its entire plan and all its laws; and write it down in their sight, so that they may observe and follow the entire plan and all its ordinances (Ezekiel 43:10-11 NRSV).

Ezekiel clearly claimed to be God's prophet.

14. Daniel

Daniel was recognized as a wise man from the writings of his fellow-prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel recorded the Lord classifying him with the biblical characters Noah and Job:

Mortal, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it, and break its staff of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it human beings and animals, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job, these three, were in it, they would save only their own lives by their righteousness, says the Lord GOD (Ezekiel 14:13,14 NRSV).

Daniel is in the company of two of the main characters of the Old Testament.

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Four Of The Twelve Minor Prophets Had Other Prophets Testify To Them

Each of the twelve Minor Prophets had God's divine calling either explicitly or implicitly attributed to them. The authority of four of the Minor Prophets was testified to in other parts of Scripture. The testimony is as follows:

Haggai And Zechariah

Ezra recognized Haggai and Zechariah as prophets:

When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them (Ezra 5:1 NASB).

Ezra believed that these men represented the God of Israel to the people.

Jonah

Jonah was called a prophet in the Book of Kings:

He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher (2 Kings 14:25 NIV).

The fact that Jonah was God's prophet is beyond all doubt.

Micah

Those who lived at the same time as Micah believed that he spoke the words of the Lord. Over a century later, the prophet Jeremiah was being persecuted for his prophecies of judgment. Jeremiah then reminded the people of Micah's prophecy:

Some of the elders of the land stepped forward and said to the entire assembly of people, "Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah. He told all the people of Judah, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets"' (Jeremiah 26:17,18 NIV).

This is a citation of Micah 3:12. It reads as follows.

Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed like a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins, and the mountain of the temple like the bare hills of the forest (Micah 3:12 NKJV).

Micah's writings were assumed to be authoritative by later generations.

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Each Of The Twelve Minor Prophets Claimed To Speak God's Word

In the writings of each of the twelve Minor Prophets, we find the testimony that the Word of the Lord came unto them. The evidence is as follows:

Hosea

Hosea believed that he was called by the Lord to the prophetic ministry. He made the following claim:

The word of the LORD that came to Hosea the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel (Hosea 1:1 NKJV).

Hosea claimed that God's Word came to him.

Joel

Joel claimed to speak the Word of the Lord. In the opening verse, he wrote that the Lord had spoken to him:

The word of the LORD that came to Joel the son of Pethuel (Joel 1:1 NKJV).

Joel testified that the Lord spoke to him.

Amos

The prophet Amos wrote down the things that God showed him. The Book of Amos begins with this testimony:

The words of Amos, who was among the sheepbreeders of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake (Amos 1:1 NKJV).

Amos clearly claimed to be a prophet.

Obadiah

Obadiah said that he recorded the Word of the Lord. He wrote the following:

The vision of Obadiah. Thus says the Lord GOD concerning Edom (We have heard a report from the LORD, and a messenger has been sent among the nations, saying, "Arise, and let us rise up against her for battle") (Obadiah 1:1 NKJV).

Obadiah is another prophet who wrote down the things the Lord showed him.

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Jonah

Jonah the prophet claimed to receive God's Word. In the opening verse of the Book of Jonah we read the following:

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying (Jonah 1:1 NKJV).

His claim to being God's prophet is beyond all doubt.

Micah

The Word of the Lord came to the prophet Micah:

The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem (Micah 1:1 NKJV).

Micah also testified that the Lord spoke to him.

As we have already noted, Jeremiah the prophet confirmed Micah's prophetic status.

Nahum

Nahum was given God's Words of judgment against the people of Nineveh. He wrote the following in the introduction to his work:

The burden against Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite (Nahum 1:1 NKJV).

Nahum made his prophetic status clear.

Habakkuk

Habakkuk spoke the word of the Lord:

The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw (Habakkuk 1:1 NKJV).

Again, we have another clear testimony of a man claiming prophetic status.

Zephaniah

Zephaniah recorded God's truth. He explained it this way:

The word of the LORD which came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah (Zephaniah 1:1 NKJV).

Zephaniah is another example of an Old Testament prophet who spoke the Word of the Lord.

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Haggai

Haggai claimed to have received the Lord's Word:

In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying (Haggai 1:1 NKJV).

Haggai prophesied about the rebuilding of the temple. Later, Ezra would confirm the prophetic status of Haggai.

Zechariah

Zechariah was designated as a prophet of the Lord. We read the following:

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying, (Zechariah 1:1 NKJV).

Among other things, Zechariah, in his prophetic words, spoke of the coming of the Messiah. Ezra also confirmed that Zechariah was a prophet of God.

Malachi

Malachi spoke forth and recorded God's Word:

The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi (Malachi 1:1 NKJV)

Therefore, we find that each of the Minor Prophets personally claimed to speak for the Lord. This was their claim—it was not something that others claimed for them. Consequently, there is sufficient testimony that those who wrote the various books that now make up the Old Testament believed that God had spoken to them and they faithfully recorded what He said. Indeed, we find that almost every Old Testament book has an explicit claim of “thus says the Lord.”

Summary To Question 7 Were All Of The Books Of The Old Testament Written By Prophets?

Most of the books of the Old Testament were written by prophets. The other books were written by wise men, such as Joshua or Solomon, who was given God's wisdom, or a king like David who was also given a prophetic gift. Each one had a divine calling to write authoritative Scripture. Only the Book of Esther does not have a clear testimony of an author who was a wise man or prophet. The evidence is that these writers believed they had a calling from God to write down the things that the Lord had showed them.

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Question 8

How Was The Old Testament Canon Of Scripture Put Together?

Who made the decision as to which books made up the Old Testament canon? Was it done over a long period of time, or was it decided by some council? What do we know for certain about the process?

Is this an important issue?

Two Observations About The Old Testament Canon

To begin with, we need to make two observations about the Old Testament canon. They include the following:

1. It Is Important To Know Which Books Belong In The Old Testament

It is important to know which books belong in the Old Testament canon. Not only does the Old Testament comprise about three fourths of the Bible, it is the foundation upon which all of God's divine revelation rests.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance that we know the exact extent of books that God divinely inspired and revealed to humanity.

2. The Exact Details Of Their Collection Are Not Known

While it is important to know which books that God revealed to humanity during the Old Testament period, the exact details as to the final completion of the Old Testament canon are not known.

However, the Old Testament does provide various clues as to the manner in which the books were recognized as canonical. The best way of treating the subject is by listing the things that we know for certain with respect to the Old Testament and its authoritative contents.

There Are Things That We Know For Certain

There are a number of things that we know for certain in our quest to understand the limits of the Old Testament canon of Scripture. They include the following:

To begin with, there was a group of individuals, whom the Lord sent to speak to the people. They were called "the prophets." The prophets were God's designated spokesmen. When they spoke, the authority of the Lord was behind their words.

The first such prophet was Moses. Other prophets followed. In fact, from the time of Samuel, until the time of the Babylonian captivity there was an unbroken succession of these prophets that God sent to the people. Consequently, the people always had God's witness during this period.

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We also discover that, at times, the prophets wrote down some of the things that God told them to say. At other times, the messages of these divinely inspired prophets were recorded by others. The writings of the prophets, along with writings from other men, were collected.

Some of the books, such as Psalms and Proverbs, were collected in stages. This collection of writings was considered to be Holy Scripture— God’s authoritative Word to humanity. They were expected to be believed and obeyed.

Finally, the list of authoritative writings was closed at a certain period of time. The people recognized when God spoke and they also recognized when God ceased sending His prophets.

The evidence for this is as follows.

1. There Was A Group Of People Who Were God’s Spokesman – The Prophets

The Old Testament contains numerous references to individuals whom God chose to proclaim His Word. They are known as the prophets. These prophets were sent to inform the people about who God is, and exactly what He expected from them.

God Himself began the process of revealing His words to humanity by personally writing the Ten Commandments upon two tablets of stone. After this, He then gave His revelation through the prophets. The first such prophet was Moses. The Lord confirmed the prophetic status of Moses when He said to him:

I will raise up a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites. I will tell that prophet what to say, and he will tell the people everything I command him (Deuteronomy 18:18 NLT).

There were others whom the Lord raised up to speak for Him. For example, the Lord raised up the prophet Jeremiah to speak His word to the people. The Bible says:

The LORD gave me a message. He said, “I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my spokesman to the world” (Jeremiah 1:4,5 NLT).

There is no doubt that the Lord raised up a number of His spokesmen, or prophets, during the Old Testament period.

2. There Was An Unbroken Succession Of Prophets From The Time Of Samuel

Not only did the Lord raise up a group of people known as the prophets to speak to Israel, He also gave them an unbroken succession of prophets.

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In fact, one of the most important evidences, in determining the extent of the Old Testament canon, is the recognition of this continuous succession of prophets. As we look at the Scripture, we find that from the time of Samuel, until the time of the Babylonian captivity there was a continuous chain of prophets that appeared to the people.

We can illustrate this as follows. Scripture says the seer, or prophet, Samuel, wrote down the events of King David. We read the following in the Book of First Chronicles:

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

The records of Solomon, the King who followed his father David, were recorded by the prophet Nathan, as well as the prophet Ahijah. We are told that the prophet Iddo wrote about Jeroboam:

Everything else Solomon did while he was king is written in the records of Nathan the prophet, Ahijah the prophet from Shiloh, and Iddo the prophet who wrote about Jeroboam son of Nebat (2 Chronicles 9:29 CEV).

In another instance, we have Shemaiah the prophet and Iddo the seer, recording the events of the reign of Rehoboam, the king who followed Solomon:

As for the events of Rehoboam's reign, from beginning to end, are they not written in the records of Shemaiah the prophet and of Iddo the seer that deal with genealogies? There was continual warfare between Rehoboam and Jeroboam (2 Chronicles 12:15 NIV).

We also read in the Book of Chronicles about the events of King Jehoshaphat being recorded by Jehu—who was also a prophet:

The rest of the events of Jehoshaphat's reign, from beginning to end, are recorded in The Record of Jehu Son of Hanani, which is included in The Book of the Kings of Israel (2 Chronicles 20:34 NLT).

The acts of King Hezekiah were also faithfully recorded by Isaiah the prophet:

Everything else Hezekiah did while he was king, including how faithful he was to the Lord, is included in the records kept by Isaiah the prophet. These are written in The History of the Kings of Judah and Israel (2 Chronicles 32:32 CEV).

There is also the example of the deeds of King Manasseh having been recorded by God's prophets:

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Everything else Manasseh did while he was king, including his prayer to the Lord God and the warnings from his prophets, is written in The History of the Kings of Israel (2 Chronicles 33:19-21 CEV)

These references illustrate the unbroken chain of prophets from before the first king in Israel until the time of the Babylonian captivity. Each writing prophet was succeeded by another.

There were also prophets that were sent to the people before this period as well as after this period. This would guarantee that the people had continuous spokesmen from the Lord during the entire period in which the Old Testament was written.

3. Sometimes The Prophets Wrote Down Their Own Messages

These prophets, whom the Lord sent, would orally proclaim His message to the people. At times, they recorded their God-given messages.

Apart from the writings of Moses, sixteen of the books of the Old Testament were composed by these writing prophets. Each of these writing prophets has a book that bears their name. This includes the Twelve Minor prophets as well as the four Major Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.

4. At Times The Messages Of The Prophets Were Recorded By Others

Not only did the sixteen writings prophets record their messages, at times the words which certain other prophets spoke were recorded by others. For example, the prophetic words of Elijah and Elisha are recorded in the Book of Kings. However, there is no indication that they themselves wrote the words attributed to them.

5. These Sacred Writings Were Immediately Collected And Treated As Divine (Progressive Recognition)

These writings that were considered sacred were immediately collected by the people and treated as Holy Scripture. This process continued from the time of Moses until the end of the Old Testament period.

It seems that the books of Moses were regarded as a closed collection of sacred writings when they were finished—there was nothing that was to be added to them. The fact that the writings of Moses were placed next to the Ark of the Covenant indicates a certain degree of completion.

Moses wrote the entire Pentateuch, of the first five books of the Old Testament, at God's command, and the Levites laid it beside the ark. After that, it seems that every prophet who wrote a book under the leading of the Holy Spirit, deposited it publicly in the holy archives in the sacred building. This would first be in the tabernacle and then in later the temple. Therefore, the authentic text of Scripture was always available.

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We do not know the exact process of how the books after Moses' writings were recognized, collected and grouped. However, from the Old Testament, there are a number of things revealed that give us some idea of what occurred.

We discover that the books were recognized as Scripture the moment they were written. In other words, the recognition of the various books was a progressive process—it did not occur at one particular time by some decision of a council, a group, or by an individual. We can provide the following examples:

6. The Book Of Micah Was Immediately Considered To Be Scripture

An example of immediate acceptance of a divine writing can be found in the prophet Micah. Scripture says that the writings of Micah were considered authoritative by his contemporaries as well as by those who lived over one hundred years after his time.

In the Book of Micah, he made the following prediction:

Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed like a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins, and the mountain of the temple like the bare hills of the forest (Micah 3:12 NKJV).

Over one hundred years later, Jeremiah the prophet, also predicted the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. There were some who considered Jeremiah's words worthy of death.

However, the people were then reminded of what the prophet Micah had said:

Then some of the wise old men stood and spoke to the people there. They said, Think back to the days when Micah of Moresheth prophesied during the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah. He told the people of Judah, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: Mount Zion will be plowed like an open field; Jerusalem will be reduced to rubble! A great forest will grow on the hilltop, where the Temple now stands.' But did King Hezekiah and the people kill him for saying this? No, they turned from their sins and worshiped the LORD. They begged him to have mercy on them. Then the LORD held back the terrible disaster he had pronounced against them. If we kill Jeremiah, who knows what will happen to us? (Jeremiah 26:17-19 NLT).

This is highly instructive. The prophecy of Micah, made over one hundred years earlier, was received by his contemporaries as being authoritative. This is in spite of its message of judgment against the nation.

Then, one hundred years later, this message was cited as being what the Lord had said through the prophet Micah. This indicates that the sacred writings were immediately recognized by the people and considered sacred by those who came afterward.

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7. **Jeremiah Writings Were Immediately Received As Scripture**

We find another example of this immediate acceptance of the writings of a prophet. In this case, it was Jeremiah. We read the following words from the prophet Daniel:

During the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, was studying the writings of the prophets. I learned from the word of the LORD, as recorded by Jeremiah the prophet, that Jerusalem must lie desolate for seventy years (Daniel 9:2 NLT).

Jeremiah's work, written some seventy-five years before Daniel, was already considered to be sacred Scripture at the time of Daniel. This again tells us that the writings of the divinely inspired prophets were immediately recognized by the people as Holy Scripture—it was not centuries after the fact.

There is something else we learn from this passage. Five hundred and fifty years before the time of Christ, we know that there were a number of books that were considered to be sacred Scripture. Daniel mentions a collection of prophets that he was reading.

Though we do not know the number of writings, or the names of the prophets, we do know that there was a collection of sacred writings at that time.

This is another indication that the books were recognized as Holy Scripture when they were written. No council, or religious or non-religious body, made any decision as to which books were considered to be divinely authoritative.

8. **Some Of The Books Were Collected In Stages**

We have hints of the collection process in certain passages in the Old Testament. For one thing, we discover that certain of the books were collected in stages. The evidence is as follows.

The Proverbs Were Added To Over Time

From the Book of Proverbs, we can discover that the proverbs contained in the book were collected in stages:

These are other proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied (Proverbs 25:1 NRSV)

Hezekiah's men collected the proverbs of Solomon. This was over two hundred and fifty years after the time of Solomon. Other proverbs were added later. For example, we read of the Proverbs of a man named Agur:

The message of Agur son of Jakeh. An oracle. I am weary, O God; I am weary and worn out, O God (Proverbs 30:1 NLT)

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Later, the writings of Lemuel were added to the Proverbs:

The sayings of King Lemuel—an oracle his mother taught him (Proverbs 31:1 NIV).

Furthermore, there are two other independent sections of Proverbs—Proverbs 22:17-24:22 and Proverbs 23:23-34—called the “sayings of the wise.”

Therefore, Proverbs consists of a number of collections of proverbial sayings which were written and collected at various times in history.

The Psalms Were Collected Over A Period Of Time

We can discover something similar about the Book of Psalms. The Book of Psalms consists of five separate books. We read the following at the end of Psalm seventy-two:

This ends the prayers of David, the son of Jesse (Psalm 72:20 CEV).

The psalms of David end at Psalm seventy-two—most of the first seventy-two Psalms came from David. After this, the psalms of others were added to the collection. Therefore, we have a progressive collection of the Psalms.

Consequently, there was an ongoing process of adding to the books that had already been composed.

Jeremiah’s Book May Have Been Issued In Two Editions

The fact that some of the books were later expanded can also be found with the example of Jeremiah. His writings exist in both a shorter and a longer form. The longer form is found in our present Old Testaments as well as in the traditional Hebrew text that is used to translate it into other languages—known as the Masoretic text.

However, the Greek version of Jeremiah, found in the Septuagint translation, as well as the Hebrew text of Jeremiah that was discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, is about one-eighth shorter than the Hebrew Masoretic text.

One likely way of explaining this feature of his work is that Jeremiah actually composed two versions of the text. The Bible says the Lord told Jeremiah to write down His words on a scroll:

In the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim, son of King Josiah of Judah, the LORD spoke his word to Jeremiah. He said, “Take a scroll, and write on it everything that I have dictated to you about Israel, Judah, and all the other nations from the time I spoke to you during the reign of Josiah until today” (Jeremiah 36:1-2 God’s Word).

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We are also told in the Book of Jeremiah that his original scroll was destroyed by King Jehoiakim after he had it read aloud to him section by section. After this occurred, the Bible says the following:

Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch son of Neriah, the scribe, and he wrote on it at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim, Judah's king, had burned in the fire. And many other words like them were added (Jeremiah 36:32 CSB).

The fact that the Scripture says many similar words were added may explain why we find the work of the prophet Jeremiah in two editions.

9. The Collection Was Considered To Be Holy Scripture

The collection of these sacred writings was assumed to be Holy Scripture. They were considered to have God's divine authority behind them. The teachings found in these writings were expected to be obeyed. For example, we read in the Book of Nehemiah:

Day by day, from the first day of the festival to the last day, Ezra continued to read from the Book of God's Teachings. The people celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, they had a closing festival assembly in accordance with the regulations. When the Israelites assembled on the twenty-fourth day of this month, they fasted, wore sackcloth, and threw dirt on their heads. Those who were descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood and confessed their sins as well as the wicked things their ancestors had done. They stood in their places, and for one-fourth of the day, [they listened as] the Book of the Teachings of the LORD their God was read, and for another fourth [of the day], they confessed their sins and worshiped the LORD their God (Nehemiah 8:18; 9:1-3 God's Word).

The people listened to the Word of the Lord and obeyed it.

We also learn something else from the writings of Agur—the man who added to certain of the Proverbs. From him, we discover that the writings of David and Moses were considered to be sacred Scripture when he wrote:

I am far too stupid to be considered human. I never was wise, and I don't understand what God is like." Has anyone gone up to heaven and come back down? Has anyone grabbed hold of the wind? Has anyone wrapped up the sea or marked out boundaries for the earth? If you know of any who have done such things, then tell me their names and their children's names. Everything God says is true—and it's a shield for all who come to him for safety. Don't change what God has said! He will correct you and show that you are a liar (Proverbs 30:2-6 CEV).

While Agur realizes his own inadequacies, he does recognize that God spoke authoritatively through Moses and David. In verses two and three, Agur cites Psalm 18:30, a Psalm of David, as being God's truth.

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In verses five and six, he cites Deuteronomy 4:2 as God's authoritative Word. In his day, these two written works were considered to be authoritative Scripture.

10. The List Of Authoritative Old Testament Writings Has Been Closed

The idea of an Old Testament canon means that there was a "closed" or "fixed" group of writings. Nothing could be added or subtracted to this list.

At the time of the Maccabees, about 164 B.C., there was the recognition that it had been a long time since the people had an authoritative word from God. We read the following in the Book of First Maccabees:

After the death of Judas, the renegades emerged in all parts of Israel; all the wrongdoers reappeared. In those days a very great famine occurred, and the country went over to their side. Bacchides chose the godless and put them in charge of the country. They made inquiry and searched for the friends of Judas, and brought them to Bacchides, who took vengeance on them and made sport of them. So there was great distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them (1 Maccabees 9:23-27 NRSV).

This statement is consistent with what we know from other sources. The people believed that no authoritative Word from the Lord had been revealed since the time of Malachi—about 400 B.C. They knew when the Lord had spoken and they knew when He had ceased speaking to them.

11. Though The Hebrew Canon Was Closed They Were Awaiting More Revelation From God

It is clear that the Old Testament canon was closed some four centuries before the time of Christ. However, this does not mean that the expectation of divine revelation was finished.

To the contrary, there are a number of promises recorded in the Old Testament canon that awaited fulfillment. For example, the Old Testament ends with the following promise:

I, the Lord, promise to send the prophet Elijah before that great and terrible day comes. He will lead children and parents to love each other more, so that when I come, I won't bring doom to the land (Malachi 4:5-6 CEV).

Therefore, although the Old Testament canon was closed, further revelation from God was expected at some future time.

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Summary To Question 8

How Was The Old Testament Canon Of Scripture Put Together?

It is important that we know which books belong in the Old Testament canon of Scripture. It is the unanimous teaching of the Bible that the Old Testament is God's divinely inspired Word to humanity. Therefore, the exact contents are important to know.

There are many things that we do not about the formation of the Old Testament canon. However, there are a number of things that we do know.

First, the Old Testament speaks of a group of people who spoke for God. They are known as the prophets. For one thousand years, there was a continuous succession of prophets from Moses until the time of the last of the writing prophets; Malachi.

The prophets, from time to time, would write down their prophetic messages. At other times, their words were written down by others. These prophetic writings, along with writings from certain other men whom God designated, were collected.

From Scripture itself we have some idea as to the collection process. We know that the people immediately recognized the writings of Moses, Micah, and Jeremiah as being divinely inspired of God.

Micah's message, though unpopular, was immediately received by the people. Daniel accepted Jeremiah's writings as divinely inspired—this was some seventy years after Jeremiah wrote. This shows that there was a progressive recognition of the Old Testament writings.

From Daniel, we also discover that there was an authoritative collection of books about five hundred and fifty years before the time of Christ.

We also find evidence that certain of the writings were collected in stages. We learn that the Psalms and the Proverbs were collected in stages. Also, Jeremiah's work may have been produced in two different editions.

This collection of writings was considered to be God's authoritative Word. This collection, or canon of Scripture, was considered to be a closed list. The people knew when the Lord had spoken and they also knew when He ceased speaking.

However, further revelation from God was expected seeing that the Old Testament contains a number of promises that await fulfillment.

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Question 9

Were The Writings Of Moses Considered To Be Scripture?

One of the most important parts of the Old Testament is the first five books—the writings of Moses. These writings were considered to be Scripture from the time they were written. The evidence is as follows.

1. The First Five Books Were The Work Of Moses

The first five books of Scripture were basically the work of one man—Moses. The Bible says that God spoke face to face with Moses. In the Book of Numbers, we read the following account:

Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. And he said, “Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed (Numbers 12:5-9 NRSV).

Moses had a unique relationship with the Lord. We read more about this in the Book of Deuteronomy:

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel (Deuteronomy 34:10-12 NIV).

Moses spoke God’s word to the people. In addition, God caused Moses to write down authoritative Scripture. While both forms were God’s Word, the only permanent form was that which was written.

2. The Books Of Moses Were Written Under God’s Authority

Early in the history of the nation Israel there was evidence that certain writings had God’s authority behind them. These writings served as a standard for belief and practice. The first five books of the Old Testament are known variously as the Law, the Law of Moses, and the Torah. They are also called the Pentateuch (literally meaning “five in a case”). This refers to the five books, or scrolls, that were kept in a case.

The idea of a fixed canon of Scripture goes back to Moses writings, God’s law in the wilderness. The Book of Exodus says:

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Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. He said, “For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD. The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation” (Exodus 17:14-16 NIV).

Moses was recognized as writing with the authority of God. The Lord told him to write down certain things:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel” (Exodus 34:27 NIV).

Moses obeyed and recorded the words of the Lord.

3. The Evidence Is That Moses Wrote Genesis Through Deuteronomy

The writings that came from Moses were the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy. Moses seems to have used earlier documents to write Genesis. For example, we read the following in Genesis about a written record:

This is the written account of Adam’s line. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God (Genesis 5:1 NIV).

It seems that Moses collected some written records to compile Genesis. Just who wrote these earlier accounts is not known. In Exodus, it speaks of Moses writing down God’s words:

And Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus 24:4 NIV).

The Book of Numbers says that Moses chronicled the journey of Israel:

At the LORD’s command Moses recorded the stages in their journey. This is their journey by stages (Numbers 33:2 NIV).

In Deuteronomy, we also find that Moses wrote down certain things:

Therefore Moses wrote this song the same day, and taught it to the children of Israel (Deuteronomy 31:22 NKJV).

Hence, we find that in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy there are specific references of Moses writing things that the Lord had revealed to him.

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4. The Writings Of Moses Were Placed In A Book

Therefore, from the beginning, we find God ordering certain things to be written down and placed in a book. Scripture says that Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord in the Book of the Covenant and then read it to the people. We read the following in the Book of Exodus:

Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey” (Exodus 24:4-7 NIV).

This shows that the people regarded the Book of the Covenant (probably Exodus 20-23) as a standard of what to believe and how to behave.

5. The Sacred Writings Of Moses Were To Be Preserved

The Law of Moses was to be preserved for future generations. The king of Israel was to have his own copy of Scripture:

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel (Deuteronomy 17:18-20 NIV).

The writings were also to be a witness to the people. They were stored next to the most sacred object ever constructed—the Ark of the Covenant.

We also read in Deuteronomy:

When Moses had finished writing down in a book the words of this law to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying, “Take this book of the law and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God; let it remain there as a witness against you” (Deuteronomy 31:24-26 NRSV).

The fact that they were stored next to the sacred Ark spoke of their value—they were considered to be holy.

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6. The Priests Were In Charge Of The Safekeeping Of Moses' Writings

The Law of Moses assigned specific responsibility to various Old Testament groups and officials. To the Levites was given the custody or care of the written Scriptures. The Bible says:

So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel (Deuteronomy 31:9 NIV).

These people had the sacred duty of looking after the holy writings.

7. Moses' Writings Were To Be Read Out Loud Every Seven Years

The people were held responsible to obey the Law. The Bible says that at the end of every seven years the Law was to be read out loud to the people of Israel:

He [Moses] commanded them: "At the end of seven years, at the appointed time of the release, at the Feast of Temporary Shelters, when all Israel has come to appear before the Lord your God in the place he has chosen, you must read this law before them within their hearing. Gather the people—men, women, and children, as well as the resident foreigners in your villages—so they may hear and thus learn about and fear the Lord your God and be careful to do all the things contained in this law (Deuteronomy 31:10-12 NIV).

This commandment assured the writings would be preserved.

8. The Writings Of Moses Were Accepted As Authoritative By Those Afterward

Those who came afterward accepted the Law of Moses as an authoritative work. The Book of Joshua accepted that Moses' writings were absolutely authoritative. The Lord told Joshua the following about the writings of Moses:

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful (Joshua 1:8 NIV).

The Message translates this verse as follows:

And don't for a minute let this Book of The Revelation be out of mind. Ponder and meditate on it day and night, making sure you practice everything written in it. Then you'll get where you're going; then you'll succeed (Joshua 1:8 MsgB)

Later, Joshua built an altar according to the way Moses commanded:

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Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites. He built it according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses—an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used. On it they offered to the LORD burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings (Joshua 8:30,31 NIV).

We also find that the people were supposed to obey what was written in the Law of Moses. At the end of his life, Joshua said the following to the nation of Israel:

Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now (Joshua 23:6-8 NIV).

Obedying the Law of Moses was not a suggestion, it was a commandment.

9. The Testimony From The Book Of Judges

In the Book of Judges, we are told that the fact of the survival of certain pagan nations around Israel proved the truth of what God had said to Moses:

These are the nations the LORD left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan (he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience): the five rulers of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the Lebanon mountains from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamath. They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the LORD's commands, which he had given their forefathers through Moses (Judges 3:1-4 NIV).

This is another indication of the authority of the Law of Moses. There is no doubt that it has always been considered as authoritative Scripture.

10. Later Generations Accepted Moses' Writings As Authoritative Scripture

Later generations considered the writings of Moses as authoritative. There are many Old Testament references that confirm this to be true.

For example, in the Book of First Kings we are told that those who keep the Law of Moses will prosper:

When the time drew near for David to die, he gave a charge to Solomon his son. "I am about to go the way of all the earth," he said. "So be strong, show yourself a man, and observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands,

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his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go” (1 Kings 2:1-3 NIV).

In Second Kings, we find a specific law about how to treat the children of murderers. Their source was the book of the Law of Moses:

Yet he did not put the sons of the assassins to death, in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses where the LORD commanded: “Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sins” (2 Kings 14:6 NIV).

The Law of Moses was the written authority concerning how the people were to behave.

11. The Book Of The Law Was Rediscovered In The Sacred Place: The Temple

Earlier, we read that the writings were kept in a sacred place—the sanctuary:

Samuel explained to the people the regulations of the kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the LORD. Then Samuel dismissed the people, each to his own home (1 Samuel 10:25 NIV).

In 2 Kings 22, the Bible records the account of the rediscovery of the book of the Law in the temple by Hilkiah:

Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD.” He gave it to Shaphan, who read it (2 Kings 22:8 NIV).

Again, we find the Scriptures kept in a sacred place. The Law was then read to the good king Josiah:

Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, “Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.” And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king. When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes (2 Kings 22:10,11 NIV).

The King, in turn, had the Law read to the people:

Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the LORD with the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD (2 Kings 23:1,2 NIV).

Once again, we find the people were expected to obey that which was written in the Law.

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12. The Kings Were Judged According To The Law Of Moses

We also discover that the kings of Israel, and the kings of Judah, were judged according to how they obeyed or disobeyed the Law of Moses.

For example, Jeroboam, the king of Israel, was judged for disobeying the Law of Moses. The Lord said:

Go, tell Jeroboam that this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I raised you up from among the people and made you a leader over my people Israel. I tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you, but you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commands and followed me with all his heart, doing only what was right in my eyes' (1 Kings 14:7,8 NIV).

In another instance, Hezekiah the king was blessed for obeying God's commandments:

He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses (2 Kings 18:6 NIV).

Josiah was a good king faithful to the Law of Moses. The Bible says the following about him:

Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses (2 Kings 23:25 NIV).

The actions of all of these kings were evaluated by how they obeyed the Law of Moses. It was the final standard by which everyone in the nation was judged.

13. The Babylonian Captivity Was A Result Of Disobedience To The Law Of Moses

The Babylonian captivity was a result of the disobedience of the children of Israel to the Law that was given by Moses—specifically they started worshipping idols. We read the following in Kings:

All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced (2 Kings 17:7,8 NIV).

This sin of idolatry caused the people to be under the judgment of the Lord.

While in Babylon, Daniel confessed the sins of the people when he prayed to the Lord:

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All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. “Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you” (Daniel 9:11 NIV).

The Lord sent the people away into captivity for disobeying His law—the Law which was given to Moses.

14. The People Obeyed The Law Of Moses After The Babylonian Captivity

After the captivity, the people began to obey the Law of Moses again. We read the following in the Book of Ezra:

Then Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God (Ezra 3:2 NIV).

The priests were installed based upon the requirements given in the Law of Moses:

And they installed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their groups for the service of God at Jerusalem, according to what is written in the Book of Moses (Ezra 6:18 NIV).

The nation learned their lesson from the Babylonian captivity—they no longer worshipped idols.

15. The Law Was Read Out Loud To The People

After the return from the Babylonian captivity, Ezra read the Book of the Law to the people. The Bible records the events as follows:

The priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers and the temple servants, along with certain of the people and the rest of the Israelites, settled in their own towns. When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law (Nehemiah 7:73-8:1-3 NIV).

It then says that Ezra explained to the people what the text meant:

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They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read (Nehemiah 8:8 NIV).

The result is they observed the Law of Moses. Scripture records the following:

Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly (Nehemiah 8:18 NIV).

The Law had again become their guide.

16. The Lord Promised Not To Remove Them Again If They Obeyed The Law Of Moses

If they obeyed His commandments, the Lord made His people a promise—never to remove them again from the land. The Bible records Him saying:

I will not again make the feet of the Israelites leave the land I assigned to your forefathers, if only they will be careful to do everything I commanded them concerning all the laws, decrees and ordinances given through Moses (2 Chronicles 33:8 NIV).

The Message reads:

He had promised, “Never again will I let my people Israel wander off from this land I’ve given to their ancestors. But on this condition, that they keep everything I’ve commanded in the instructions my servant Moses passed on to them” (2 Chronicles 33:8 (MsgB)).

These passages make it clear that the Law of Moses was considered to be the authoritative Word of God to the people of Israel. They were expected to obey the commandments contained within the Law.

If they did not obey, then they would be subject to the punishment of God. The entire history of the nation of Israel is based upon its obedience, or disobedience, to the Law of Moses.

However, the Law of Moses was not the end of God’s revelation to Israel.

Summary To Question 9: Were The Writings Of Moses Considered To Be Scripture?

It is clear from the evidence that the writings of Moses were considered to be authoritative from the moment they were written. The history of the nation Israel testifies to the fact. Time and time again the Law of Moses was cited as the authoritative standard from which the people were to live. There is no doubt that it was always considered to be the divine Word of God.

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Question 10

How Were Books Apart From The Writings Of Moses Determined To Be Scripture?

Throughout the entire Old Testament period, it is clear that the five books of Moses were regarded as divinely authoritative. There is no question about this. But what about the books that came after Moses? What do we know about them?

We Do Not Know For Certain How They Were Recognized

The situation is less clear for the books that came after the time of Moses. The Old Testament provides very little in the way of information about the collection of divinely authoritative books apart from the Law of Moses.

Things We Know For Certain

There are, however, several things that we do know for certain. They are as follows.

Other Divine Writings After Moses Were To Be Expected

We do find that other divine writings, apart from the Law of Moses, were to be expected. This can be seen as follows:

First, there was nothing final about the Law of Moses. There is no hint in the Law that it was to be the only written revelation from God.

Second, the Lord promised to raise up certain people to be prophets after the time of Moses. It would only be natural to assume that some of the words of the prophets would also be committed to writing.

In addition, the Law of Moses was incomplete. There were predictions made of things to come. God's promises needed to be fulfilled and recorded. All of this anticipates further Scripture.

The Gift Of Prophecy Continued After Moses

Following Moses, God raised up the institution of prophecy to continue revealing Himself to His people. Moses promised that this would happen. We read about this in the Book of Deuteronomy:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die." The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my

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words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account” (Deuteronomy 18:15-19 NIV).

While divine revelation did not end with Moses, the process of the acceptance of canonical works after Moses is not quite as obvious. However, there are a number of things that we can learn.

Joshua Received And Wrote Authoritative Truth

Joshua, who was the successor of Moses, continued to receive and write authoritative truth from the Lord. The Book of Joshua says:

On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD (Joshua 24:25,26 NIV).

Joshua’s writings were placed in the very Book of the Law that Moses wrote. His work would have been immediately accepted with the same authority as Moses’ writings.

The fact that this happened is very important. Strong warnings were given about adding to, or subtracting from, God’s Word. Scripture says:

Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you (Deuteronomy 4:2 NIV).

We also read the following in the Book of Deuteronomy:

Be sure to do everything I command you. Never add anything to it or take anything away from it (Deuteronomy 12:32 God’s Word).

These sacred writings were kept at the sanctuary at Shechem. This practice, of placing holy records in the sanctuary, was done by many other nations of antiquity. This is another indication that Joshua, like Moses, was regarded as having written Holy Scripture. Joshua, along with the people, had to be convinced that his writings carried the same authority as those of Moses. God Himself had to authorize them as being Scripture.

Samuel Wrote God’s Truth

We are told that the prophet Samuel wrote down the regulations, put them on a scroll, and kept it in a sacred place, the sanctuary. Scripture says:

Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship; and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the LORD. Then Samuel sent all the people back to their homes (1 Samuel 10:25 NRSV).

Since the writings of Samuel would have been placed with those of Moses and Joshua, they would have immediately been accepted as Holy Scripture.

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The Book Of Kings Recorded God's Word

The Chronicler mentions that the annals of Jehu were written in the Book of the Kings of Israel. He says the following:

The other events of Jehoshaphat's reign, from beginning to end, are written in the annals of Jehu son of Hanani, which are recorded in the book of the kings of Israel (2 Chronicles 20:34 NIV).

The Book of First Kings says that Jehu was a prophet:

Moreover, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Jehu son of Hanani to Baasha and his house, because of all the evil he had done in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger by the things he did, and becoming like the house of Jeroboam-- and also because he destroyed it (1 Kings 16:7 NIV).

Therefore, at least part of the Book of Kings (First and Second Kings) was written by one who had the prophetic gift.

The Psalms Were Divinely Given

The wisdom revealed in the Psalms was divinely given. David, the author of a number of Psalms, said the following about the wisdom given Him:

The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue (2 Samuel 23:2 NRSV).

His writings carried God's authority.

The Proverbs Were Of Divine Origin

The wisdom found in the Book of Proverbs was also divinely ordained of the Lord:

For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 2:6 CSB).

The truth recorded in the Book of Proverbs was divine; not human.

Isaiah The Prophet Wrote The Word Of The Lord

Isaiah the prophet was told by the Lord to write words on a scroll. Isaiah recorded this command of the Lord:

The LORD said to me, "Take a large scroll and write on it with an ordinary pen" (Isaiah 8:1 NIV).

These words were to be preserved as a memorial for the future. He gave this command to his followers:

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Tie up the written instructions. Seal the teachings among my disciples (Isaiah 8:16 God's Word).

He also wrote about his words being an everlasting witness. We read the following:

Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness (Isaiah 30:8 NIV).

The prophet Isaiah faithfully wrote down the things the Lord had showed him.

Ezekiel Claimed To Write Down God's Words

We also find the Lord telling the prophet Ezekiel to write certain things down. The Lord said:

And if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple—its arrangement, its exits and entrances—its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations (Ezekiel 43:11 NIV).

Ezekiel also wrote down the Lord's truth as God had commanded him.

Jeremiah Was Told To Write Words In A Book

God told Jeremiah the prophet to write down words in a book. This is the claim of the prophet:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Write in a book all the words I have spoken to you'" (Jeremiah 30:1,2 NIV).

Jeremiah was another writing prophet who recorded God's Word.

The End Of The Old Testament Was At The Time Of The Prophets Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

The end of the Old Testament came at the time of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Haggai wrote about 520 B.C. Zechariah wrote at about the same time with some material being added after 480 B.C. Malachi, the last of the writings prophets, wrote approximately 435 B.C.

The last books of history were Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Their writings would have completed the Old Testament canon. We know that Ezra went to Jerusalem about 460 B.C. and Nehemiah was in Jerusalem from about 445-433 B.C.

The Book of Esther was probably written sometime during the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-423 B.C.). This being the case, the last historical books of the Old Testament were written no later than 420 B.C.

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Only A Few Other Authoritative Writings Are Referred To In Scripture

Apart from the five Books of Moses, it is mainly the authors themselves who acknowledge the divine inspiration of their own works. There are, however, a few references of one prophet acknowledging another prophet or one writer acknowledging other books. The evidence is as follows.

1. Isaiah Spoke Of The Scroll Of The Lord

In one example, Isaiah the prophet, wrote of “the Book, or Scroll, of the Lord:”

Look in the scroll of the LORD and read: None of these will be missing, not one will lack her mate. For it is his mouth that has given the order, and his Spirit will gather them together (Isaiah 34:16 NIV).

The contents of this book are not identified by Isaiah.

2. Daniel Spoke Of The Sacred Books

Daniel the prophet spoke of certain “sacred books:”

In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years (Daniel 9:1,2 NIV).

This is the earliest reference we have to a collection of “sacred books.” However, nothing is said as to what books were in the collection, or how many there were.

3. Isaiah’s Writings Were Testified To By The Chronicler

The Chronicler noted the writings of the prophet Isaiah:

The other events of Uzziah’s reign, from beginning to end, are recorded by the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz (2 Chronicles 26:22 NIV).

Therefore, we have another testimony that Isaiah the prophet wrote down certain things.

4. The Psalms Were Written Over A Period Of Time

The Book of Psalms was not all composed at once or by one person. We read about the end of the psalms that were written by David:

This collection of the prayers of David son of Jesse ends here (Psalm 72:20 NET).

Therefore, the psalms of David make up only a part of the Book of Psalms.

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5. The Proverbs Of Solomon Were Collected And Edited

The Bible says that the proverbs of Solomon were collected and copied by the men of Hezekiah. We read the following:

These are more proverbs of Solomon, copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah (Proverbs 25:1 NIV).

This is another indication of the process of the composition the Old Testament books. The sacred records were faithfully copied.

6. The Earlier Prophets Were Quoted As Authoritative By The Later Prophets

Those prophets, who came later in history, quoted the earlier prophets as authoritative:

Some of the elders of the land stepped forward and said to the entire assembly of people, “Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah. He told all the people of Judah, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.”’ “Did Hezekiah king of Judah or anyone else in Judah put him to death? Did not Hezekiah fear the LORD and seek his favor? And did not the LORD relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he pronounced against them? We are about to bring a terrible disaster on ourselves!” (Now Uriah son of Shemaiah from Kiriath Jearim was another man who prophesied in the name of the LORD; he prophesied the same things against this city and this land as Jeremiah did (Jeremiah 26:17-20 NIV).

We have a number of references in the Book of Zechariah to the former prophets. For example, he wrote the following:

Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed: This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices.’ But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the LORD. Where are your forefathers now? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your forefathers? “Then they repented and said, ‘The LORD Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do’” (Zechariah 1:4-6 NIV).

Zechariah also wrote these words:

Are these not the words the LORD proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled? (Zechariah 7:7 NIV).

He then said:

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They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry (Zechariah 7:12 NIV).

Zechariah clearly recognized that certain prophets came before him.

7. The People Were Rebuked For Not Obeying The Earlier Prophets

There were times the people were rebuked for not listening to the earlier prophets. In the Book of Chronicles, we read the following:

Although the LORD sent prophets to the people to bring them back to him, and though they testified against them, they would not listen (2 Chronicles 24:19 NIV).

Ezra, in his prayer, acknowledged the people did not listen to the former prophets:

But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other' (Ezra 9:10,11 NIV).

Again, we have another reference to previous prophets.

8. The Books Were Probably Recognized Individually

The books after Moses were written by a number of different people during a one-thousand-year period. Most likely, they were individually recognized as being canonical. When the recognition that the prophetic gift had been removed from the nation (about 400 B.C.) these writings were then put into clearly defined divisions—the Law and the Prophets.

Summary To Question 10: How Were Books Apart From The Writings Of Moses Determined To Be Scripture?

While we do not have a lot of information regarding the books that were written after the time of Moses, there are several things that we do know. Within the Old Testament itself we find that the Law of Moses was accepted as authoritative Scripture.

In the same way, God sent prophets and wise men after Moses. Their writings were accepted with the same respect as Moses—they were received as the Word of God. Therefore, within the pages of the Old Testament we find the idea of an authoritative group of writings.

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From the earliest times we find that the writings of Moses, Joshua, and Samuel were immediately accepted as Holy Scripture. Samuel was probably the author of First and Second Samuel. He may also have written Judges and Ruth.

The collection of sacred writings that make up our present Old Testament grew over the period of Israel's history. From the beginning, the words contained in these books were understood as being the words of the Lord. The first person to speak of a collection was Daniel the Prophet.

However, the Old Testament itself does not give us any indication as to the extent of the canon. This would come later. This sums up what we know about the writings which were composed after the time of Moses and were recognized as sacred Scripture.

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Question 11

When, By Whom, And Where Were The Books Of The Old Testament Finally Collected?

There is strong evidence that the Hebrew Scripture, the Old Testament, was completed about 400 B.C. At this particular time in history, God stopped speaking to His people through the prophets.

This being the case, do we know when, by whom, and where the books of the Old Testament were finally collected? The answer is, “No.” Nothing is said about it. We do not know who collected the sacred writings, when they were collected, or where they were collected.

However, there are a number of things that we can be reasonably certain about. They include the following.

1. The Sacred Writings Were Always Placed In The Temple

The Bible says that the sacred writings were to be kept next to the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred chest:

The Lord told Joshua, “Be brave and strong! I will help you lead the people of Israel into the land that I have promised them.” Moses wrote down all these laws and teachings in a book, then he went to the Levites who carried the sacred chest and said: This is The Book of God’s Law. Keep it beside the sacred chest that holds the agreement the Lord your God made with Israel. This book is proof that you know what the Lord wants you to do (Deuteronomy 31:24-26 CEV).

This means they were first kept in the Tabernacle, or Tent of Meeting, and then later in the Temple.

2. The Book Of The Law Was Found In The Temple

The fact that the sacred writings were kept in the temple is consistent with the recorded episode of Hilkiah discovering the Book of the Law in the temple during the reign of King Josiah (630 B.C.). The Bible says the following:

Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD.” He gave it to Shaphan (2 Chronicles 34:15 NIV).

The Law was kept where it was supposed to be—in the temple.

3. The Scriptures Were Taken To Babylon

The fact that the Scriptures were always kept in the Temple in Jerusalem is further confirmed by the prophet Daniel. Daniel had a copy of the writings of Jeremiah with him while he was captive in Babylon. He also mentions some other “books” that were in his possession. The Book of Daniel says:

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It was the first year of the reign of Darius the Mede, the son of Ahasuerus, who became king of the Babylonians. During the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, was studying the writings of the prophets. I learned from the word of the LORD, as recorded by Jeremiah the prophet, that Jerusalem must lie desolate for seventy years (Daniel 9:1-2 NLT).

The Bible says that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took all the sacred items from the temple when he burned it, as well as destroying the city of Jerusalem. This occurred in the year 587 B.C.

The sacred Scripture would have been among the items taken to Babylon. This explains why Daniel had a copy of the Book of Jeremiah as well as the other holy writings.

4. The Scriptures Were Returned To Jerusalem After The Babylonian Captivity

When the Jews returned from captivity the sacred Scriptures would have returned with them. The scribe Ezra was sent to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel to gather together the canonical writings. Later in their history, Ezra read the Scripture to the people that had returned to the city of Jerusalem:

They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read (Nehemiah 8:8 NIV).

The fact that the Law of Moses was read to the people upon their return from Babylon gives evidence the Scriptures were not destroyed.

Instead, they were returned to the Jews. Therefore, the sacred Scriptures were not lost though they were taken from the temple, transported to Babylon, and then brought back to Jerusalem.

5. The Old Testament Scripture May Have Been Collected By Ezra

One of the possible solutions with respect to the collection of the Old Testament canon has to do with Ezra and the men of the Great Synagogue.

In the Talmud, an ancient collection of Jewish traditions, there is a consistent theme that Ezra, and the men of the Great Synagogue, were the ones who collected the sacred writings. In these traditions, Ezra is given a position second only to Moses.

For example, we read the following in the Talmud:

Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi received it [the tradition of Moses] from the prophets. The men of the Great Synagogue received it from Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (Aboth of Rabbi Nathan 1.3).

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We are told in the Scripture that Ezra had the Law of God in his hand when he went on his mission to the city of Jerusalem. The Bible records the king saying:

You are authorized by the king and his seven advisors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of your God which is in your possession (Ezra 7:14 NIV).

This also shows the Scriptures were still in the possession of the people at this time—they were not destroyed.

According to Jewish tradition, prophecy ceased in Israel around the year 400 B.C. This is the same time as the death of the last of the Old Testament prophets—Malachi.

6. Antiochus IV Destroyed Copies Of Scripture (Second Century B.C.)

In the second century B.C., the Syrian ruler Antiochus IV destroyed many copies of the Scriptures. He declared that those who possessed a copy would be punished by death. We read about this in First Maccabees. It says:

The books of the law that they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. Anyone found possessing the book of the covenant, or anyone who adhered to the law, was condemned to death by decree of the king (1 Maccabees 1:56,57 NRSV).

Antiochus, like many others, attempted to destroy the Holy Scripture. His efforts, however, did not succeed.

7. Judas Maccabeus Collected The Sacred Books (Second Century B.C.)

From the apocryphal book of Second Maccabees, we discover that Antiochus did not destroy all the copies of the Scripture—other copies of the sacred scrolls still existed.

After defeating Antiochus IV, Judas Maccabaeus collected the sacred books. We read the following in Second Maccabees:

The same things are reported in the records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah, and also that he founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings. In the same way Judas also collected all the books that had been lost on account of the war that had come upon us, and they are in our possession (2 Maccabees 2:13,14 NRSV).

The fact that he collected the sacred books shows that there were a number of books that were considered holy. We are told specifically about the memoirs of Nehemiah, books about the kings and prophets, the writings of David, and the letters of kings.

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According to this passage, Nehemiah had collected and kept the books that had God's authority behind them. The statement that Nehemiah had a library indicates that the sacred books were kept with other writings.

We also find that Judas encouraged his followers from the "law and the prophets." Second Maccabees says:

Encouraging them from the law and the prophets, and reminding them also of the struggles they had won, he made them the more eager (2 Maccabees 15:9 NRSV).

This is another indication that he had a list of sacred books.

8. The Testimony Of Josephus To The Sacred Books

First century writer Flavius Josephus tells us that the sacred writings were kept in the temple in Jerusalem before its destruction in A.D. 70. In fact, in his autobiography, we are told that the sacred scrolls were given to him by the Roman general Titus after he conquered Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

He also informs us that there were twenty-two books considered to be sacred Scripture. These are the same books that are presently in the Old Testament canon.

In addition, Josephus says that the last writing to be recognized as divinely inspired was composed almost five hundred years before the time he wrote (A.D. 90). Again, this was the time the last Old Testament book, Malachi, was composed.

Conclusion: The Scriptures Have Been Providentially Preserved Throughout History

From the evidence, which is available, there is a consistent testimony to the existence of sacred writings from the time of Moses until the time that the second temple was destroyed in the year A.D. 70.

These Scriptures were continually housed in a sacred structure—first the tabernacle and then later the temple. Therefore, the people would have always been aware of the exact extent and content of the sacred writings. No one would have any doubts about which writings were divinely authoritative.

Seemingly, the only time they were removed from the tabernacle, or the temple, was during the Babylonian captivity. Yet we are told that the Scriptures were all brought back safely to Jerusalem; nothing was lost or destroyed.

Consequently, the verdict is clear: God has providentially preserved His sacred word throughout history.

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Summary To Question 11: When, By Whom, And Where Were Books Of The Old Testament Finally Collected?

While there are many things that we do not know about how, where, and by whom the Old Testament canon was collected, there are several things that we do know.

To begin with, the writings of Moses were kept in the tabernacle, or tent of meeting, and then later in the temple. They were placed next to the Ark of the Covenant. When further writings were added, they were also kept in the tabernacle then in the temple. Later, in the history of the nation, the Book of the Law was found in the temple. This is consistent with the practice of keeping the sacred writings next to the Ark.

We know that the sacred Scriptures were taken to Babylon when the nation went into captivity. Daniel the prophet had a copy of the Scriptures when he was captive in Babylon. In fact, he had a collection of books with him—including that of the prophet Jeremiah.

We also know that these sacred writings were returned to the people after the Babylonian captivity. Ezra the scribe read the Scriptures out loud to the people.

From first century writer, Flavius Josephus, we discover that the sacred writings were kept in the temple before it was destroyed in A.D. 70. He was personally given the sacred scrolls by Titus—the man who conquered Jerusalem.

Josephus informs us that the sacred writings in his possession numbered twenty-two—the exact same books that presently makeup the Old Testament. Nothing has been lost.

Therefore, we have a continuous testimony about the Old Testament canon from the time of Moses until the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70.

Tradition says that the one who first collected all of the Old Testament writings was Ezra. However, of this we cannot be certain. What we do know is that the Scriptures were providentially preserved by the Lord for our benefit.

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Question 12

What Was The Earliest Writing That Was Put Into The Old Testament Canon?

When did the Old Testament canon actually start? What was the first thing that God revealed to humanity that was written down as authoritative Scripture?

There is no certain answer in Scripture to this question. However, there are three possible writings that were the beginning of the Old Testament canon. They include: the Book of Genesis, the Book of Job, or the Ten Commandments.

Possibility 1: The Book Of Genesis

The earliest collection of the words of God is not certain. Moses may have had the entire Book of Genesis in some written form when he placed it with his own writings (Exodus—Deuteronomy).

There may be an indication of this. Ten times in the Book of Genesis we find the phrase, “this is the record of,” “these are the histories of,” or “this is the account of.” For example, we read in the fifth chapter of Genesis the following statement:

This is the record of the family line of Adam. When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God (Genesis 5:1 NET).

This may indicate that some written records were used by Moses. If this is the case, then God guided Moses to gather the correct materials.

We do know that Luke also used sources to write his gospel. In the introduction to his gospel, he wrote the following:

Now many have undertaken to compile an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, like the accounts passed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word from the beginning. So it seemed good to me as well, because I have followed all things carefully from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know for certain the things you were taught (Luke 1:1-4 NIV).

The Message puts it this way:

So many others have tried their hand at putting together a story of the wonderful harvest of Scripture and history that took place among us, using reports handed down by the original eyewitnesses who served this Word with their very lives. Since I have investigated all the reports in close detail, starting from the story's beginning, I decided to write it all out for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can know beyond the shadow of a doubt the reliability of what you were taught (Luke 1:1-4 MsgB).

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In the case of Luke and Moses, God would have given them supernatural guidance and discernment concerning what documents to use.

Thus, Moses may have possessed a written account before he started his own writings. This would make Genesis the earliest writings that became part of Scripture.

Possibility 2: The Book Of Job

Certain Bible students believe that the Book of Job was actually written before Genesis. Some of the events in the Book of Job give the impression the story occurred before the giving of the Mosaic Law. For example, Job served as a priest for his family. He would offer sacrifices for them. We read in Job:

And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually (Job 1:5 ESV).

This practice ceased once the Law of Moses was given.

Thus, the events recorded in Job may have occurred before the time of Moses. If this is the case, then Job could have been written before the Book of Genesis. However, this would only be true if Moses did not have any written records when he wrote Genesis.

There is also the possible mention of the sin of Adam in the Book of Job. It says:

If I have covered my transgressions as Adam, by hiding my iniquity in my bosom (Job 31:33 NKJV).

If this is a reference to Adam's fall, it may be reference to the written account in Genesis.

However, most English translations render this verse as referring to "men" or "people," and not specifically to Adam. The Hebrew word can be either a proper name "Adam," or the word for "people."

For example, the New English translation sees it as referring to people. They translate the verse as follows:

I have covered my transgressions as men do, by hiding iniquity in my heart (Job 31:33 NET)

There is something else. While the Book of Job may have covered events that occurred before the giving of the Law it does not mean that the final form of the Book was composed at that time.

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Possibility 3: The Ten Commandments

It is also possible that the first written form of Scripture came from God Himself—the Ten Commandments. When the Ten Commandments were written, it is possible that Moses had not compiled, or written the Book of Genesis. This would have been likely since that the Ten Commandments were given immediately after the children of Israel left Egypt.

If this were the case, then the Ten Commandments would have been the start of the canon of Scripture. They could have been written before the Book of Genesis or the Book of Job. The Bible says the finger of God wrote the Ten Commandments:

When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God (Exodus 31:18 NIV).

The reference to the “finger of God” is not to be understood literally—God, by nature, is Spirit. Jesus said:

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24 NRSV).

God is not made up of some physical or corporeal form. The expression “finger of God” emphasizes that God alone carved the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets.

Moses later said to the people:

These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me (Deuteronomy 5:22 ESV).

This verse emphasizes that the Ten Commandments were the very words of God.

The first set of tablets was destroyed when Moses came down the mountain and found the people in sin. The Lord then wrote on the stone tablets a second time. The Bible says:

At that time the LORD said to me, “Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones and come up to me on the mountain. Also make a wooden chest. I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Then you are to put them in the chest.” So I made the ark out of acacia wood and chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I went up on the mountain with the two tablets in my hands. The LORD wrote on these tablets what he had written before, the Ten Commandments he had proclaimed to you on the mountain, out of the fire, on the day of the assembly. And the LORD gave them to me (Deuteronomy 10:1-4 NIV).

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The Ten Commandments were placed in the Ark of the Covenant. Moses explained that this was what God commanded him to do:

Then I came back down the mountain and put the tablets in the ark I had made, as the LORD commanded me, and they are there now (Deuteronomy 10:5 NIV).

The people of Israel believed that the Ten Commandments were God's authoritative Word for them. They have always been held to be sacred.

We Are Not Certain Which Was Written First

Ultimately, we do not know, nor can we know, which of these three were actually written down first. A case can be made for each one of these writings as being the first part of Scripture that God gave to humanity. What we do know is that it is possible that any of them may have been the first writing that eventually became part of the Bible.

Summary To Question 12: What Was The Earliest Writing That Was Placed In The Old Testament Canon?

While we are not told exactly which was the earliest writing that became part of the Old Testament canon there are three candidates—the Book of Genesis, the Book of Job, and the Ten Commandments. Any of these three could have been the first writings that became part of Scripture.

Moses could have compiled Genesis from previously written records. The events in Job may have taken place before the time of Moses. The Ten Commandments could have been written down before Genesis or Job.

What we do know is that Genesis, Job, and the Ten Commandments are all part of authoritative Scripture.

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Question 13

What Criteria Were Used To Recognize Which Books Belonged In the Old Testament?

What were the criteria that were used to recognize which books were given by divine revelation and belonged in the Old Testament? What things were used to decide which books belonged in Holy Scripture? Do we have an answer to this question?

1. No Exact Criteria Are Listed Anywhere

There is no simple answer to this question because no criteria are listed in the Old Testament. Nowhere do we find any standard listed, or any decision that was made, about the books that eventually became part of the Old Testament Scripture.

2. Probable Questions That Were Asked About Each Book

However, it is probably safe to say that a number of questions would have been asked of any book that was assumed to have been divinely inspired. The following criteria were most likely used to recognize the books that were divinely inspired.

3. Did The Writer Claim Divine Inspiration?

One question would have been, “Did the book indicate that God was speaking through the writer?” It is clear that the various writers of the Old Testament books believed that God was speaking through them. For example, we read of Moses writing the following:

And God spoke all these words, saying (Exodus 20:1 NKJV).

We also read that God spoke to Joshua. The Book of Joshua begins by saying the following:

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, it came to pass that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying (Joshua 1:1 NKJV).

Isaiah the prophet claimed to receive God’s Word. He wrote:

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:1 NIV).

The consistent testimony, of almost all of the Old Testament books, is that God actually spoke through the writers.

There is the point of view that says that each Old Testament book was written for the express purpose of being a divine standard of faith and practice. Each writer believed that he was divinely inspired of God and

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thus wrote under that belief. While this may be correct, it is not possible to prove since we do not have sufficient evidence to back this up.

4. Was The Author A Genuine Prophet Of God?

A second question may have concerned the identity of the human author, “Was the human author recognized as a spokesman of God, that is, was he a prophet, or did he have the prophetic gift?” As a prophet, the person would have the ability to speak and write with God’s authority. Moses recorded the following:

The LORD said to me: “What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him” (Deuteronomy 18:17,18 NIV).

The New Revised Standard Version translates these verses as follows:

Then the LORD replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command” (Deuteronomy 18:17,18 NRSV).

Later, in Book of Deuteronomy, we read that the writings of the prophet Moses were considered to be Scripture:

After Moses finished writing in a book the words of this law from beginning to end, he gave this command to the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD: “Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God. There it will remain as a witness against you” (Deuteronomy 31:24-26 NIV).

The Bible says that Samuel the prophet wrote certain things in a book:

Samuel explained to the people the regulations of the kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the LORD. Then Samuel dismissed the people, each to his own home (1 Samuel 10:25 NIV).

It has been argued that while not every book was actually written by a prophet, each book may have had some sort of prophetic endorsement behind it. Although this may be true, it cannot be proven in the case of some of the Old Testament books. These include Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon.

5. Did The Writings Agree With Previous Doctrine?

This test would compare the teachings of any new writing with the teaching of the writings which were already accepted. Since God cannot contradict Himself, if the book under consideration was found to be contradictory

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with the previous accepted writings, then it would automatically be rejected.

However, the reverse is not necessarily true. Merely because a book is orthodox, and agrees with previous doctrine, does not make it Holy Scripture.

6. Was The Book Accepted As Authoritative?

The fact that the people of God accepted the books as authoritative is another indication of their divine inspiration. The people believed these Old Testament books had God's authority behind them. Later prophets acknowledged earlier prophets. For a book to be considered Scripture, there must have been continuous acceptance by the people of God. However, it must be remembered that the books were not given authority by the people of God—they already possessed divine authority when written.

7. Did The Writing Survive Through Time?

The fact that a book survived for long ages also says something about it. Each of these ancient works was slowly copied by hand on material that was perishable. For a work to survive over a long period of time it had to be copied and recopied. The fact that this is what occurred with each of the biblical books shows that they were highly valued by the people.

In fact, the Lord put a command in place which would assure the continuous copying of the Law of Moses. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we are told that the king had the following responsibilities toward the Scriptures:

And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, from that which is in the charge of the Levitical priests (Deuteronomy 17:18 RSV)

The command would ensure that a copy of the Law would always exist.

In addition, the Lord commanded that the Law be read out loud to the people every seven years:

Moses commanded them, “At the end of [every] seven years, at the appointed time in the year of debt cancellation, during the Festival of Booths, when all Israel assembles in the presence of the Lord your God at the place He chooses, you are to read this law aloud before all Israel. Gather the people—men, women, children, and foreigners living within your gates—so that they may listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and be careful to follow all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 31:10-12 CSB).

This is another safeguard to insure the continuous existence of the Scripture.

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8. The Writings Did Survive Through Time

History bears out the fact that there was a continuous copying of the Holy Scripture. We know that the sacred writings were carried to the city of Babylon when the city of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. In Babylon, Daniel the prophet had a copy of the writings of Jeremiah the prophet in his possession. We read about this in the Book of Daniel:

During the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, was studying the writings of the prophets. I learned from the word of the LORD, as recorded by Jeremiah the prophet, that Jerusalem must lie desolate for seventy years (Daniel 9:2 NLT).

Later, these writings were brought back to the Second Temple. We find that the king gave Ezra everything that he asked for. The Bible says:

This Ezra was a scribe, well versed in the law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given to the people of Israel. He came up to Jerusalem from Babylon, and the king gave him everything he asked for, because the gracious hand of the LORD his God was on him (Ezra 7:6 NLT).

When Ezra returned, he had the Book of the Law with him:

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel (Nehemiah 8:1 RSV).

This fulfilled a promise that God has made through the prophet Jeremiah. It is as follows:

Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says about the precious things kept in the Temple and in the palace of Judah's king: They will all be carried away to Babylon and will stay there until I send for them, says the LORD. But someday I will bring them back to Jerusalem again (Jeremiah 27:21-22 NLT).

As always, God keeps His promises.

9. The Completion Of The Old Testament And The Beginning Of The New Testament

The Old Testament was completed about 430 B.C. with Nehemiah and Malachi being the last writers. There was no further revelation till John the Baptist came preaching the soon coming of the Messiah. The New Testament records this as follows:

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas

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and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness (Luke 3:1-2 NASB).

Thus, after four hundred and fifty years of silence, the Lord again spoke to His people Israel. On this occasion it was to announce the coming of the One to whom the Law and the Prophets spoke about.

Summary To Question 13: What Criteria Were Used To Recognize Which Books Belonged In The Old Testament Canon?

God gave the world a limited number of sacred books during the Old Testament period. However, we do not know the exact criteria that were used in recognizing these divinely inspired books from other writings.

However, there are certain things that the Old Testament does say that gives us some ideas as to why they were accepted. A book that claimed to be divinely inspired, written by a man of God, contained teaching that was consistent with what God had already revealed, and was accepted by the people of God, were the minimal criteria to have the book being accepted. All of the current Old Testament books meet these criteria.

Furthermore, the writing would have to have been copied and recopied to have survived. This would further demonstrate its worth in the eyes of the people. Indeed, the fact that these writings have survived throughout time indicates the value that the people placed upon them.

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Question 14

What Are Some Of The Inadequate Reasons Why A Book Would Be Part Of The Old Testament Canon?

There have been a number of inadequate reasons that have been put forward as to why a book was included in the Old Testament canon. They include the following:

1. Did It Agree With The Torah? (The Law Of Moses)

It has been argued that any work that would be placed in the canon of the Old Testament must be in agreement with the teaching in the Law of Moses. Obviously, any book that was divinely inspired would be true in all that it said. In addition, it would not contradict anything that God had previously revealed.

However, the mere fact that a book agrees with the Law of Moses is not enough, by itself, to be part of the Old Testament canon. Most likely, there were other books written in the ancient world that agreed with the truth of Moses' writings that were not placed in the Old Testament canon. Agreement with the Law of Moses is not enough.

2. Did The Writings Contain Ancient Information About Israel?

For a book to become part of the Old Testament canon it is not enough that it contains ancient information about God's chosen people, the nation Israel. Many books, that are not part of Holy Scripture, contained ancient information about Israel and their dealings with other nations. A number of these are actually mentioned in the Old Testament.

Even if an ancient book brings us information about Israel's history this is still not enough for it to be considered canonical.

3. Has The Work Been Read And Valued By God's People For A Long Time?

While one of the tests of divinely inspired Scripture is the fact that God's people read it and valued it highly, this is not enough by itself. It is possible for a book to be read and highly valued by the people of God without assuming the work to be divinely inspired.

4. Was It Written In Hebrew?

Another inadequate test for a book to be part of the Old Testament was its composition in the Hebrew language. While all thirty-nine books of the Old Testament were originally written in either Hebrew or Aramaic, this fact alone would not make it part of the Old Testament canon. There were other ancient books that were written in Hebrew during the Old Testament period that did not qualify as part of the Old Testament canon.

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5. Were They Written By Men Of God?

While men of God wrote the books of Scripture, this does not mean that everything that a prophet or a man of God wrote would be placed into Holy Scripture. For example, Solomon spoke many proverbs and wrote many songs. We read about this in First Kings:

He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish (1 Kings 4:32,33 NIV).

Yet, many of those writings did not find their way into Scripture.

We are told that the prophet Isaiah recorded the acts of King Uzziah:

The other events of Uzziah's reign, from beginning to end, are recorded by the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz (2 Chronicles 26:22 NIV).

Yet this did not become part of Holy Scripture. Therefore, not everything that was written from an acknowledged prophet, or a man of God, became part of the Old Testament canon.

6. All Of This Is Not Enough

Even if a book met all the above criteria—it was written in Hebrew, agreed with the Law of Moses, contained new information about the nation Israel, and had been read and valued for a long time by the Hebrew people—this would still be not enough for it to be placed in the Old Testament canon of Scripture.

From the Old Testament itself we find a number of ancient written sources that are mentioned. These books were undoubtedly written in Hebrew and contained valuable information for God's people. Yet, all of that would not be enough to be included in the canon.

7. Divine Inspiration Is The Key To Biblical Authority

What is necessary for a book to be in the Old Testament canon of Scripture is divine inspiration. A book must be more than historically accurately—God must divinely inspire it.

Therefore, God's authority must be behind any book for it to be placed into the Old Testament canon of Scripture. The Bible says that God supernaturally spoke through human authors to let people how to behave and what to believe. This resulted in a permanent form of revelation—the Old Testament Scriptures.

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Summary To Question 14

What Are Some Inadequate Criteria As To Why A Book Should Be Part Of The Old Testament Canon?

While we do not know the exact criteria as to why certain books were placed in the Old Testament canon there are a number of criteria that would not have been sufficient. The mere fact that a book was ancient, agreed with the Law of Moses, was written in Hebrew, contained helpful information, and was valued by God's people, is not enough.

The books must have been divinely inspired by God to be placed into the Old Testament canon of Scripture.

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Question 15

What Were The Non-Canonical Books That Were Mentioned In The Old Testament?

During the Old Testament period a number of books were composed. In fact, three thousand years ago, the writer of Ecclesiastes made the following admission about the making of books:

Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh (Ecclesiastes 12:12 NRSV).

Therefore, it seems obvious that was much literary activity occurring in the ancient world.

The Old Testament mentions the existence of a number of books that have not been placed in Holy Scripture. These include the following.

1. The Book Of The Wars Of The Lord

In the Book of Numbers there is a quotation from the “Book of the Wars of the Lord.” It says the following:

Wherefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the LORD (Numbers 21:14,15 NRSV).

The author, as well as the exact contents of this book is unknown.

2. The Book Of Jasher (The Upright One)

The “Book of Jasher,” or the “Scroll of the Upright One” is mentioned as recording Joshua’s long day. Scripture says:

The sun stood still and the moon stood motionless while the nation took vengeance on its enemies. The event is recorded in the Scroll of the Upright One The sun stood motionless in the middle of the sky and did not set for about a full day (Joshua 10:13 NET).

This book seems to be well-known to the readers of Joshua. Yet, we know nothing about it.

3. Solomon’s Proverbs And Songs

Scripture speaks of the number of proverbs and songs of Solomon. We read about this in the Book of 1 Kings:

He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish (1 Kings 4:32,33 NIV).

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The Book of Proverbs does not contain three thousand proverbs. The Song of Solomon is the only part of Scripture that contains a song from Solomon. For some reason, many of the proverbs and the songs of Solomon were not placed in Holy Scripture.

4. The Acts Of Solomon

There is reference to a book called, “The Acts of Solomon,” or the “Annals of Solomon.” We read about this work in First Kings:

As for the other events of Solomon's reign—all he did and the wisdom he displayed—are they not written in the book of the annals of Solomon? (1 Kings 11:41 NIV).

Nothing is known about this book beyond its mention here.

5. The Annals Of The Kings Of Israel

The writer of First Kings mentions a source known as the, “The Annals of the Kings of Israel.” It says the following:

The other events of Jeroboam's reign, his wars and how he ruled, are written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel (1 Kings 14:19 NIV).

This would not be the same as the canonical book of First Kings. The author and contents of this particular work are unknown.

6. The Annals Of The Kings Of Judah

There is the mention of a work titled, “The Annals of the Kings of Judah.” We read about this in First Kings:

As for the other events of Abijah's reign, and all he did, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Judah? There was war between Abijah and Jeroboam (1 Kings 15:7 NIV).

Nothing is known about the author or the contents of this book.

7. The Records Of Samuel, Nathan, Gad

The prophets Samuel, Nathan, and Gad are said to have recorded events in the life of King David:

As for the events of King David's reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer (1 Chronicles 29:29 NIV).

Samuel is credited with writing First and Second Samuel. He also possibly wrote Judges and Ruth. Nothing is known about the writings of Gad.

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In another place, Nathan the prophet is also credited with writing something about Solomon. The Chronicler wrote:

As for the other events of Solomon's reign, from beginning to end, are they not written in the records of Nathan the prophet, in the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite and in the visions of Iddo the seer concerning Jeroboam son of Nebat? (2 Chronicles 9:29 NIV).

Along with Nathan, there is mention of other writings: the prophecy of Ahijah, and the vision of Iddo the seer. Again, we know nothing else of these writings.

8. The Records Of Shemaiah The Prophet And Iddo The Seer

A prophet named Shemaiah, and a seer named Iddo, recorded the acts of king Rehoboam. The Bible says the following:

As for the events of Rehoboam's reign, from beginning to end, are they not written in the records of Shemaiah the prophet and of Iddo the seer that deal with genealogies? There was continual warfare between Rehoboam and Jeroboam (2 Chronicles 12:15 NIV).

Nothing has ever been found of these works.

9. The Annals Of Jehu

Jehu the King is said to have recorded the acts of another King, Jehoshaphat. This is also recorded in the Book of Chronicles:

The other events of Jehoshaphat's reign, from beginning to end, are written in the annals of Jehu son of Hanani, which are recorded in the book of the kings of Israel (2 Chronicles 20:34 NIV).

It seems that certain things that were written in the annals of Jehu were incorporated into the biblical books of First Kings.

10. The Acts Of Uzziah

The prophet Isaiah recorded the acts of King Uzziah. The Chronicler wrote the following:

The other events of Uzziah's reign, from beginning to end, are recorded by the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz (2 Chronicles 26:22 NIV).

This written record of Isaiah is not the same as the biblical book that bears his name.

11. The Laments Of Jeremiah

There is a mention of the laments of Jeremiah. We read about this in Second Chronicles:

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Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day all the men and women singers commemorate Josiah in the laments. These became a tradition in Israel and are written in the Laments (2 Chronicles 35:25 NIV).

The lament of Jeremiah is not the same as the biblical book of Lamentations. That particular work was written after the destruction of Jerusalem and it laments its devastation.

Why Are These Works Not Included In The Old Testament Canon?

These are some of the written works mentioned in the Old Testament that have not become part of sacred Scripture. Indeed, the writer, or writers, of Chronicles, First and Second Chronicles, mention seventy-five different sources for the contents of this work!

Some of these works cited were used as sources for the Old Testament Scripture. Obviously, they would have been accurate records for this to happen. Yet these accurate ancient records were not included in the Old Testament canon of Scripture.

As to why they were not included in Holy Scripture, it is not possible to know. For some reason, known to God, and to Him alone, these works were not placed into the Old Testament canon of Scripture.

All of these works have perished. It is only the sacred Scriptures that have been miraculously preserved through the annals of history. This is exactly what we would expect as the prophet Isaiah wrote:

Grass dries up, and flowers wither, but the word of our God will last forever (Isaiah 40:8 God's Word).

The Hebrew Scriptures, the Word of God, has indeed survived. This is another testimony to its character.

Summary To Question 15: What Were The Non-Canonical Books That Were Mentioned In The Old Testament?

There seems to have been a number of literary works composed during the Old Testament period. The Old Testament mentions a number of ancient written works, alongside the authoritative books. Some of these were used as sources for the biblical books.

For example, there are seventy-five different sources listed in the Books of Chronicles. Yet these writings, for whatever reason, were not included in Scripture. As to why they were not included, we do not know. Because we do not know the answer to this question, it is useless to speculate.

What we do know is that God's Word, the Old Testament Scriptures, have not perished. As predicted, the Word of the Lord has lasted forever.

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Question 16

Why Was The Authority Of Certain Old Testament Books Questioned?

At certain times, some of the books of the Old Testament have had their authority questioned. These include Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Ezekiel, and Proverbs. The reasons vary from book to book. We can make the following observations about each one of these works.

1. Esther

The problem with the Book of Esther is that the name of God is not found in the book. However, the hand of God, however, is certainly evident in the account as He protected the Jews from total annihilation. The mere absence of God's name is not sufficient reason to deny its status, especially when His providential hand is so evident. Certainly, there is nothing taught in the Book of Esther that is inconsistent with the rest of Scripture.

We Do Not Know Why God's Name Is Not Mentioned

While a number of theories have been proposed as to why God's name is not mentioned, no one really knows for certain. What we do know is that Esther did exercise faith. She said:

Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish (Esther 4:16 NIV).

The fact that Esther urged the people to fast demonstrates that she, as well as the people, had faith in the God of the Hebrew Scripture.

Esther Is The Basis For The Feast Of Purim

The deliverance that was granted by God was basis for the feast of Purim. The Book of Esther explains how the feast originated. We read the following:

Therefore these days were called Purim, from the word pur. Because of everything written in this letter and because of what they had seen and what had happened to them, the Jews took it upon themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year, in the way prescribed and at the time appointed. These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never cease to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of them die out among their descendants (Esther 9:26-28 NIV).

This passage explains how the feast should be perpetually celebrated. This is another indication of the importance of the Book.

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Is The Name Of God Found In Esther?

It has been contended that God's name is actually contained in the Book of Esther. It is found in acrostic form in the original Hebrew at four crucial points of the story of Esther. Indeed, at Esther 5:4, it has been observed that if one would take the first letter of four consecutive Hebrew words, it would spell out the divine name *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*. Consequently, it is argued, that Esther shows the working of God behind the scenes without His name being mentioned.

2. Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes was sometimes objected to because of its skeptical tone. The writer of the book exclaims that all life is subject to vanity:

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3 ESV).

The problem here is a matter of understanding the author's intent. Solomon, the writer of the book, is demonstrating that no one can experience ultimate satisfaction in this world. He shows that all people, no matter who they are or what they have, need God. There are no exceptions.

There is also what seems to be an encouragement for one to live for pleasure, rather than live for God. We read the following:

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God (Ecclesiastes 2:24 NIV).

Ancient Judaism reconciled this problem by translating this verse as a question demanding a no answer rather than a statement. Consequently, the verse would read something like the following:

Is there is nothing better for mortals to do but to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil? No there is not.

The book ends with the author encouraging the people to turn to God. It says:

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man (Ecclesiastes 12:13 NIV).

Therefore, the problem is the lack of understanding the message of the book of the Book of Ecclesiastes—not its divine authority.

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3. The Song Of Solomon

The Song of Solomon was sometimes criticized as being too secular. First, it was said to have been too sensual. Second, the name of the Lord is not mentioned in the book.

The misdirected criticisms of sensuality do not understand the purpose of the book, which is to emphasize the nobility of marriage.

In addition, the Song of Solomon may contain the name of God. There is a verse that reads as follows:

Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame (Song of Solomon 8:6 NIV).

The last phrase could be translated, “like the very flame of the Lord.”

Whether or not the name of the Lord is used, the authority of the Song of Solomon has never really been in doubt.

4. Ezekiel

There were some who considered the Book of Ezekiel to be against the Mosaic Law. It was thought that the closing chapters, which speak of a new temple, could not be reconciled with the Law of Moses.

Eventually it was discovered how Ezekiel and Moses could be reconciled. Its authoritative status was never really in doubt.

5. Proverbs

Proverbs had some who doubted it because of certain supposed inner contradictions. One example is as follows:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes (Proverbs 26:4,5 NIV).

While these statements seem contradictory, this is not necessarily a contradiction. There are times when one should answer a fool, and other times when one should not.

Different situations call for different responses when dealing with foolish people. Consequently, we should not assume these statements are contradictory.

There Was No Serious Challenge To These Writings

While the divine inspiration of each of these books may have been discussed, there has been no serious challenge to their place in the canon of Scripture. Consequently, there is no reason to question their authority.

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Summary To Question 16 Why Was The Authority Of Certain Old Testament Books Questioned?

Certain Old Testament books had been questioned as to their divine authority. These include Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Ezekiel, and Proverbs. There was a different reason why each was questioned. Esther does not mention the name of God. Likewise, the Song of Solomon does not mention the name of God.

Also, it seemed to be too sensual to be in Scripture. Ecclesiastes seemingly contained things that were at odds with other parts of Scripture.

Certain of the Proverbs seemed to be contradictory. Ezekiel was thought to have portions that were against the Law of Moses. Yet all these differences have sensible solutions.

It should also be noted that was never any serious consideration that these books did not belong in Holy Scripture.

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Question 17

Did The Sadducees Have A Different Old Testament Canon Than The Rest Of Judaism?

It has been argued that the one of the religious groups that Jesus confronted, the Sadducees, were like the Samaritans, in that they only accepted the Law of Moses as divinely authoritative.

That is, they rejected all other writings including the remainder of the Hebrew Scripture. If this is true, it may show that the canon of the Old Testament was not settled during the time of Christ.

Several observations need to be made about this question.

Arguments For The Sadducees Having A Different Canon

Three reasons are usually given for the Sadducees having a different canon than the rest of the Jews. They are as follows.

1. Statements From Early Church Fathers

To begin with, many of the church Fathers clearly stated that the Sadducees only accepted the Book of Moses as canonical. According to these Christian sources, the Sadducees rejected all other writings as Holy Scripture.

The church fathers Origen and Hippolytus, living in the third century, were the first to make such a claim. Therefore, from a number of Christian writers, we have early testimony as to a different canon used by the Sadducees.

2. The Statement Of Josephus About The Beliefs Of The Sadducees

One of the reasons that the church fathers held this position was a statement found in the writings of first-century Jewish writer Flavius Josephus. Josephus wrote of the Sadducees in the following manner:

[They] admit no observance at all apart from the laws (*Antiquities* 18:16).

This led a number of church fathers, including Origen, to say that the Sadducees accepted only the five books of Moses as divinely inspired.

Indeed, Josephus' statement was consistent with the Sadducees whom the Christians were aware of in the third century A.D. They rejected all of the Hebrew Scripture except the Mosaic Law.

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3. Statements Found In The New Testament

Finally, there are statements in the New Testament about the beliefs of the Sadducees. Matthew records that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead:

The same day Sadducees came to him [Jesus], who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question (Matthew 22:23 ESV).

Here we are told that they did not believe in the resurrection.

In the Book of Acts, Luke also records the fact that the Sadducees differed from the Pharisees on their view of the resurrection of the dead. He wrote:

And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all (Acts 23:7.8 ESV).

Obviously, the Sadducees had different beliefs than the Pharisees. They rejected the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. While the Law of Moses does not specifically teach the resurrection of the dead, other Old Testament books clearly do. For example, the resurrection is found in Daniel. It says:

Michael the great prince who stands watch over your people will rise up. There will be a time of distress such as never has occurred since nations came into being until that time. But at that time all your people who are found written in the book will escape. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, and some to shame and eternal contempt (Daniel 12:1,2 CSB).

Other passages also teach the resurrection of the body. Isaiah the prophet wrote:

Your dead will live; their bodies will rise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in the dust! For you will be covered with the morning dew, and the earth will bring forth the departed spirits (Isaiah 26:19 CSB).

There are a number of passages, outside of the Law of Moses, which teach the same thing. Therefore, it logically follows that the Sadducees must have rejected the remainder of Old Testament Scripture.

The fact that the Sadducees denied the resurrection seems to be further evidence that they only accepted the Law of Moses as canonical and rejected the remainder of Scripture.

Response

Though some have held the view that the Sadducees accepted a different canon than the Pharisees and other first-century Jews, the evidence is not there. We can make the following observations.

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The Sadducees United With The Samaritans In The Second Century A.D.

While many of the church fathers, from the third century onward, testified that the Sadducees only accepted the Law of Moses as canonical, this claim only refers to the Sadducees living at that time. Indeed, from the writings of the church father Hippolytus, we find that the Sadducees joined with the Samaritans in the second or third century A.D.

After the destruction of Jerusalem, the Sadducees, as a group, began to die out. Some of those which remained eventually united themselves with a sect of the Samaritans—the only religious community which accepted the Law of Moses as authoritative and denied the remainder of Scripture. However, this joining of the Sadducees and the Samaritans occurred at least century after the time of Jesus. Therefore, the statements of the church fathers indicated the beliefs of the Sadducees at their time in history—not the beliefs they held at the time of Jesus.

As we shall see, there is no evidence anywhere that the Sadducees, in the first-century A.D., held to a different canon than other Jews.

There Was A Misunderstanding Of The Jewish Writer Josephus

But what about the statement made by Josephus? Didn't he clearly say the Sadducees only accepted the Law of Moses? The answer is, "No." This idea comes from a misreading of Josephus.

For example, Origen understood Josephus' statement to mean that the Sadducees accepted only the Law of Moses as Scripture. However, Josephus was not referring to the Law of Moses as opposed to all the writings which make up the Scripture.

Rather he was speaking of the written law, versus the oral law. Another of his statements makes this clear. He wrote:

[The Sadducees] hold that only written laws should be reckoned valid but that those handed down by tradition from the fathers need not be observed (*Antiquities* 13:297).

This does not imply the Sadducees' rejection of the Old Testament canon of Scripture—only that they held the written Scripture to be valid, not the oral law which had been passed down.

Furthermore, nowhere in the writings of Josephus do we find the slightest hint that any of the Jews accepted a different canon of Scripture.

While Josephus tells us of the existence of the many different sects of Judaism that existed in the first century, as well as their unique beliefs, he never says the issue of the canon was one of the beliefs which divided these groups.

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To the contrary, his writings assume that the canon of Scripture was a common heritage for all Jews no matter what their particular beliefs may have been.

Therefore, Josephus' testimony is that the Sadducees held to the same canon of Scripture as all other groups.

The New Testament Is Consistent With The Other Evidence

The New Testament does say the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. We also know that the resurrection of the dead is not specifically taught in the Books of Moses but is taught elsewhere in the Old Testament. How can we reconcile this?

The answer is that the Sadducees explained the resurrection in a non-literal manner. Therefore, while accepting the Law of Moses, and the rest of the Old Testament as Scripture, the differences were over how the teachings were to be interpreted and understood—their differences with the Pharisees were not over the extent of the canon.

Furthermore, the New Testament also says that the Sadducees did not believe in angels. Yet, there are a number of accounts of the ministry of angels in the Law of Moses which everyone agrees the Sadducees accepted as Scripture.

Consequently, if the Sadducees rejected outright the doctrine of angels, then they would have had to have rejected the Law of Moses as Scripture. As was true with the doctrine of the resurrection, the Sadducees held a different view from the Pharisees with respect to angels while still accepting the same books as Holy Scripture. Therefore, the differences were over interpretation, not the canon.

The Sadducees Called For The Scripture To Discover Where The Christ Was To Be Born

There is further evidence that the Sadducees accepted the entire Old Testament, or Hebrew Scripture, as canonical. For one thing, when the Magi appeared in Jerusalem looking for the Christ Child, Herod turned to the chief priests to discover where the Christ was to be born. At that time, most of the leading priests were Sadducees. Yet, they told Herod that the Scripture predicted the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem. This "Scripture" was not from the Law of Moses but rather from the prophet Micah. This illustrates they accepted more Scripture than the Law of Moses.

The Sadducees Would Have Been In Charge Of The Temple Archives

There is one final thing. Since the late second century B.C., the Sadducees were the group that had jurisdiction over the temple archives. Among other things, the archives housed the Holy Scriptures. The fact that the other

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writings, apart from the Law of Moses, were kept in the temple archives, shows the Sadducees did not reject these writings as Scripture.

Conclusion: The Sadducees Used The Same Canon

Therefore, when all the evidence is considered, we find that the Sadducees, like all other Jewish sects in the first century, accepted the same writings as Holy Scripture. This was their common heritage. There is no evidence that any group rejected the sacred writings or any part of it. The extent of the Hebrew canon was clear.

Summary To Question 17

Did The Sadducees Have A Different Old Testament Canon Than The Rest Of Judaism?

No. While it has been argued that the Sadducees had a different Old Testament canon than the rest of Judaism in the first century A.D., the evidence does not bear this out. The Sadducees in the third century after Christ did join the Samaritans in rejecting all of Holy Scripture except for the writings of Moses. However, the evidence shows that in the first century A.D., the Sadducees were united with all Jewish sects in that they received and valued the same writings as Holy Scripture.

The evidence from first-century writer Flavius Josephus, along with the evidence from the New Testament itself makes this clear. It shows that the Sadducees, while disagreeing with the Pharisees over certain doctrines such as angels and the resurrection from the dead, did not disagree with them as to the extent of the Old Testament canon.

Therefore, the testimony from the Sadducees reveals that the canon of Scripture was agreed upon by all first-century Jewish groups—no matter what their other differences of belief may have been.

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Question 18

What Was The Extent Of The Old Testament Canon Among The People Who Wrote The Dead Sea Scrolls?

One of the issues that may have some bearing on the extent of the Old Testament canon concerns ancient Hebrew manuscripts found in the mid-twentieth century in Israel. These manuscripts have come to be known as “the Dead Sea Scrolls.”

What Are The Dead Sea Scrolls

In the year 1947, a discovery of ancient manuscripts was made in a cave at a site called Qumran—an area about five hundred yards northwest of the Dead Sea. Eventually manuscripts were discovered in eleven different caves. These various written works were dated from 200 B.C. to A.D. 70.

Who Wrote The Dead Sea Scrolls?

It is not certain who wrote the scrolls. There have been a number of suggestions. Most likely, it was a community of people who lived alongside the Dead Sea known as the Essenes. The Essenes lived at Qumran until A.D. 70. At that time, Jerusalem fell to the Romans and the Jews were taken out of their land.

There Were Copies Of The Scriptures Among The Texts

The Dead Sea Scrolls consist of about eight hundred texts. Among the texts discovered were over two hundred copies of all of the different books of the Hebrew Bible (with the exception of Esther and possibly the Book of Nehemiah). While most copies were fragmentary, a few (notably Isaiah) were complete.

Was There A Wider Canon Of Scripture At Qumran?

Also found among the Dead Sea Scrolls are portions of the Old Testament Apocrypha—the Book of Tobit, the Letter of Jeremiah, and Sirach. There were also some other non-canonical books found among the Dead Sea Scrolls—The Book of Jubilees, and the Book of Enoch. Because all of these works were found with the canonical writings, it has been argued that they were included with the Hebrew Scriptures as being divinely authoritative.

Consequently, it has been presumed that the Old Testament canon at that time was larger than the present thirty-nine books found in the Protestant Old Testament, or the same twenty-two in the Hebrew Scriptures.

There Is No Evidence They Had Wider Canon Of Scripture

However, a number of points can be made in response to this. They include the following observations.

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1. It Was A Library At Qumran

The fact that copies of certain non-canonical writings were found at Qumran does not necessarily mean the Essenes considered these works to be on the same level as the canonical books. The writings from Qumran were part of a library. They were not merely documents that this particular community held to be sacred.

2. There Were No Commentaries Found On The Books Outside Of The Hebrew Canon

While copies of these non-canonical books have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is no evidence that the people of this community wrote commentaries on these disputed books.

This is in contrast to the commentaries of certain biblical books that were found at Qumran. This may be an indication that the Essenes did not consider these books canonical.

Whatever the case may be, the lack of commentaries on these books is consistent with the idea that they did not recognize them as authoritative Scripture.

3. There Is No Direct Statement Of The Extent Of The Hebrew Canon

Those who lived at Qumran left no written statement as to the extent of the Hebrew canon. Any conclusion can only be based upon inference from the evidence.

Therefore, we have no clear statement, one way or another, as to which particular books those people accepted as Scripture.

4. The Essenes Were Not In The Mainstream Of Judaism

Even if the people at Qumran did use a different canon than those who lived in Jerusalem, it does not prove very much. These people were a group that was outside of mainstream Judaism. Therefore, their beliefs could not be considered normative of first century Judaism.

5. The Books Were Hastily Hidden From The Roman Army

There is something else that has to be considered. The scrolls at Qumran seem to have been hastily hidden when the Roman army was advancing toward them. This could account for the sacred books being hidden together with the other writings of the community—there was no time to separate the sacred from the non-sacred.

Therefore, when all the facts are considered, any evidence we find from Qumran is not that helpful in determining the extent of the Hebrew canon.

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Why Are There No Copies Of Esther Found At Qumran?

If the community at Qumran had the same canon as did mainstream Judaism, then why wasn't there any copy of the Book of Esther found among their writings?

There have been a number of suggestions as to why Esther was not included among the writings found at Qumran. They include the following theories.

1. Esther Was Not Considered Canonical By The Essenes

There has been the argument that, for some reason, those at Qumran did not accept the divine authority of Esther. It is possible the lack of God's name in this work caused them to reject it as being Holy Scripture. It may have been something else that caused them to reject its status.

Whatever the reason, those at Qumran did not believe Esther was to be placed with the authoritative books.

2. There Was Doubt About The Status Of Esther

Rather than outright rejection, there is also the possibility that there were some doubts that were held about the canonicity of Esther. Like some others in the early church, they may have been unsure as to Esther's canonical status.

3. The Book Of Esther Had A Different Calendar Than The Essenes

Another possible reason that a copy of Esther has not been found may have to do with the Qumran calendar. The calendar at Qumran was different than the one found in the Book of Esther. This is important because the calendar used at Qumran was considered to be divinely ordained by the Essenes.

This may account for no copies of the Book of Esther being found among the other writings.

4. The Essenes May Have Had A Negative View Of Women

It is possible that the Essenes did not keep a copy of the Book of Esther because of negative views they held toward women. This would be consistent with what we know about them.

Since the Book of Ruth was attached to the Book of Judges, they would not have had the problem with it as they may have with a book that bore the name of a woman. However, this is only speculation.

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5. The Essenes Disapproved Of The Hasmoneans

There is also the possibility that the events recorded in the Book of Esther were too complementary to the ruling Hasmonean family. Those who lived at Qumran disapproved of the activities of the Hasmonean dynasty. This would account for the lack of a copy.

6. There Was No Celebration Of Purim By The Essenes

The Book of Esther also provides an explanation for the feast of Purim. While all the other feasts were mentioned and celebrated by the Essenes, Purim was not. As far as we know it is a feast that they never celebrated. This fact could have contributed to the omitting of Esther from their writings.

7. All Copies Of Esther May Have Been Lost

It is possible that Esther was included in the canon by those who lived at Qumran. The fact that no copy of it was found does not necessarily mean that it was rejected or doubted by these people. Any copies that had been made could have been lost.

A case can be made that those living at Qumran included the Book of Esther as Scripture. While there has not been any fragment of Esther found among the writings of the Dead Sea community this should not necessarily be understood as their rejection of Esther as a canonical work.

For one thing, they did not share the same view held by some other Rabbi's about the canonicity of other disputed books such as Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Proverbs. Copies of these works were all found among their library. Therefore, it is possible that there was a copy of Esther at one time, which, for some reason, became lost.

Indeed, there are some non-canonical writings found among the Dead Sea Scrolls which may show some familiarity to the Book of Esther.

We know this because there are a number of Hebrew words which are found in the Book of Esther that are contained nowhere else in the Old Testament. However, in these non-canonical writings found in Qumran, some of these unique words are used. This seems to show that the people of Qumran were familiar with Esther seeing they used some of the vocabulary from this book.

8. Until Recently there Is No Copy Of The Text Of Nehemiah Among The Dead Sea Scrolls

Finally, Esther was not the only Old Testament book among the Dead Sea Scrolls where no fragment has been found. Nothing has been found from the text of the Book of Nehemiah until recently.

We know that the Book of Nehemiah was considered canonical by all. The fact that no fragment from Nehemiah had been found simply means that

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nothing had survived until this recent discovery. It certainly did not mean that this work was not placed in the canon of Scripture at this time.

Therefore, the Book of Esther may have suffered the same fate. It was considered canonical, and used at Qumran, but nothing of it has survived; or at least no copy of it has been found as of yet.

To sum up: we do not know exactly why there were no copies of the Book of Esther found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, this has no bearing on its canonicity or the extent of the canon at that time.

9. The Testimony Of Second Maccabees

One more point should be mentioned. There is evidence that before the time the Dead Sea Scrolls were written, the Book of Esther was considered to be divinely authoritative Scripture. From the apocryphal book of Second Maccabees, we read the following:

And they all decreed by public vote never to let this day go unobserved, but to celebrate the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—which is called Adar in the Aramaic language—the day before Mordecai's day (2 Maccabees 15:36 NRSV).

This passage recognizes Mordecai, one of the main characters in the Book of Esther. Therefore, it is ancient testimony that his status, as given in the Book of Esther, was well-known.

Summary To Question 18

What Was The Extent Of The Old Testament Canon Among The People Who Wrote The Dead Sea Scrolls?

It has been argued that those who lived at Qumran during the time of Christ, the Essenes, had a different canon of Scripture than those at Jerusalem.

However, there is no convincing evidence of this. While those who lived at Qumran had copies of writings other than the Holy Scripture, they give us no list of their beliefs about the status of these books. There is no evidence of a different canon than that of normative Judaism at that time. Therefore, we cannot say for certain, one way or the other, about the extent of their canon.

Even if it is eventually proven that the people at Qumran used a different canon than those in Jerusalem, it would still not prove the canon was unsettled. These people were outside of normative Judaism in certain of their beliefs and practices. There is also the likelihood that the scrolls were quickly hidden because of the approach of the Roman army. This is why the sacred scrolls were next to non-sacred scrolls.

As far as Esther is concerned, there are a number of possible reasons as to why no copy was found. The book could have been rejected outright or doubted. There also were differences between the calendar of the Qumran

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community and the calendar used in Esther. Since the Essenes considered their calendar holy, this could have caused its lack of use of Esther. We also know that the Essenes had a negative view toward women. This could account for not keeping a writing that bore the name of a woman.

They also had their differences with the ruling Hasmonean dynasty. The events recorded in Esther could be seen as casting favorable light on the Hasmonean dynasty. Thus, the work was omitted. Add to this that the Essenes did not celebrate the feast of Purim—a feast that was established by the events recorded in the Book of Esther.

However, there is also the possibility that all of the copies of Esther were lost. There are no copies of the Book of Nehemiah among the Dead Sea Scrolls—a work everyone considered as canonical. Thus, it may have been only chance that copies of these two writings did not survive or have not yet been found.

We just do not know. There is some evidence that those who lived at Qumran did acknowledge Esther as a canonical work. Yet we cannot say for certain, one way or another, whether they considered Esther to be Holy Scripture.

When all the evidence has been considered, we do not have to change our view of the Old Testament canon because of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

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Question 19

Why Is There A Threefold Division Of The Hebrew Canon? (Law, Prophets, Writings)

Apart from the first five books of the Old Testament, there is a different order between the books of the Hebrew Bible and that of English Bibles. The Hebrew Bible has three divisions—the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the sacred Writings (also known as the Hagiographa).

The Prophets consist of eight books in the following order: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Twelve (the Minor Prophets).

The Writings consist of eleven books that are ordered in this manner: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. The Book of Ruth was originally placed before the Psalms.

However, in the Middle Ages it was moved next to the other smaller books Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, and Esther.

Why Was The Hebrew Canon Divided Into Three Parts?

One of the questions that Bible students ask is, “Why was the Hebrew canon divided into three parts?” Why were the books grouped according to the Law, Prophets, and the Writings? Is there any reason as to why a certain book was in the Prophets rather than the Writings?

There Are Four Possible Answers

There have been a number of answers given to this question. The main ones include the following.

1. There were three different historical stages when the books were canonized
2. The books in section two were written by prophets while the books in section three were not
3. The books were divided according to their literary character
4. The threefold division did not occur until after the time of Christ

We will look at each theory individually and consider the case for it.

Option 1: There Was Three Stages Of Canonization Of The Old Testament Scripture (The Triple Canon Theory)

One popular theory is that the Hebrew Old Testament was canonized in three stages. Thus, the reason as to why we find these books in their present

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threefold division is because it reflects the order in which they were canonized. Supposedly, there was a gradual development of the Hebrew canon over a long period of time.

Arguments For The Triple Canon Theory

The arguments that have been used for the “Triple Canon Theory” can be simply stated as follows.

The Three Sections Represented Three Stages Of Development

According to this theory, the Law of Moses was canonized in the fifth century B.C., the prophets were canonized in the third century B.C., and the Hagiographa, the holy Writings, were not canonized until the first century A.D.

This explains why we find the threefold division of the Hebrew Scripture; the sacred writings were canonized in three historical stages.

A Number Of Books In The Third Section Were Completed Too Late To Be Canonical At The Time Of Christ

The books in the third section were not recognized as Scripture in the third century before Christ. According to this theory, it is possible that some of them, including Daniel, had not even been written at that time.

It was not until after the time of Christ that the Writings in the third section were regarded as Scripture. Therefore, when Jesus was on the earth, only the Law and Prophets were recognized as Holy Scripture.

The Council Of Jamnia Added The Writings To The Canon And Then Closed It

Finally, it has been argued that the Jewish Council of Jamnia, meeting around A.D. 90, defined the extent of the canon. They added the third section, the Writings, to the canon. The authorities at Jamnia then closed the canon once and for all.

Therefore, three different groups of sacred writings are recognized because there were three different times of recognition in history. This is how this particular theory is usually stated.

Response

While this theory was once popular, it not held by leading scholars today. The main problem with this theory is that several of the prophetic books were written much later than the books found in the “Writings.”

In addition, we now know that all of the books found in the Old Testament canon had been composed long before the time of Christ— since copies of all of them, except Esther and possibly Nehemiah, were found among

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the Dead Sea Scrolls which date from 100-200 years before the time of Christ.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that an authoritative council met in Jamnia to add the writings to the canon or to determine its extent. Consequently, this theory has generally been abandoned.

Option 2: The Last Two Sections Are Divided Between Prophets And Non-Prophets

There is also the view that the second stage of the Hebrew canon was written exclusively by prophets while the third stage was composed of books written by non-prophets. The writers of the third section had the prophetic gift but did not hold a prophetic office. David, Solomon, Daniel and Ezra, whose writings are found in the third section, were not prophets in the sense of holding a prophetic office. However, the Scripture does say that David and Daniel had the prophetic gift.

The problem with this view is that one of the prophets of the second section, Amos, seems to state that he was not a prophet by office. Note how the New Revised Standard Version translates this verse:

Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees" (Amos 7:14 NRSV).

However, the New English Translation renders the verse in this manner:

Amos replied to Amaziah, "I was not a prophet by profession. No, I was a herdsman who also took care of sycamore fig trees" (Amos 7:14 NET).

In this passage Amos seems to say that he is not a prophet. However, this passage does not necessarily refute the idea that the second section consisted of those who have held the prophetic office.

As we observed, the Hebrew can be translated, "I was neither a prophet," or, "I was not a prophet by profession" instead of, "I am" no prophet.

Consequently, Amos would be saying that he became a prophet through the call of God, rather than outright denying that he was ever a prophet by profession. If this is the case, then this theory may explain the divisions into the Prophets and the Writings.

Option 3: They Were Divided According To Their Literary Character

There is also the position that the books are grouped according to their literary character—Law, Prophets, and Writings. The first section contains the Law of Moses; the second contains the works of the Prophets, while the third contains the Holy Writings.

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According to this theory, the three divisions have nothing to do with the order in which they were written, or the time they were canonized. There are parts of the third section that are equally as old as parts of the second section.

For example, some of the Psalms were composed centuries before the last of the writing prophets—Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Consequently, there is no evidence that the Hagiographa, the writings, was the last collection of books to be placed into the canon.

In addition, each of the three divisions has an historical section. The first section contains history from creation through the Law of Moses.

The second section is from the time of Moses to the end of the Hebrew monarchy.

The third section contains the history of the Babylonian captivity and then the return.

For example, Daniel, Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah give the history of this third period of Israel's history. This is the reason as to why they are in the third section. The reason Chronicles is placed last is because it summarizes Old Testament history—not because it was the last work to be canonized.

Therefore, the Old Testament Scriptures are divided into three parts according to their literary character with each part containing an historical section.

Option 4: There Was No Threefold Division Until After The Time Of Christ

Finally, there is also the possibility that the threefold division into Law, Prophets, and Writings, was not something that happened until after New Testament times.

At the time of Christ, the Old Testament was divided into two sections—the Law and the Prophets. It was only after the New Testament era, and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, that the Prophets were divided into two sections—the Prophets and the Writings. Therefore, the triple division of the Old Testament Scripture occurred after biblical times.

Consequently, the fact that the Old Testament was eventually divided into three sections has no relevance in determining how the canon was formed.

There is something else that needs to be remembered about the collection process. The sacred writings were written upon separate scrolls. Hence, it is not possible, or necessary, to place them in any exact sequence.

What we do know is that there were a number of sacred writings that existed and they were eventually placed in three categories—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

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Summary To Question 19: Why Is There A Threefold Division The Old Testament Canon? (Law, Prophets, Writings)

The Old Testament Scriptures are now divided into three sections—the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. There is no explanation as to why this is so. There are four theories that explain this division.

One theory holds that each group was canonized at different stages. The Law was first canonized, then the Prophets, and then finally the writings. The final stage did not take place until after the time of Christ.

However, there is evidence that parts of the Holy Writings, section three, are older than parts of the works of the prophets found in section two. This theory, though once popular, has largely been abandoned.

Another theory holds that the section of the Prophets consisted of only those writers who held the prophetic office while the people of the third section, though it included those with the prophetic gift, did not hold the office of a prophet.

A third view says that the works are divided according to their literary character. The first section contained the Law, the second section the Prophets, and the third the Writings. Each section also has a history that corresponded to three different periods of Old Testament history.

The fourth theory holds that the modern division of Law, Prophets, and Writings, did not occur until after the city of Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70.

Before that time, the Hebrew Scriptures were divided into two sections: the Law and the Prophets. Therefore, the present division into three sections has nothing to do with the canonizing of the books since it occurred centuries after the canon was closed.

While we cannot be certain which of these theories is correct, we can say for certain that the threefold division of the canon did not correspond to three stages of the development of the canon. The canon was closed about 400 B.C. when the last of the Old Testament writings was composed. The division into the Law, Prophets and Writings is merely a convenient way of organizing the Holy Books.

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Question 20

Was The Hebrew Canon Determined After The Time Of Christ? (The Council Of Jamnia)

The assertion that the canon was officially closed at the council of Jamnia by certain rabbinical authorities is based upon a passage in the Jewish writings, the Mishnah. The background of this assertion is as follows.

The Meeting At Jamnia

After the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70, Jewish life took on a different aspect. The holy city was no longer exclusively theirs, and the temple no longer existed. The Jewish people now had to rethink how their religion was to function.

The Mishnah says that in an effort to understand how Jewish life would function in the future, a group of Jewish leaders met in the town of Jamnia, or Jabneh, in Israel in the year A.D. 90. They established a school where they exercised legal functions as the Sanhedrin had done before the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

Led by Rabbi Jonathan Ben-Zakkai, they discussed a number of things pertaining to the state of Judaism after the destruction of the temple. The following questions need to be examined about their meeting and discussion.

Was The Canon Closed At Jamnia

According to some ancient sources, one of the subjects discussed was the Hebrew Scriptures. It has been argued that there was some discussion with respect to the canonicity of five books—Ezekiel, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.

The fact that such discussion occurred has convinced some that the Hebrew canon had not been determined until that time. The council of Jamnia, it is argued, determined the boundaries of the Hebrew canon. The Rabbis at Jamnia discussed the canonicity of these five books, found them to be canonical, and then added the third division of the Hebrew Scripture, the Writings, to the canon at that time. Previously, the canon consisted only of the Law and the Prophets. Thus, the Council of Jamnia authoritatively closed the Old Testament canon once and for all.

While this theory has been popular, it is not where the evidence leads us.

Was The Third Stage Of The Canon Still Open?

It is argued that only two stages of the canon—the Law and the Prophets—had been accepted as canonical up to this time. The Hagiographa, the writings, were yet to be canonized. If this is true, then the Old Testament was still unsettled.

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There Was No Authoritative Decision About The Canon For The Following Reasons

Yet, the evidence does not support this contention that some type of authoritative decision was made at Jamnia about the canon of Scripture. The following points should be noted.

1. The Mishnah Does Not Speak About Debates About The Closing Of The Canon

To begin with, there is nothing in the passage in the Mishnah which says the Rabbis either debated the extent of the canon or were seeking to close it. Indeed, the debate over some of the books of the canon continued for one hundred years after the council of Jamnia!

Consequently, there is no evidence whatsoever, that they authoritatively closed the Old Testament canon once and for all for the Jewish people.

The passage in the Mishnah merely indicates that the status of two books, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, were under discussion by the religious authorities. The debate was not about the writings in general or which books belonged, or did not belong, in the canon of Scripture.

2. Why Was The Book Of Ezekiel Debated?

If there had been a threefold canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures during three different periods of history, as some have argued, then why was the Book of Ezekiel debated at Jamnia?

Ezekiel is found among the Prophets—the second section of the Hebrew canon. According to the accepted theory, this section had been closed for at least three centuries before the time of Christ. There would have been no need to debate its canonicity for the issue would have been long settled.

3. The Disputes Imply They Were Already Considered Canonical

The fact that certain books were discussed implies that they were already considered to be canonical. There would have been no need to discuss possible problems or contradictions in writings that were not assumed to be divinely inspired. Hence, there was already the assumption that these works were held to be God's authoritative Word.

4. There Was No Discussion About Adding More Books

Also, there was no discussion at Jamnia about adding certain books to the canon. No new writings came up for discussion. This was not an issue. The books discussed were the same twenty-two as listed by Josephus.

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5. **There Is Some Evidence That Only Two Books Were Debated**

As we have already mentioned, there is some ancient testimony that only two of the books—the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes were actually debated at Jamnia. According to the Rabbi Akiba, it was only Ecclesiastes that was debated. Regarding the Song of Solomon Rabbi Akiba said:

Silence and Peace! No one in Israel has ever doubted that the Song of Solomon defiles the hands. For no day in the history of the world is worth the day when the Song of Solomon was given to Israel. For all the Hagiographa are holy, but the Song of Solomon is a holy of holies. If there has been any dispute, it referred only to Ecclesiastes. . . . So they disputed and they decided.

The phrase “a book that defiles the hands” is a technical expression that refers to a writing that is part of Holy Scripture. It has the idea that the hands would become ceremonially unclean for touching something holy. Therefore, a person had to wash their hands after touching one of those holy books. This would reinforce the sacredness of the work. Song of Solomon defiled the hands—it was a sacred work.

In addition, it seems the discussions were more concerned on how to interpret the books—not whether they were canonical.

Ecclesiastes Was Recognized As Authoritative

At Jamnia the Book of Ecclesiastes was recognized as being divinely authoritative. Those at Jamnia made the following conclusions regarding this book:

The wise men desired to withdraw the Book of Ecclesiastes because its language was often self-contradictory and contradicted the utterances of David. Why did they not withdraw it? Because the beginning and the end of it consist of words of the law (Sabbath 30b).

Therefore, the canonical status of Ecclesiastes was upheld.

The Testimony Of Josephus

We know from the writings of first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus that there was already a sacred list of writings that had been accepted by the Jews for about five hundred years. He wrote:

We have but twenty-two [books] containing the history of all time, books that are justly believed in; and of these, five are the books of Moses, which comprise the law and earliest traditions from the creation of mankind down to his death. From the death of Moses to the reign of Artaxerxes, King of Persia, the successor of Xerxes, the prophets who succeeded Moses wrote the history of the events that occurred in their own time, in thirteen books. The remaining four

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documents comprise hymns to God and practical precepts to men (*Contra Apion* 1:7-8).

Since Josephus had been given the sacred scrolls by the conqueror of Jerusalem, Titus the Roman, he would be in a position to know which books were considered sacred and which were not. The issue had long been settled.

The Testimony Of The Ezra Legend

There is further evidence that those at Jamnia made no pronouncements about the canon. The Book of Second Esdras, while written in A.D. 100, claims to record revelations made to Ezra after the destruction of the first temple—some five hundred years earlier. There is an important section in this work that has bearing upon the meeting in Jamnia. The story reads as follows:

So I took the five men, as he commanded me, and we proceeded to the field, and remained there. And on the next day a voice called me, saying, “Ezra, open your mouth and drink what I give you to drink.” So I opened my mouth, and a full cup was offered to me; it was full of something like water, but its color was like fire. I took it and drank; and when I had drunk it, my heart poured forth understanding, and wisdom increased in my breast, for my spirit retained its memory, and my mouth was opened and was no longer closed. Moreover, the Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated, using characters that they did not know. They sat forty days; they wrote during the daytime, and ate their bread at night. But as for me, I spoke in the daytime and was not silent at night. So during the forty days, ninety-four books were written. And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying, “Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first, and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people. For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge.” And I did so. Five thousand years and three months and twelve days after creation. At that time Ezra was caught up, and taken to the place of those who are like him, after he had written all these things. And he was called the scribe of the knowledge of the Most High for ever and ever (2 Esdras 14:37-48 NRSV).

According to the claim which is found in these verses Ezra had the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Scriptures recopied about 400 B.C. This statement could not have been made if five out of the twenty-four books were only added to the canon in A.D. 90—some ten years earlier, at the council of Jamnia. The twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon had been long settled as Scripture.

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Conclusion: What Happened Or Did Not Happen At Jamnia Is Not Relevant

The evidence from the ancient sources leads us to believe that there was no authoritative council at Jamnia which made any final decision as to which books belonged in the Old Testament canon of Scripture. They did not assign any canonical status to any book that was not previously recognized—neither did they reject any book that had been previously accepted, neither did they attempt to close the canon in any official sense.

If any discussions did take place, it was probably about only two books—Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. No authoritative decision was made to include or exclude these books, or any other book, from the canon.

One Final Thought

It is important that we do not confuse certain people questioning parts of the canon with the idea that the canon was already closed. The fact that a few people may have questioned a few books in the canon does not mean that the canon was still open or the issue of the extent was unsettled.

In fact, the great majority of the people received the canonical books as divinely inspired and realized that the canon was closed at a certain time—four centuries before the coming of Christ.

Merely because a few voices may have questioned this fact does not indicate that no canon existed or that it was still open.

Summary To Question 16: Was The Hebrew Canon Determined After The Time Of Christ? (The Council Of Jamnia)

After Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed, the Jewish people had to completely restructure their religious lives. At Jamnia, in A.D. 90, a discussion took place concerning how this could be done. Some discussion may have taken place about the canonicity of certain books—Esther, Song of Solomon, Proverbs, Ezekiel, and Ecclesiastes.

However, there is no evidence that a council in Jamnia determined the extent of the Hebrew canon. What was discussed at Jamnia was the authenticity of only a few of the Old Testament books. No decision was made to ratify the contents of the Old Testament canon at that time. There is every reason to believe that the twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon had been considered canonical for a long time before this so-called council met.

There was really no authoritative council at Jamnia that made binding decisions about the extent of the canon. There was no discussion about adding any new books to the canon. What was held at Jamnia were discussions about the right of certain books to remain in the canon—Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. The discussions merely confirmed that

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which had long since been believed—each of the twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon was part of Holy Scripture.

There is further evidence that the canon had been long closed before any meeting in Jamnia. First century Jewish writer Flavius Josephus testified to the fact that the canon had been completed at the time of Artaxerxes, 400 B.C. This was some five hundred years before Josephus wrote. He stated that nothing had been added to the canon since that time.

In addition, the statement from the Apocryphal book of First Esdras, written in A.D. 100, also shows that the twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon had been considered authoritative for a long time.

Therefore, nothing new was accomplished at Jamnia and whatever did happen is irrelevant as far as determining the extent of the Old Testament canon.

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Question 21

Does The New Testament Quote The Old Testament As Authoritative Scripture?

Yes. As we examine the evidence, we find the New Testament quoting the Old Testament writings as authoritative. There are over two hundred and fifty quotations from Old Testament books that are found in the New Testament. Most of the books of the Old Testament are directly cited as Scripture in the New Testament. The evidence is as follows.

Genesis

Jesus cites the creation account of humanity in Genesis (Genesis 1:27) as authoritative Scripture. We read about this in the Gospel of Matthew. It says:

He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’ (Matthew 19:4-5 NRSV).

Genesis is assumed to have authoritative status by the Lord Jesus. Of this there is no doubt.

Exodus

The Apostle Paul quoted the Book of Exodus (Exodus 20:12) when he wrote to the Ephesians. He stated it as follows:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother—this is the first commandment with a promise: so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth (Ephesians 6:1-3 NRSV).

The Book of Exodus is quoted as being the very Word of God.

Leviticus

After healing a man with leprosy, Jesus told the person to go and show himself to the priest. This is according to the command written in the Law of Moses in the Book of Leviticus (Leviticus 14:2-32). Matthew records it in this manner:

Then Jesus said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (Matthew 8:4 NRSV).

Therefore, Leviticus is assumed to be part of Holy Scripture.

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Numbers

The faithfulness of Moses (Numbers 12:7) is cited in the Book of Hebrews. The writer stated it as follows:

Moses was certainly faithful in God's house, but only as a servant. His work was an illustration of the truths God would reveal later (Hebrews 3:5 NLT).

This shows that the material recorded in Numbers was assumed to be divinely authoritative.

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is quoted a number of times in the New Testament. Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:13 when He was tempted by the Devil. We read in Matthew:

Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'" (Matthew 4:10 NRSV).

There is no doubt about the authority of Deuteronomy.

Thus, we find that all five books of Moses are quoted as authoritative in the New Testament. This is obvious from the evidence.

Joshua

The writer to the Hebrews quotes the Book of Joshua (Joshua 1:5) as Scripture. He cited it in the following manner:

Your conduct must be free from the love of money and you must be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you and I will never abandon you" (Hebrews 13:5 NET).

Joshua, the successor to Moses, is considered as writing authoritative Scripture.

Judges/Ruth

While Judges is not directly quoted as authoritative Scripture, events that are recorded in the Book of Judges are cited in the Book of Hebrews. We read the following:

And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets (Hebrews 11:32 KJV).

Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah are all featured in narratives in the Book of Judges. The writer to the Hebrews used them as illustrations of faith.

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All of the other illustrations in this portion of the Book of Hebrews, which were used by the writer, were taken from characters which are found in the pages of Old Testament Scripture. These include such people as Abraham, Noah, Moses and Jacob. Placing these characters from the Book of Judges alongside the characters in the canonical books clearly testifies to the status of Judges.

As far as the Book of Ruth is concerned, while it not directly cited in the New Testament, Ruth was probably attached to the Book of Judges at the time of Christ. Consequently, when the writer to the Hebrews cited these accounts of great faith from the Book of Judges, it would mean that Ruth was also recognized as Holy Scripture; seeing that it was part of the Book of Judges.

Samuel

Jesus cited the account of David and those with him eating the bread on the Sabbath (1 Samuel 21:1-6). We read the following statements of Jesus in Matthew:

But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: “how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?” (Matthew 12:3,4 NKJV).

Citing the book of First Samuel would also include Second Samuel—since they were one book in the Hebrew arrangement.

Kings

Paul cited God’s reply to Elijah (1 Kings 19:18):

But what does the divine response say to him? “I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal” (Romans 11:4 NKJV).

First and Second Kings are one book in Hebrew. Therefore, a citation from First Kings means the entire book was cited as authoritative.

Chronicles

First and Second Chronicles are one book in Hebrew. While Chronicles is not directly cited in the New Testament, Jesus seems to testify to its authority:

So all the righteous blood shed on the earth will be charged to you, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar (Matthew 23:35 HCSB).

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The death of the prophet Zechariah is listed in Chronicles. This event was recorded in 2 Chronicles 24:20, 21.

However, while this statement of Jesus may be referring to the Zechariah mentioned here, it is not certain. There is no record in the Old Testament of Zechariah son of Berechiah having been murdered. The Zechariah mentioned in Chronicles is Zechariah the son of Jehoida.

It may possibly be referring to a Zechariah who was martyred in Jesus' day. If so, then this would not be a reference to Chronicles.

Yet, we do know from other passages in the New Testament, such as Matthew 1:5,12, that the writers were familiar with the Book of Chronicles. The best which we can say here is that this may be a reference to an event listed in Chronicles.

Job

Paul quotes Job 5:12,13 in his letter to the Corinthians:

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As the Scriptures say, "God catches those who think they are wise in their own cleverness" And again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are worthless" (1 Corinthians 3:19,20 NLT).

Job is considered to be part of the Word of God by Paul.

Psalms

The Psalms are one of the most often quoted Old Testament books. For example, Jesus quoted Psalm 82:6 in his discussion with the religious leaders. John writes:

Jesus replied, "It is written in your own law that God said to certain leaders of the people, 'I say, you are gods!' And you know that the Scriptures cannot be altered. So if those people, who received God's message, were called 'gods' why do you call it blasphemy when the Holy One who was sent into the world by the Father says, 'I am the Son of God'?" (John 10:34-36 NLT).

There is no doubt that the psalms were assumed to be divinely inspired of God.

Proverbs

James cites Proverbs 3:34 in his letter:

He gives us more and more strength to stand against such evil desires. As the Scriptures say, "God sets himself against the proud, but he shows favor to the humble" (James 4:6 NLT).

Proverbs is also considered to be sacred Scripture.

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Isaiah

The Book of Isaiah is quoted often in the New Testament. Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah (61:1,2) at a synagogue in Nazareth. The Bible states it as follows:

And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:17-21 NRSV).

The prophet Isaiah was assumed to have written God's authoritative Word. In this case, it was a prophecy that Jesus Himself fulfilled!

Jeremiah

Matthew cites a passage from Jeremiah the prophet (31:15). This is in the context of the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem. He wrote:

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more" (Matthew 2:17-18 NKJV).

Jeremiah's authority is assumed in the New Testament.

Lamentations

Matthew records an allusion to the Book of Lamentations (Lamentations 3:30):

They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head (Matthew 27:30 NASB).

While not a direct quote, it does give the impression that Lamentations was considered to be authoritative Scripture. However, it is likely that Lamentations was attached to the Book of Jeremiah at the time of Christ. Therefore, its canonical status was not in doubt.

Ezekiel

The Book of Ezekiel is alluded to on several occasions in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul alluded to Ezekiel 37:27 in his letter to the Corinthians:

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and walk

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among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Corinthians 6:16 NRSV).

Ezekiel is assumed to be a divinely inspired work.

Daniel

Jesus identifies Daniel as one of the prophets. He quotes him as speaking authoritatively (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11):

So when you see ‘the abomination of desolation’—spoken about by Daniel the prophet—standing in the holy place (let the reader understand) (Matthew 24:15 NET).

There is no doubt about the status of Daniel. Jesus made that clear.

The Twelve

The Twelve Minor Prophets were considered to be one book. The fact that one of them is cited as authoritative testifies to the divine authority of all of them. However, nine out of the twelve are specifically cited as Scripture in the New Testament. The evidence is as follows.

Hosea

Matthew quotes the prophet Hosea (Hosea 11:1). He wrote:

That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, and they stayed there until Herod's death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: “I called my Son out of Egypt” (Matthew 2:14,15 NLT).

His prophetic status is clear. Hosea wrote of Jesus’ flight to Egypt.

Joel

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter cited a passage from Joel 2:28-32 as God’s Word:

But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel (Acts 2:16 KJV).

He then went on to quote a major section from Joel. This leaves no doubt as to Joel’s authority.

Amos

In Acts, the Book of Amos is quoted (Amos 9:11,12) by James, the Lords’ brother, at the council of Jerusalem:

This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other

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peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things' (Acts 15:15-17 NRSV).

His writings are assumed to carry divine authority.

Jonah

Jesus referred to the incident of Jonah being swallowed by the large sea creature (Jonah 1). We read the following in Matthew:

Then some of the experts in the law along with some Pharisees answered him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights (Matthew 12:38-40 NET).

Jonah's prophetic status is confirmed by the Lord Jesus.

Micah

Matthew cites Micah as the one who predicted the place where the Christ is to be born (Micah 5:2):

After assembling all the chief priests and experts in the law he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem of Judea," they said, "for it is written this way by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are in no way least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel'" (Matthew 2:4-6 NET).

The writings of Micah are assumed to carry God's authority.

Habakkuk

Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 in his letter to the Galatians:

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith" (Galatians 3:11 NRSV).

Habakkuk was indeed a prophet of God.

Haggai

The writer to the Hebrews quotes Haggai (Haggai 2:6 in the Septuagint):

At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven" (Hebrews 12:26 NRSV).

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Haggai is also believed to have composed Holy Scripture.

Zechariah

The Book of Zechariah is quoted on Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Zechariah 9:9). Matthew wrote the following:

Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Matthew 21:5 NRSV).

This important prophecy was cited on Palm Sunday. Zechariah was indeed God's prophet.

Malachi

Jesus cited the necessity of the coming of Elijah (Malachi 4:5). Matthew wrote about this:

His disciples asked, "Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?" Jesus replied, "Elijah is indeed coming first to set everything in order" (Matthew 17:10-11 NLT).

Malachi was believed to be God's prophet.

The New Testament Cites All The Old Testament Books (With Four Exceptions)

All Old Testament books are quoted as authoritative works by the New Testament writers with four exceptions: Ezra/Nehemiah, Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. However, the absence of any quotations of these books does not speak against their canonicity.

These Four Books May Be Alluded To

In fact, there is some evidence that these four books were considered divinely inspired. We offer the following evidence.

Purim, From Esther, May Have Been Mentioned In The New Testament

It should be noted that the Feast of Purim celebrated the events recorded in the Book of Esther. We read of the following command given in the Esther:

These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city; and these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants (Esther 9:28 NRSV).

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This verse commands a continuous celebration of Purim. According to John's gospel, Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate a certain feast:

Later, Jesus went to Jerusalem for a Jewish festival (John 5:1 God's Word)

It is possible that this refers to Purim. If so, then this indicates that the people recognized the tradition to celebrate Purim in remembrance of their deliverance from the Persians. By doing so, it gives testimony to the authority of the Book of Esther.

There are some who say that a statement that is found in the Book of Revelation seems to echo something that was written the Book of Esther. In Revelation, it says the following about the two witnesses who are killed in the city of Jerusalem:

And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth (Revelation 11:10 NKJV).

The people celebrated and sent gifts because of their death. In Esther, we read:

He told them to celebrate these days with feasting and gladness and by giving gifts to each other and to the poor. This would commemorate a time when the Jews gained relief from their enemies, when their sorrow was turned into gladness and their mourning into joy (Esther 9:22 NLT).

Each statement speaks of people giving gifts to one another because of the victory over their enemies.

Therefore, we may have allusions to the Book of Esther in the New Testament.

The Song Of Solomon Was Read At The Passover

There is also evidence for the Song of Solomon. It was traditionally read at each Passover. This gives testimony to its importance among the people of Israel. Again, it is evidence of its divine inspiration.

It is also possible that the reference of Jesus to "living water" was referring to Song of Solomon. Jesus said the following to a Samaritan woman whom He met at a well:

Jesus replied to her, "If you only knew what God's gift is and who is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him for a drink. He would have given you living water" (John 4:10 God's Word).

We read the following in the Song of Solomon:

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You are a garden fountain, a well of living water, as refreshing as the streams from the Lebanon mountains (Song of Solomon 4:15 NLT).

Jesus may have been referring to Song of Solomon in His illustration of living water. Therefore, He would be quoting from the Song of Solomon as Holy Scripture.

Ecclesiastes Is Alluded To In The New Testament

While Ecclesiastes does not have any direct quotes from it in the New Testament, there are a number of passages that allude to it. For example, Paul wrote to Timothy:

For the love of money is at the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows (1 Timothy 6:10 NLT)

This seems to depend upon the following verse in Ecclesiastes:

The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity (Ecclesiastes 5:10 NRSV).

While Ecclesiastes is alluded to in the New Testament, we may also have a direct quote from it. Paul wrote the following to the Romans:

As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10 CSB).

This is a possibly a direct quote from Ecclesiastes 7:20. It reads as follows:

There is certainly no righteous man on the earth who does good and never sins (Ecclesiastes 7:20 CSB).

If this is the case, then we do have a direct citation of a passage from Ecclesiastes from the New Testament.

In another place in Romans, Paul also seems to allude to Ecclesiastes in his description of the fallen creation:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope (Romans 8:20 NRSV).

The word translated “futility” is the same Greek word found in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes in the Septuagint—Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.

Here it is translated “meaningless:”

“Everything is meaningless,” says the Teacher, “utterly meaningless!” (Ecclesiastes 1:2 NLT).

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Creation was made subject to futility, or meaninglessness, because of the curse of the fall.

Therefore, there seems to be direct dependence upon this book in a number of places in the New Testament.

In addition, there is evidence that Paul directly quoted Ecclesiastes in his letter to the Romans.

There May Be A Reference To Ezra/Nehemiah

There also may be a reference in the New Testament to a statement found in Ezra/Nehemiah. Jesus spoke of the bread that came down from heaven. John records him saying the following:

Our fathers ate the manna in the desert, just as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat (John 6:31 CSB).

This may have reference to a statement in Nehemiah:

You gave them bread from heaven to stay their hunger (Nehemiah 9:15 REB).

While Jesus' statement may be a reference to Nehemiah, this same reference of "bread from heaven" is also found in the Psalms:

He rained manna for them to eat; He gave them grain from heaven (Psalm 78:24 CSB).

These references, while not directly quoting these four books, do show the importance of these works in the sight of the people.

Therefore, while Ezra/Nehemiah, Esther, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes are not directly cited in the New Testament, this does not mean that they were not part of Scripture. The number of books had been long fixed before the time of Christ.

This list included these four works. Indeed, at the time of Ben Sirach, two centuries before Christ, these works were cited as Holy Scripture.

However, there is some evidence that even Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon were directly quoted in the New Testament. If this is the case, then only Ezra/Nehemiah and Esther are the only two books of the Old Testament which are not specifically cited in the New Testament.

Therefore, the evidence leads us to believe that the first Christians had the exact same Hebrew Scripture as their Jewish contemporaries.

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A Final Observation: No Books Outside Of The Hebrew Canon Was Cited As Scripture

There is one other point that needs to be emphasized. No other book outside of the Hebrew canon is ever cited with the formula, “Thus says the Lord,” “It is written,” or “Scripture says.”

While some non-canonical writings may have been alluded to by the New Testament writers, these works are never quoted as Scripture, or as having some sort of divine authority.

This is further testimony that the extent of the Hebrew canon was clear to everyone at the time of Christ.

Summary To Question 21: Does The New Testament Quote The Old Testament As Authoritative Scripture?

We find that most the books of the Old Testament are directly cited as Holy Scripture. The fact that these books were cited demonstrates the belief of the New Testament writers that they were quoting from God’s Word.

There are only four books that were not cited in the Old Testament—Ezra/Nehemiah, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Song of Solomon. While these books are not directly cited in the New Testament, their inclusion in the Hebrew canon is testified to by other means. Furthermore, we do find possible allusions to each of these books in the New Testament.

Add to this, there is actually some evidence that Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes were directly cited in the New Testament. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that these thirty-nine books were the only writings that God divinely inspired and that the New Testament writers recognized as Holy Scripture.

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Question 22

Did The New Testament Recognize A Completed Old Testament Canon Of Scripture?

While it is not specifically stated in the New Testament that the Old Testament canon had been closed, there is sufficient evidence to believe that this was the case. As we look at all the facts, we find that those who lived in the New Testament period recognized a completed Old Testament canon of Scripture that corresponds to the present canon held by Jews and Protestants. This can be seen in a number of ways.

1. The Old Testament, The Law And The Prophets Was Cited As Authoritative Scripture

From an examination of the four Gospels, we find that Jesus spoke of the Old Testament Scripture as being absolutely authoritative. It was the final word on every issue which it addressed.

Indeed, Jesus often appealed to the Old Testament as the ultimate authority. In answering a question about divorce, He said the following to the religious rulers:

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female (Matthew 19:4 ESV).

The answer to their question would be found in the reading of the Scripture.

On another occasion, Jesus said to the Sadducees that they did not really know the “Scripture.” Matthew records the following:

Jesus replied, “Your problem is that you don’t know the Scriptures, and you don’t know the power of God” (Matthew 22:29 NLT).

In John’s gospel, we read the following words of Jesus:

“It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me” (John 6:45 NKJV).

These writings held absolute authority for Jesus. Of this, there is no doubt.

He also declared that everything which was written in the Law and the Prophets, a reference that includes all of the Old Testament, was going to be fulfilled. Jesus said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish but to fulfill. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth pass away not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will pass from the law until everything takes place (Matthew 5:17,18 NET)

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To Jesus, when the Scripture spoke, God spoke.

2. The Scripture Was Authoritative For Paul

The Apostle Paul also testified to the existence of a written Scripture that had God's divine authority behind it. He wrote the following to the Romans:

From Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God that he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures (Romans 1:1,2 NET).

Thus, all the evidence points to the existence of a fixed group of writings called "the Scripture." It consisted of a clear, well-defined, set of writings; the five books of Moses and the other writings known as "the Prophets."

We should note that the only exception to this designation of "Law and Prophets" is a statement made by Jesus on the day of His resurrection. He said:

"These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:44, 45 CSB).

On this occasion, the Psalms were included as a separate group of writings from the Prophets. However, the usual designation was the Law and the Prophets.

3. Jesus Contrasted The Scriptures With Human Tradition

In addition, we find that Jesus made a distinction between the traditions of the people and the Scripture. He rejected the Jewish tradition of the ceremonial washing of the hands before eating. In doing so, He appealed to the Scriptures.

We read about this episode in Mark's gospel. He recorded it as follows:

Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?" He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: "This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Mark 7:6-7 NKJV).

Here the Lord Jesus contrasts the human traditions with the Scripture; He did not consider unwritten tradition as having the same authority as written Scripture.

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4. According To Jesus The Scriptures Were Complete

Furthermore, Jesus also indicated the Old Testament Scripture was complete. He said to the religious rulers:

You search the Scriptures because you believe they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! (John 5:39 NLT).

The inference is that there was a completed body of written work, the Scriptures, that was divinely authoritative. These written works were so well-known that Jesus could refer to them as a group—the Scriptures. In fact, it was so well-known that the Lord could speak of “the Scriptures” to the religious leaders without receiving an argument, or a question, from them about what He meant by “the Scriptures.” Indeed, they knew precisely what He meant!

Moreover, Jesus claimed that these books testify about Him—they are a legal witness to His identity as the Messiah.

In fact, for Jesus’ statement to be meaningful there had to have been a certain well-known number of books labeled as Scripture. Jesus was not saying, or implying, that any and every book which the Jews read or studied would testify of Him; it was only the sacred Scriptures!

The fact that Jesus referred to these writings as a witness to Him shows that He, and the religious rulers, agreed upon what constituted Scripture. Otherwise, the statement would have been meaningless because no one would be able to identify which books, out of all the ones they possessed, testify to Him.

Thus, Jesus statement, while not telling us specifically which books made up the canon of Scripture, does clearly show us that such a well-defined number of books existed.

5. Paul Spoke Of A Completed Scripture

We also find the Apostle Paul speaking of a completed canon of Scripture. He wrote the following to Timothy:

And that from childhood you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:15-17 HCSB).

Paul assumes that Timothy had known from childhood that a specific set of holy books existed—the Scriptures. Furthermore, these books have been divinely inspired by God. Since Paul said that “all Scripture was “divinely inspired” or God-breathed,” for this statement to be meaningful, he must have had a specific group of writings in mind. Otherwise, the statement would be meaningless.

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In another place, Paul spoke of an “old” covenant, or “old” testament. He wrote:

But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside (2 Corinthians 3:14 NRSV).

This passage says that the Jews read the Scriptures of the Old Testament, or the Old Covenant. Again, this assumes that there was a completed Old Testament Scripture.

6. The Writer To The Hebrews Spoke Of A Completed Scripture

We have another testimony to a completed Scripture from the New Testament—from the writer to the Hebrews:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors at many different times and in many different ways through the prophets. In these last days he has spoken to us through his Son. God made his Son responsible for everything. His Son is the one through whom God made the universe (Hebrews 1:1-2 God’s Word).

Again, it is clear that the writers of the New Testament saw the Old Testament as a completed group of writings. In this instance, the writer to the Hebrews said the prophets spoke long-ago. This implies that there had been no new revelation a long time.

6. Almost Every Book Of The Old Testament Is Quoted As Scripture

With the exception of Ezra/Nehemiah, and Esther, every book of the Old Testament is quoted by the New Testament writers. This is another indication that the extent of the Hebrew canon was exactly the same among the Christians as it was among the Jews.

7. There Is No Evidence That Christians Wanted To Reject Any Of The Old Testament

Not only do we have the positive evidence of the New Testament figures quoting the Old Testament as authoritative, we also find nothing in their preaching, or teaching, which would suggest the Old Testament was incompatible with the Christian faith. On the contrary, we find Paul reasoning with the Jews, “from the Scriptures,” concerning Jesus.

In the Book of Acts, we read the following:

And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you” (Acts 17:2,3 NRSV).

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Paul also said the Old Testament was written to instruct and encourage Christians. He wrote to the Corinthians:

Now these things happened to them as examples, and they were written as a warning to us, on whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Corinthians 10:11 CSB).

Paul also wrote to the church at Rome about the lessons that can be learned from the Old Testament:

For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.” For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 15:3-6 NKJV).

Therefore, for the early Christians, the Hebrew Scriptures were their only written Scripture—there was nothing else that was authoritative for them. While we find that the Christians disagreed with Jews with respect to some of the Jewish traditions, they agreed with them when it came to the existence and the authority of the Scripture. While they debated about certain practices, there was no debate about the Scripture.

8. The Christians Disagreed With The Jewish Traditions, Not The Scripture

It is also important to note that in all of the charges Jesus made against the religious rulers of His day. He never accused them of adding, or taking away from, the Scriptures.

While they debated on various spiritual issues, there is no record of any debate on the extent of the canon of Scripture. They were all agreed as to the authority and extent of the Old Testament canon. To all of them, the issue of the canon had been settled. The books that are found in the Old Testament were accepted by Jesus, as well as by His enemies.

9. When Writings Outside The Old Testament Are Cited They Are Never Called Scripture

Another important point to note is how the New Testament cited writings apart from the Hebrew Scriptures. We find Paul citing heathen poets in the Book of Acts, First Corinthians, and in Titus. Jude may have cited First Enoch in his letter. The evidence is as follows.

Paul cited the writer Cleanthes before a crowd in Athens:

As also some of your own poets have said, “For we are also His offspring” (Acts 17:28 NKJV).

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He quoted the writer Menander when he wrote to the Corinthians. It reads as follows:

Do not be deceived: “Evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Corinthians 15:33 NKJV).

When Paul wrote to Titus, he cited Epimenides:

One of them, a prophet of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons” (Titus 1:12 NKJV)

Jude may have cited the book of First Enoch. We read the following in his letter:

Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him” (Jude 14,15 NKJV)

When these works that were outside of the Old Testament canon were cited, they are never called “Scripture.” Neither are they introduced with such phrases as “God said,” “the Holy Spirit said,” or “it is written.”

Therefore, we learn two important truths: First, the writers of the New Testament were aware of other written works apart from the Old Testament Scripture.

However, though they knew of them, alluded to them, and perhaps quoted from them, they never cited them as divinely authoritative Scripture. This again demonstrates the distinction between the Scriptures and all other writings.

10. New Divinely Inspired Writings Were Not To Be Added To The Old Testament

The earliest Christians believed that God was speaking to His people in the New Testament era. However, they did not believe that any prophetic writings were to be added to the Old Testament. The New Testament makes a clear distinction between the writings found in the Old Testament canon and the newer revelation which Christians preserved and eventually became part of a “New” Testament. Peter wrote:

Dear friends, this is the second letter I’m writing to you. In both letters I’m trying to refresh your memory. I want you to remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and what the Lord and Savior commanded you through your apostles (2 Peter 3:1-2 God’s Word).

Here, Peter recognizes the distinction between the Old Testament prophets and the words of the Lord Jesus. He also wrote:

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Think of our Lord's patience as an opportunity [for us] to be saved. This is what our dear brother Paul wrote to you about, using the wisdom God gave him. He talks about this subject in all his letters. Some things in his letters are hard to understand. Ignorant people and people who aren't sure of what they believe distort what Paul says in his letters the same way they distort the rest of the Scriptures. These people will be destroyed (2 Peter 3:15-16 God's Word).

Peter recognizes the distinction between Paul's letters, which he considered to be Scripture and the Old Testament writings—they are two distinct groups.

This is a further testimony that the New Testament writers, while acknowledging that God was giving the world more divinely inspired written Scripture, kept the new sacred writings separate from the old.

11. The Exact Extent Of The Hebrew Scripture Is Possibly Given By Jesus

Finally, it is possible that Jesus declared the extent of the Old Testament. He made the following statement to the religious leaders of His day:

I will send you prophets and wise men and teachers of religious law. You will kill some by crucifixion and whip others in your synagogues, chasing them from city to city. As a result, you will become guilty of murdering all the godly people from righteous Abel to Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered in the Temple between the altar and the sanctuary (Matthew 23:34-35 NLT).

Some have argued that this statement clearly defined what Jesus viewed as the Old Testament canon—the same Old Testament as we have in the Protestant English Bible. The following reasons are given.

Abel Was The First Martyr

Abel was the first person murdered that the Scripture records. The Bible says:

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him (Genesis 4:8 NIV).

The death of Abel, the first martyr, is recorded in Genesis.

Zechariah Was The Last Person Murdered In The Hebrew Reckoning

Zechariah was the last person murdered in the Old Testament order of books, according to the way the Jews listed them. His death is recorded in Chronicles. It says:

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Then the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah son of Jehoiada the priest. He stood before the people and said, “This is what God says: ‘Why do you disobey the LORD’s commands? You will not prosper. Because you have forsaken the LORD, he has forsaken you.’” But they plotted against him, and by order of the king they stoned him to death in the courtyard of the LORD’s temple (2 Chronicles 24:20,21 NIV).

The Zechariah that Jesus referred to is the one mentioned in 2 Chronicles 24:21. Second Chronicles is the last book in the Hebrew order.

However, Zechariah was not the last prophet to be murdered in Old Testament history. That person was Uriah son of Shemaiah. His murder is recorded in the Book of Jeremiah:

There was another man who prophesied in the name of the Lord, Uriah the son of Shemaiah from Kiriath-jearim. He prophesied against this city and against this land in words like those of Jeremiah. And when King Jehoiakim, with all his warriors and all the officials, heard his words, the king sought to put him to death. But when Uriah heard of it, he was afraid and fled and escaped to Egypt. Then King Jehoiakim sent to Egypt certain men, Elnathan the son of Achbor and others with him, and they took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who struck him down with the sword and dumped his dead body into the burial place of the common people (Jeremiah 26:20-23 ESV).

Historically, this took place after the murder of Zechariah. While Zechariah was not the last Old Testament prophet to be martyred, he is the last prophet that was martyred in the order that the books were listed. Consequently, when Jesus mentioned the murders of Abel to Zechariah, it would be like saying “from Genesis to Chronicles.” Genesis to Chronicles was the extent of the Old Testament.

It is also argued that in Matthew 24:35 Jesus refers to the first section of the Hebrew canon, the Law, and the last section of the Hebrew canon, the Writings. By implication He would also have accepted the second section—the Prophets. Therefore, we have Jesus’ testimony to the threefold division to the Hebrew Scriptures as well as its content.

Response To This Argument

While this line of argumentation is possible, it is not certain that there was a clear threefold division of the Hebrew Scriptures at the time of Christ or that Second Chronicles was the last book in the Hebrew order at that time. The threefold division into Law, Prophets, and Writings, may have occurred after the time of Christ and the writing of the New Testament. Therefore, the mention of the death of Zechariah was not to give us the limit of the Old Testament Scripture.

Again, we have the question as to whether there was a clearly defined threefold division of the Hebrew Scriptures at the time of our Lord. While the canon was closed, and the extent known to everyone, it is not certain

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as to whether the Scriptures were placed into any clearly defined divisions except for the designation the Law and the Prophets.

The Law would have consisted of the writings of Moses while the Prophets referred to everything else. Therefore, to argue that Jesus gave the extent of the Old Testament Scripture in this passage, while possible, may not be that likely.

However, what we do know for certain is that all of the evidence strongly suggests that the Jesus, His disciples, and all of the New Testament writers, accepted the same fixed or closed canon of Scripture as the Jews.

Summary To Question 22

Did The New Testament Recognize A Completed Old Testament Canon Of Scripture?

From New Testament evidence, we have the concept of a completed body of sacred writings that we term the “Old Testament.”

For one thing, the New Testament cited the Old Testament as authoritative Scripture. Quoting the Scripture on a particular subject would settle any argument. In addition, we find Jesus denouncing human traditions when it conflicted with that which was written. Again, the authority of the Scripture was emphasized.

There is also evidence that the Scriptures were a complete, well-known, set of writings. The New Testament usually divides the Old Testament writings into two groups—the Law and the Prophets.

The Law consisted of the Books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, while the Prophets referred to everything else. The only exception to this designation was the words of Jesus in Luke 24:44 where He referred to the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Here, the Psalms seems to be placed in its own section. Whatever the case may be, the Hebrew Scriptures were recognized as being complete.

This is further evidenced by the fact that we find that Jesus disputed with the Jewish religious leaders over their traditions but never over the extent of Scripture. There was no debate about which books were sacred and which were not. Indeed, when Jesus said that the Scriptures testified or witnessed to Him, He must have been referring to a distinct set of writings which all acknowledged. Otherwise His claim would have been without meaning.

The Apostle Paul also testified to a well-known set of writings as did the writer to the Hebrews. They acknowledged the existence of a set of writings known as Scripture.

We also find that the New Testament writers, while realizing that God had given humanity further written revelation, kept the Old Testament Scriptures separate from these new writings. They never confused the two sets of sacred documents.

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Some people argue that Jesus actually set the limits to this group of writings. From His testimony found in Matthew 23:34-36 and the parallel passage in Luke 11:49-51, it is contended that we discover the limits of the Old Testament at that time. Genesis was the first book and Chronicles was the last. This agrees with the order of the books that was found in later Jewish writings—the Talmud.

However, this may have not been the case. It is possible that this division into three sections, with Chronicles being the last book, may not have been organized until after the time of Jesus and the writing of the New Testament. There is not enough evidence to be certain that Jesus was attempting to give us the limits of the Old Testament canon with His statement.

What we do know for certain is this: the totality of the evidence indicates that the New Testament writers recognized a canon of Scripture which was identical with the Hebrew canon—they recognized the same books as divinely inspired. Consequently, the New Testament does indeed testify to a completed Old Testament canon of Scripture.

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Question 23

Apart From The New Testament, What Other Historical Evidence Exists For The Completed Old Testament Canon?

The New Testament gives strong testimony as to a fixed canon of Scripture. Apart from the New Testament, we also find other historical evidence that there was a completed canon of Scripture centuries before the time of Christ. The evidence can be seen as follows.

1. The Book Of Ecclesiasticus (200 B.C).

The “Book of Ecclesiasticus,” also known as the “Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach,” was written about 200 B.C. by a man named Jesus Ben Sirach. In this work, he cites almost every book of the Old Testament as Scripture. In fact, except for the Book of Ruth, which he may link with the Book of Judges, there is either a direct citation or allusion to every Old Testament book. From his writings, we find that Ben Sirach considered these Old Testament writings as divinely authoritative.

There is more. As we look at the work of Sirach, we discover that he makes a clear distinction between Old Testament history and his own contemporary history.

For Ben Sirach, biblical history ended at the time of Nehemiah—around 430 B.C. This is consistent with what we find in the Old Testament. Consequently, Ben Sirach testifies to a completed canon of Scripture, with a fixed number of books, which had been closed for about two centuries. Thus, he is an excellent witness to the Old Testament canon.

2. The Prologue Of Ecclesiasticus (132 B.C)

In 132 B.C., the grandson of Ben Sirach translated the work from Hebrew into Greek. We can be certain of the date because of a specific reference he gives in the preface. He wrote the following in his preface to the translation:

A legacy of great value has come down to us through the law, the prophets, and the writers who followed in their steps and Israel deserves recognition for its traditions of learning and wisdom. It is the duty of those who study the scriptures not only to become experts themselves, but also to use their scholarship for the benefit of the world outside through both the spoken and written word. For this reason my grandfather Jesus, who had applied himself diligently to the study of the law, the prophets, and the other writings of our ancestors, and had gained a considerable proficiency in them, was moved to compile a book of his own on the themes of learning and wisdom, in order that, with this further help, scholars might make greater progress in their studies by living as the law directs. You are asked then, to read with sympathetic attention and to make allowances whenever you think that, in spite of all the devoted work that has been put into the

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translation, some of the expressions I have used are inadequate. For what is said in Hebrew does not have the same force when translated into another tongue. Not only the present work, but even the law itself, as well as the prophets, and the other writings, are not a little different when spoken in the original (Prologue to Sirach, REB).

The grandson of Sirach mentioned the Law, the Prophets, and the “other writings which followed” or “the other books of our ancestors.”

Therefore, from his testimony, there may have been a recognized threefold division of the Hebrew Scripture some two hundred years before the time of Christ. Each section in this threefold division had a title and a set list of books—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

However, it must be noted, that some have disputed that these references speak of a threefold division of the Old Testament. They argue that the Old Testament was divided into only two divisions at this time—the Law and the Prophets. The reference to “other books,” they contend, were not books that made up part of the sacred Scriptures but rather they were non-canonical writings that contained valuable wisdom and were beneficial to study. Consequently, the writer is not talking about three separate divisions of the Old Testament Scripture but rather two divisions, the Law and the Prophets, along with other books which were not canonical but rather helpful and instructive.

Whatever the case may be, this is a further testimony that the Old Testament was considered to be a completed canon of Scripture with a known list of books—this is true no matter how they were divided.

3. First Maccabees (Second Century B.C)

Another ancient testimony to a collection of sacred writings can be found in the apocryphal book of First Maccabees.

In 167 B.C, a Syrian leader named Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the Jewish temple. He also showed open hostility to the holy writings. We read the following description in First Maccabees:

The books of the law that they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. Anyone found possessing the book of the covenant, or anyone who adhered to the law, was condemned to death by decree of the king (1 Maccabees 1:56,57 NRSV).

Here we have a reference to “the book of covenant.” Later, in First Maccabees, we read the following:

Therefore, though we have no need of these things, since we have as encouragement the holy books that are in our hands (1 Maccabees 12:9 NRSV).

Here is another reference to the “holy books.”

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We also have a reference to the Book of the Law:

And they opened the book of the law to inquire into those matters about which the Gentiles consulted the likenesses of their gods (1 Maccabees 3:48 NRSV).

There is something else that we learn. While there was a group of holy writings with a known fixed limit, there had not been any books added to this group for many years. It was clear that the prophetic gift had ceased a long time before. We also read in First Maccabees:

So there was great distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them (1 Maccabees 9:27 NRSV).

According to this verse, an authoritative prophet of God was only a memory of their distant past—they were looking for another prophet to appear:

And stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until a prophet should come to tell what to do with them (1 Maccabees 4:46 NRSV).

This is further indication the people were waiting for another prophet to arise. Elsewhere we read in First Maccabees:

The Jews and their priests have resolved that Simon should be their leader and high priest forever, until a trustworthy prophet should arise (1 Maccabees 14:41 NRSV).

These passages testify that they of knew of no one who could speak authoritatively from the Lord to them, as had been true in the past. Also, they possessed a recognized list of authoritative writings and nothing had been added to this group of sacred writings for long ages—they were waiting for another prophet before any new Scripture could be added.

Therefore, the Book of First Maccabees testifies to a completed Scripture that had been long recognized.

4. Second Maccabees (104-64 B.C)

Still another reference can be found in the apocryphal book of Second Maccabees. In 164 B.C., the Jewish patriot Judas Maccabaeus led a revolt that cleansed the defiled Temple. He then gathered together, and compiled a list, of the inspired Prophets and the Holy Writings. It is described in this manner:

The same things are reported in the records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah, and also that he founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings. And in like manner Judas (Maccabaeus) also gathered together for us all those writings that had been scattered

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by reason of the war that befell, and they are still with us. If therefore you have need thereof, send some to bring them unto you (2 Maccabees 2:13,14 NRSV).

This is an obvious testimony to a collection of sacred writings that existed at this time. Although we are not certain what is meant by the “letters of kings about votive offerings,” we can be assured that there was a known group of sacred writings. These writings had been collected years earlier by Nehemiah and formed part of his library. Nehemiah, it should be remembered, wrote around 430 B.C.

This passage indicates that some sacred books had been destroyed and needed to be replaced in the official archives. The replacements probably came from synagogue copies or perhaps from a private collection.

Furthermore, from Second Maccabees, we note that a canon did exist in the first century B.C. and it was divided into two sections: the Law and the Prophets. We read the following:

Encouraging them from the law and the prophets, and reminding them also of the struggles they had won, he made them the more eager (2 Maccabees 15:9).

Therefore, we have another ancient testimony to the existence of Old Testament Scripture.

5. The Septuagint

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, needs to be considered in the quest for the Old Testament canon. This translation, made before the time of Christ, should give us an idea of what books belong in the Old Testament.

The problem that exists is that except for a few small scraps, the earliest manuscripts of the Septuagint date from A.D. 325. This is three hundred years after the time of Christ and seven hundred years after the Old Testament was completed. Moreover, it was Christians, not Jews, who produced these manuscripts of the Septuagint—since they are combined with the Greek New Testament. Consequently, we do not know what was in the Septuagint before the time of Christ. Therefore, its testimony is not decisive as to what books belong in the Old Testament Scripture.

6. The Dead Sea Scrolls

In 1947, a number of scrolls were discovered in several of the caves alongside the Dead Sea. They have become known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Among other things, the Dead Sea Scrolls contain writings from the Hebrew canon. In fact, we have found manuscripts of every book of the Old Testament except Esther and possibly also Nehemiah. These scrolls provide further testimony to a completed canon of Scripture which is the same as our present Old Testament canon.

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Interestingly, there may be some evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls as to a threefold division of the Hebrew Scriptures before the time of Christ. This is found in one scroll titled, “Some of the Works of the Torah.” It is also known as 4QMMT. In it, we find the following statement:

We have written to you that you may have understanding in the Book of Moses, and in the words of the Prophets, and in David.

This is a testimony to a threefold division of the Old Testament—the Book of Moses (the Law), the Prophets, and David (which would represent the Psalms). On one occasion, Jesus Himself used this designation for the entire Old Testament. We read the following in Luke:

Then he [Jesus] said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44 ESV).

Thus, from this work found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, we may have another testimony to a threefold division of the Old Testament at that time in history. However, as we have stated before, the usual division was twofold—the Law and the Prophets.

7. Philo Of Alexandria (20 B.C. to A.D. 50)

Philo was a learned Jew who lived in Alexandria, Egypt at the same time as Christ. He wrote on a number of subjects. Philo wrote the following about the Law of Moses:

After a lapse of more than two thousand years [the Jews] have not changed a single word of what had been written by him [Moses], but they would sooner endure to die a thousand times than to violate his laws and customs.

In his various writings, Philo quoted from many different books of the Old Testament. His testimony would have reflected the view of Alexandrian Judaism at that time. He cited from each of the five books of the Law of Moses, he cited most of the prophets, as well as Psalms, Job, and Proverbs.

What is also of interest is that he did not quote from the Apocrypha when citing books that were believed to be authoritative Scripture. Philo’s testimony is consistent with the other writings we possess—there was a set of sacred books at that time the contents of which were well-known.

In one of his writings, he described the “Therapeutae;” a group of Jews who lived in Egypt. This ascetic group held similar beliefs to the community of Jews who lived alongside the Dead Sea during that period—the Essenes. The Essenes were most likely the community who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Some scholars believe that Philo was actually referring to the Essenes—though he used a different name in describing them. Whatever, the case may be, he described their Scriptures as follow:

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The laws and the sacred oracles of God enunciated by the holy prophets, hymns, and psalms, and all kinds of other things by reason of which knowledge and piety are increased and brought to perfection (Philo, *The Contemplative Life*, 3:25-28).

Though Philo does not specify which books are included in their collection, it is consistent with what we find among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain parts of every Old Testament book with the exception of Esther.

Therefore, the testimony of Philo as to the sacred Scripture of the Therapeutae, or possibly the Essenes, seems to be in line with what was found at Qumran.

8. Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37-100)

Of all the ancient writers, the clearest testimony to the Hebrew canon comes from the first-century writer Flavius Josephus. We have a number of revealing statements from Josephus about the canon of Scripture. These statements of Josephus are all the more credible because he himself was personally given the sacred Scriptures by Titus—the Roman general who conquered Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

In his autobiography, Josephus tells us that when Titus conquered Jerusalem, he took the table of showbread and the golden lampstands with him to Rome but he gave Josephus the sacred scrolls from the temple.

Consequently, Josephus would have been in a unique position to know the exact contents of the writings considered to be Holy Scripture by the Jews since he had them in his own possession.

What We Learn From Josephus

From the writings of Josephus, we learn a number of important truths about the canon and its contents. To begin with, we have the following statement by Josephus about the extent of the canon, as well as when it was closed:

We have but twenty-two [books] containing the history of all time, books that are justly believed in; and of these, five are the books of Moses, which comprise the law and earliest traditions from the creation of mankind down to his death. From the death of Moses to the reign of Artaxerxes, King of Persia, the successor of Xerxes, the prophets who succeeded Moses wrote the history of the events that occurred in their own time, in thirteen books. The remaining four documents comprise hymns to God and practical precepts to men (Contra Apion 1:7-8).

There are a number of important things can be derived from this statement of Josephus. They are as follows.

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Josephus Divided The Hebrew Scriptures Into Two Periods: Before And After Moses

Josephus divided the sacred writings into two periods—the time before Moses and the time after Moses. In the time after Moses, Josephus further divided the writings into two groups—the prophets and the books which contain hymns and wisdom.

The Sacred Books Are Limited To Twenty-Two

Josephus limits the number of canonical books in these three divisions to twenty-two. Though he does not name the books, these twenty-two sacred writings certainly correspond to our present Old Testament. First, there were five books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy. There is no doubt what was contained in these five books.

Next come thirteen books of the prophets. They would most likely have been Joshua, Judges/Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra/Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah/Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets. Most likely, the Book of Ruth was attached to the Book Judges, and Lamentations was attached to Jeremiah.

The four books which he called hymns and practical precepts would be probably have been Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

From the various writings of Josephus, we find that most of the Old Testament books are individually cited by him. Therefore, his list of twenty-two books agrees with the evidence we find from Ben Sirach as to exactly how many books were in the Hebrew canon as well as the identity of these writings.

There Has Been No Scripture Since 425 B.C

Josephus also states something else that is important for our study. He says there had been no more authoritative writings since the reign of Artaxerxes, son of Xerxes (464-424 B.C.). This is the same time as Malachi—the last book in the Old Testament.

The Bible actually speaks of the rule of Artaxerxes. Scripture says that Ezra came to Jerusalem in the seventh year of his rule. We read of this in Ezra:

Some of the Israelites, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants accompanied [him] to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, during the seventh year of the king (Ezra 7:7,8 CSB).

We are also told that Nehemiah, the cupbearer, entered in the presence of King Artaxerxes in his twentieth year. The Bible says:

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before (Nehemiah 2:1 NIV).

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Therefore, this testimony of Josephus fits well with what we know from Scripture—the last of the writers lived and wrote in the late Persian period—no later than 425 B.C.

Other Writings Apart From The Scripture Were Known

Between the time of Malachi and Josephus' writing (425 B.C. to A.D. 90) no additional material was added to the Old Testament canon of Scripture. Josephus says that the period from Moses until 425 B.C. was one where there was an unbroken succession of prophets. This would have guaranteed the trustworthiness of what was written during that period. However, after that period, the succession of prophets ceased.

While Josephus does testify that certain people after this period had the gift of prophecy, there was no one who wrote authoritative Scripture. Consequently, there was the notion of a long period of time without a divinely authoritative Word from God that was put in written form for the people, as well as for future generations.

Indeed, Josephus wrote concerning books that were composed after the completion of the sacred books. He said:

From Artaxerxes to our times a complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit, with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets (*Against Apion* 1:41).

From this statement we learn that other writings had been composed after the completion of the Old Testament. However, these books were not considered to be divinely authoritative as was the Scripture. There had been no authoritative Word from the Lord after Malachi.

Josephus Knows Of No Disputes About The Canon

We learn something else from Josephus. While he knew of various Jewish sects and reports their differences of belief, he never indicates that they had any differences with respect to the extent of Scripture. To the contrary, his statement indicates that all Jews, no matter what their particular belief, acknowledged the same sacred Scripture.

The Scriptures Were Copied Carefully By The Jews

There are some other things that we learn from Josephus. For one thing, the Old Testament writings were carefully preserved. He wrote:

But that our forefathers took no less, not to say even greater care than the nations I have mentioned in the keeping of their records—a task which they assigned to their chief priests and prophets—and that down to our own times these records have been, and if I may venture to say so, will continue to be, preserved with scrupulous accuracy, I will now endeavor briefly to demonstrate (*Again Apion* 1.6.29).

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Because the Holy Scriptures were recognized as authoritative, they were treated in a manner that attested to their divine origin.

Josephus also declared the willingness of the Jewish people to die for their sacred writings. He wrote the following about their respect for the Scripture:

And how firmly we have given credit to those books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them or take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it becomes natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willing to die for them. For it is no new thing for our captives, many of them in numbers, and frequently in time, to be seen to endure racks and deaths of all kinds upon the theatres, that they may not be obliged to say one word against our laws, and the records that contain them.

Therefore, Josephus' writings contain a powerful testimony as to the extent of the Old Testament canon as well as the divine status in which these writings were held. Nothing was added to them and nothing was taken away from them.

The Sacred Writings Were Preserved In The Temple Archives

While we learn a number of important truths about the Holy Scriptures from the writings of Josephus. Perhaps the most important thing which we learn is that the sacred scrolls were officially housed in the temple in Jerusalem. This is consistent with what we read in the Old Testament—placing a particular writing in the temple was the same as canonizing it.

From various passages in the writings of Josephus, we discover the following about the canon of Scripture:

In a writing archived in the Temple, it is revealed that God predicted to Moses that water would gush from the rock (Antiquities 3:38).

This is a reference to Exodus 17:6 and Numbers 20:8. These two works were archived in the temple.

Josephus mentioned in another place that part of the writings of Moses was housed in the temple:

Then he [Moses] recited to them a poem in hexameter which is also archived in the Temple (Antiquities 4:303-304).

This is a reference to Deuteronomy 33. It too was officially housed in the temple.

Josephus also wrote that the writings of Joshua were kept in the temple archives:

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That the length of the day was increased then and was greater than what is customary is revealed in the Scriptures that are archived in the Temple (*Antiquities* 5:61).

This is evidence that sacred writings, apart from the Law of Moses, were also kept in the temple.

We further learn that the Romans took the temple archives when they destroyed the temple in A.D. 70. Josephus wrote of the spoils taken from Jerusalem by the conquering Roman army:

The spoils were borne in large heaps, but conspicuous of all of them were those captured in the Jerusalem Temple . . . And after these the Jewish Law was carried as the last of the spoils (*War of the Jews* 7:148-150).

Consequently, from a number of different passages, Josephus testifies that the Holy Writings were kept in the temple archives. When the city of Jerusalem, as well as the temple, were destroyed by the Romans, this archive ceased to exist.

Therefore, no longer could one look to Jerusalem and the temple archives to know which books belong in the sacred canon of Scripture. However, until that time, if someone wanted to know the complete catalog of sacred Scripture all they would have to do would be consult the temple archives. This was where the Hebrew canon was kept.

We can thus rightly conclude from Josephus' statements, as well as from the testimony of others, that the canon of Scripture was determined by which books were kept in the official archive of the temple; it was not because they were found on some list.

This further explains why no list of the books which belong in the Old Testament canon is given in the writings of the New Testament, or anywhere else, until after the destruction of the temple.

It was unnecessary. The sacred books were kept in the temple. This is how the people knew which books were divinely inspired and which were not. The canonical books were officially housed in the Holy temple.

Conclusions As To What We Learn From Josephus

We can sum up what we learn from Josephus as follows. He was the first person to list the number of books in the Hebrew canon. Josephus notes there were twenty-two books that were deemed as sacred Scripture. He divides the history of the Jews, and these books, into two periods: before and after Moses.

He is also the first person to explicitly tell us that the canon was closed because of the cessation of the prophets at the time of Nehemiah. Josephus also explicitly tells us that the sacred books were kept as an official archive in the temple. He also lets us know that the Jews were aware of other

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writings after the completion of the Old Testament but that these writings were not accepted as divinely authoritative Scripture.

Furthermore, Josephus knows of Jewish sects and reports their differences of belief, yet he nowhere reports that they disputed about the canon. In all, Josephus presents us with invaluable evidence about the canon.

9. The Testimony Of Second Esdras, Or 4th Esdras (A.D. 100)

There is the testimony of the twenty-four book Hebrew canon by the apocryphal work of Second Esdras (also known as Fourth Esdras). The Book of Second Esdras, although written in A.D. 100, claims to records revelations made to Ezra after the destruction of the first temple—some five hundred years earlier. This supposedly happened after the sacred writings had been burned. The fanciful story reads as follows:

So I took the five men, as he commanded me, and we proceeded to the field, and remained there. And on the next day a voice called me, saying, “Ezra, open your mouth and drink what I give you to drink.” So I opened my mouth, and a full cup was offered to me; it was full of something like water, but its color was like fire. I took it and drank; and when I had drunk it, my heart poured forth understanding, and wisdom increased in my breast, for my spirit retained its memory, and my mouth was opened and was no longer closed. Moreover, the Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated, using characters that they did not know. They sat forty days; they wrote during the daytime, and ate their bread at night. But as for me, I spoke in the daytime and was not silent at night. So during the forty days, ninety-four books were written. And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying, “Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first, and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people. For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge.” And I did so. Five thousand years and three months and twelve days after creation. At that time Ezra was caught up, and taken to the place of those who are like him, after he had written all these things. And he was called the scribe of the knowledge of the Most High for ever and ever (2 Esdras 14:37-48 NRSV).

According to the book of 2 Esdras, Ezra republished the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Scriptures. The testimony of twenty-four, or twenty-two books as Holy Scripture, goes way back before the end of the first century A.D.

Agreement on their number would also mean agreement on their identity. This is another strong testimony to a well-known set of books that existed at that time in history.

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10. The Talmud

The Talmud is a handbook of Jewish traditions. From the Talmud, we find the Jews realized that special revelation ceased with the prophet Malachi. The Talmud reads:

Up to this point [the time of Alexander the Great 330 B.C.] the prophets prophesied through the Holy Spirit; from this time onward incline your ear and listen to the sayings of the wise (Seder Olam Rabbah 30).

The Babylonian Talmud reads:

After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi had died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel, yet they were still able to avail themselves to the *bath kol* (Yoma 98).

In this context the Holy Spirit is a reference to divine prophecy. The phrase *bath kol* literally means “daughter of a voice.” It refers to words that were not as authoritative as the words of the prophets.

Since direct revelation from God had ceased in Israel about 400 B.C., the people had to listen to the words of wise men. These wise men did not speak with the same authority as the biblical prophets.

As far as the Jews were concerned, it is clear from all of the evidence, that long before the time of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament canon was closed. They had a clearly defined group of writings in which they recognized as sacred Scripture.

11. The Testimony Of 2 Baruch

Second Baruch is a forgery. While it is claimed the author was Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah, it was written long after his time. In this book the writer explains the lack of prophetic writing after the time of Malachi by saying that the prophets had “fallen asleep” (2 Baruch 85:3).

Though the book is not genuine, it does reflect the current thought of the day concerning the extent of Scripture.

12. The Testimony Of Fourth Maccabees

Finally, there is the testimony from a work known as Fourth Maccabees. This work was most likely written around A.D. 20. Therefore, it was composed around the time of the life of Christ. It reads as follows:

While he was still with you, he taught you the Law and the Prophets. He read to you about Abel slain by Cain, and Isaac who was offered as a burnt offering, and of Joseph in prison. He told you of the zeal of Phineas, and he taught you about Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael in the fire. He praised Daniel in the den of the lions and blessed him. He reminded you of the scripture of Isaiah, which says, ‘Even though you

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go through the fire, the flame shall not consume you.’ He sang to you songs of the psalmist David, who said, ‘Many are the afflictions of the righteous.’ He recounted to you Solomon’s proverb, ‘There is a tree of life for those who do his will.’ He confirmed the saying of Ezekiel, ‘Shall these dry bones live?’ For he did not forget to teach you the song that Moses taught, which says, ‘I kill and I make alive: this is your life and the length of your days’ (4 Maccabees 18:10-19).

In this passage from Fourth Maccabees, the author cites examples from eight out of the twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon which he calls, “the Law and the Prophets.

Therefore, from the evidence of Fourth Maccabees, we see that shortly before the time of Christ, there was an assumption of a completed canon of Scripture, the Law and the Prophets, which seems to be identical to our present Old Testament canon.

Conclusion: The Hebrew Canon Was Closed Four Centuries Before Christ

Therefore, when the evidence is considered from these various sources outside of Scripture, it agrees with the evidence that we find from the New Testament—that the Hebrew canon was completed and closed during the Persian period, about 400 B.C. and was recognized by all as being complete.

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Question 24

Why Do The Jews And Christians Understand The Old Testament So Differently?

From the evidence available, it is clear that the first-century Jews, including Jesus and His followers, accepted the books of the Hebrew Scripture as the divinely authoritative Word of God.

This brings up an obvious question. “If the Jews and Christians have the exact same Old Scripture, then why do they understand it so differently?” Why didn’t the same sacred book unify them? What are the reasons for the differences between the Jewish view and the Christian view of the Old Testament?

A number of points need to be made.

1. The Problem Is Not With The Canon

To begin with, the problem does not lie in anything having to do with the number of books that make up sacred Scripture, their authenticity, their divine authority, or how the books originally read. In these matters, there are no disagreements.

Therefore, the problem lies elsewhere. When Jesus came into the world, He, along with His followers, received the same books as God-given as did the religious rulers. While Jesus disputed with them on a number of topics, the extent and authority of the Scripture was not one of them.

2. The Old Testament Is All About Jesus

The reason for the differences centers on the Person of Jesus Christ. According to His own testimony, Jesus came to this world to explain who God is, as well as to properly interpret the Old Testament. In fact, the Old Testament could not be correctly understood apart from Christ. This is what divided the Christians from the Jews. While each believed in the divine origin of the Old Testament, the Christians saw it teaching about Jesus while the Jews did not.

The church believed that the Old Testament was the divinely inspired Word of God because of the testimony of Jesus. Jesus claimed that the Old Testament was all about Him. He said to the religious leaders of His day:

You study the scriptures diligently, supposing that in them you have eternal life; their testimony points to me (John 5:39 REB).

Peter said the same thing. When preaching the gospel to the Gentile Cornelius, he said that all the prophets bore witness to Christ:

It is to him that all the prophets testify, declaring that everyone who trusts in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:43 REB).

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When Philip the evangelist proclaimed the good news to the Ethiopian eunuch, He said the prophet Isaiah was writing about Jesus:

So Philip began with this same Scripture and then used many others to tell him the Good News about Jesus (Acts 8:35 NLT).

Peter wrote that the Old Testament prophets did not realize they were speaking of Christ when they wrote:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that would come to you, searched and carefully investigated. They inquired into what time or what circumstances the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating when He testified in advance to the messianic sufferings and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you concerning things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Angels desire to look into these things (1 Peter 1:10-12 CSB).

It was only those who lived at the time of Christ that understood this truth.

Therefore, the Christians read the Old Testament with the idea that it was entirely about Jesus. This is in contrast to the unbelieving Jews. While they still read the same Old Testament as the Christians, they did not see it referring to Jesus. Thus, while they were reading the exact same writings, the Jews and Christians interpreted these writings in a completely different manner.

3. Jesus Unlocked The Meaning Of The Old Testament

There is something else. His coming unlocked the true meaning of the Old Testament. This understanding was given to His disciples. Mark records Jesus saying the following:

You are permitted to understand the secret about the Kingdom of God. But I am using these stories to conceal everything about it from outsiders (Mark 4:11 NLT).

The true meaning of the Old Testament is only understood by those who believe in Jesus.

4. The Understanding Of Certain Commands In Scripture Has Changed

With the coming of Christ, many of the things taught in the Old Testament were no longer binding. For example, the Jews circumcised their male children, did not eat certain foods, and observed the Sabbath as well as other holy days.

Christians did none of these things. They saw all these commands as something that belong to a previous age. They were no longer bound to

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observe them. Consequently, the Jews viewed the Christians as misinterpreting and perverting the Old Testament and its commands.

The Christians saw the Jews as being spiritually blinded to the truth. Paul wrote:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:3,4 NRSV).

It is only the light of Christ that could cure their spiritually blindness.

5. The New Testament Explains Things Hidden In The Old Testament

There is something else. Certain things, which were hidden in Old Testament times, were now revealed by the coming of Christ. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote the following about the mission to the Gentiles, or the non-Jews:

I Paul, am a prisoner of Christ Jesus because of my preaching to you Gentiles. As you already know, God has given me this special ministry of announcing his favor to you Gentiles. As I briefly mentioned earlier in this letter, God himself revealed his secret plan to me. As you read what I have written, you will understand what I know about this plan regarding Christ. God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now he has revealed it by the Holy Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets. And this is the secret plan: The Gentiles have an equal share with the Jews in all the riches inherited by God's children. Both groups have believed the Good News, and both are part of the same body and enjoy together the promise of blessings through Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:1-6 NLT).

This Gentile hope was not plainly taught in the Old Testament. However, it was indeed there:

And he came so the Gentiles might also give glory to God for his mercies to them. That is what the psalmist meant when he wrote: "I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing praises to your name." And in another place it is written, "Rejoice, O you Gentiles, along with his people, the Jews." And yet again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; praise him, all you people of the earth." And the prophet Isaiah said, "The heir to David's throne will come, and he will rule over the Gentiles. They will place their hopes on him" (Romans 15:9-12 NLT).

While the idea of the Gentiles having hope in David's Son was found in the Old Testament, this truth was not really understood, or fully revealed, until the coming of Christ. Therefore, Jesus' hand-picked apostles not only properly understood the Old Testament Scripture, as opposed to the unbelieving Jews—they also revealed new truth to the world.

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This is why there is such a difference in their understanding of the meaning of the Old Testament. The Old Testament became a Christian book when Christ came into the world.

Summary To Question 24: Why Do The Jews And Christians Understand The Old Testament So Differently?

When the church began, the Jews and Christians had the same Bible; the Old Testament. However, this same Scripture did not unify them—rather it divided them. This is due to the fact that the Christians saw the Old Testament as referring to Jesus Christ while the Jews did not. Believers, following the example of Jesus, interpreted the Scriptures as being all about Him.

In fact, it could not be correctly interpreted apart from Him. In one sense, the Old Testament became an entirely different Bible with the coming of Christ. It is now a book that has to be interpreted in light of Jesus.

The Jews reacted to this by accusing the Christians of misinterpreting the Scripture while the Christians accused the Jews of spiritual blindness. Therefore, the same sacred book became a point of division. As time went by, these divisions became deeper.

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Question 25

What Can We Conclude About The Old Testament Canon?

The subject of the canon of Scripture is of the utmost importance. Why is this so? It is important because we need to know exactly which books have been divinely inspired of God and which have not. We want to study and obey only those writings which God has given to the human race.

Therefore, after looking at the available evidence, we can conclude the following about the Old Testament canon of Scripture.

1. The Idea Of A Canon Is Found In The Old Testament Itself

To begin with, the idea of an Old Testament canon, or a set number of sacred books, can be found within the writings of the Old Testament itself. While Old Testament events were still occurring, certain writings were already recognized to be divinely inspired by the people of God.

For example, Moses' writings were accepted as authoritative the moment they were written. Other writings soon followed which were also acknowledged as having been divinely inspired. These came from God's spokesmen, the prophets or from men whom God granted special wisdom.

These sacred writings were always kept in a holy place—first the tabernacle and then later in the official archives in the temple. This is further testimony to their worth and their unique character as the Word of God. Furthermore, the placing of a book in the temple archives was the way in which the Jews canonized a writing.

The sacred scrolls were taken from the temple when the Jews were led away captive to Babylon in 587 B.C. However, they were returned to the temple once the captivity was over. This means, that during the entire Old Testament period, the scrolls were always available for the people of Israel and Judah.

We know this to be true because the Bible tells us that Daniel the prophet read a copy of the Book of Jeremiah while he was a captive in Babylon. Daniel also mentioned that he had other sacred books in his possession. Scripture also informs us that Ezra the scribe brought back the sacred writings to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity had ended.

These holy writings informed the people of Israel about a number of things. For example, from the Holy Scripture we discover who God is, as well as what He is like. Furthermore, the Scriptures also told the nation of Israel about their unique place in God's plan, as well as the responsibility they had to serve and worship Him. It is only from the Scripture that they would know these things.

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Hence, the people of Israel were expected to obey the commands set forth in the writings. This includes the king himself. He was ordered to make a copy of the Law of Moses. This was to serve as a guide as to how he should rule the people.

In addition, the Law of Moses was to be read to the people every seven years so that everyone would know his or her responsibility. Again, the authoritative nature of these writings was made clear to all.

Consequently, from the Old Testament itself, we know the Jewish people accepted some books as authoritative Scripture. There is no doubt about this.

2. The New Testament Recognizes A Completed Canon Of Scripture

This brings us to the New Testament. The evidence shows that at the time the New Testament events occurred, the canon had been long-formed and accepted by the Jews. This is particularly true in the words of Jesus. He recognized the entire Old Testament as well as its two individual sections (the Law, and the Prophets). The Law consisted of the writings of Moses while the prophets referred to all of the divinely inspired writings which were produced after the time of Moses.

Each of these sections was a well-defined collection. We know this to be true for the following reasons.

Everyone agrees that the Law of Moses consisted of the five books of the Hebrew Scripture, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Therefore, it logically follows that the prophets would also have been a strictly defined group of writings with well-defined limits.

Otherwise, you have the reference to the Law and the Prophets referring to one strictly defined unit, the Law, and one undetermined group of writings by an unknown number of prophets. This does not make any sense. The writings which were found in the section called “the prophets” had to have been well-known and clearly defined.

Indeed, when Jesus told the religious rulers that the Scriptures witnessed or testified to His identity as the Messiah, Jesus, as well as His enemies, must have had a limited, well-defined number of books in mind.

If not, the reference of Jesus to the “Scripture” as proving His identity would not make any sense. Because of the way Jesus made the claim, we know that there was no disagreement about the extent of the sacred writings.

Thus, not only did Jesus and His disciples accept the idea of a completed Old Testament canon of Scripture, the same is true with His enemies. The religious rulers debated Jesus on a number of issues—including the interpretation of the Scripture. However, the content and extent of the Old Testament Scripture was not one of the issues they debated—it was a

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settled matter. Never, do we find them disputing this question. There is no evidence anywhere in the New Testament that there was a debate about any of the writings which belonged as sacred Scripture.

Indeed, there was no need for such a debate. The sacred scrolls were officially kept in the temple archives for all to see. Consequently, it was a settled matter.

There is further evidence. We also find from the writings of Paul, as well as the Book of Hebrews, that the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures, was a well-defined unit. Paul told Timothy that he had known the Holy Scripture since his youth. This assumes a known group of books. Paul also told Timothy that all Scripture was divinely inspired, or God-breathed. For this statement to have any real meaning, the identity of the Scripture must have been obvious.

The writer to the Hebrews compared the former revelation in the written Scripture to the final revelation of God through His Son Jesus Christ. Again, there was unanimous consensus on the issue of the existence of a body of writings called the Scripture.

Furthermore, the writer to the Hebrews noted that the prophets had spoken “long ago” indicating that the Scripture had been complete for an extended period of time.

Consequently, the teaching of the New Testament is unanimous. There was a group of writings considered to be Holy Scripture with well-known limits.

3. The Existence Of The Old Testament Canon Was Confirmed By Other Historical Sources

Not only do we have the New Testament confirming the concept of a sacred group of writings known as “the Scripture,” other historical sources confirm the existence of a completed Old Testament canon.

This includes the writer of the Book of Ecclesiasticus, the prologue to the Book of Ecclesiasticus, Philo of Alexandria, first-century Jewish writer Flavius Josephus, the Talmud, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the testimony of First and Second Maccabees, Baruch, the Ezra legend, and Fourth Maccabees.

Some of this testimony comes from a time before the New Testament was composed. Thus, every source, from the time of Ben Sirach, or the Book of Ecclesiasticus, in 200 B.C. assumes the existence of a canon of Scripture.

We must also emphasize that there is no evidence within any of these writings that there was any dispute as to the existence of the canon. The issue was settled since the sacred scrolls were officially kept in the temple archives. From both 2 Maccabees and the writings of Josephus, we know that the scrolls were kept as official records in the temple in Jerusalem. This is why no Jewish sect disputed which books belonged in the canon. The

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Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes all agreed on the contents of Holy Scripture.

There is something else. From a number of these writings, we know that “inspired prophecy” ceased in some sense during the Persian period—this is the same time as to when the last books of the Old Testament were written.

This is explicitly stated in the writings of Josephus as well as the in the later Jewish writings found in the Talmud. The same truth is implicitly stated in Ben Sirach, First Maccabees and Second Esdras. The New Testament also implicitly states that no inspired Word from the Lord had been given since the last of the Old Testament prophets. This is further evidence that the canon had been closed for about four centuries before the time of Christ.

While this evidence does not reveal exactly what books belonged in the canon, or what order they were to be placed in, it does reveal the concept that a fixed canon of Scripture already existed centuries before the time of Christ.

4. The Exact Books Of The Old Testament Canon Can Be Known

The Old Testament speaks of a number of writings which were considered to be sacred. The evidence from the New Testament, as well as from secular sources, informs us that a canon of Scripture existed at least two centuries before the time of Christ. The canon of Scripture was complete with well-known limits.

From examining the Old Testament, we find that each of the books claim that the Lord spoke through the writer, or that the writer was recording the words of the Lord. These writers were either prophets of God or men who had received God’s special wisdom. The only exception to this is the Book of Esther where no specific claim is made for it.

However, the Old Testament does not tell us how many of the sacred writings were considered to be God-given or if the canon was closed at a certain time in history. We have to discover this by examining other evidence.

This brings us to our next point. We find that from the second century B.C. to the first century A.D. only the books of the Old Testament are cited as authoritative Scripture. Most of these books are cited many times. These citations come from different groups such as ordinary Jews, Greeks, Pharisees, Essenes, and Christians. They all give testimony to the extent of the Hebrew canon. These groups cite only the books that make up the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative—they do not recognize the divine authority of any other writings. This is a strong witness to the idea that there was a fixed group of authoritative books.

For example, the Book of Ecclesiasticus, also known as the writings of Ben Sirach, was composed about 200 B.C. In his work, he cites almost every

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book of the Old Testament and recognizes it as Scripture. Only the book of Ruth, which may have been linked to the Book of Judges, was not cited or alluded to by Sirach.

Furthermore, he makes a clear distinction between these writings, which are considered to be sacred, and all other writings. Therefore, a canon of Scripture existed at least two centuries before the time of Christ with well-known writings and clearly defined limits.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, also written before the New Testament era, provide further testimony as to the extent of the Old Testament. All of the books of the Old Testament, with the possible exception of Nehemiah, and with the exception of Esther, were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although these sacred writings were found with other writings which were not part of the canon, it is only the Scriptures, or the canonical writings, in which we find commentaries written about them.

The evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls is consistent with what we know from other sources. The writings of the Old Testament were looked upon differently than all other writings.

The New Testament itself cites almost every book of the Old Testament with phrases such as, “Scripture says,” “it is written,” or “God said.” Indeed, it is possible that the New Testament actually directly quotes or alludes to every book that makes up the Old Testament. It agrees exactly with Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, as to the extent of the Old Testament.

Flavius Josephus, writing shortly after the time of Christ, makes it clear that the Holy Scriptures had been complete since the time the Persians ruled (400 B.C.). He specifically stated that only twenty-two writings were deemed as divinely inspired. This fits with the testimony of Ben Sirach about the canon. These are the same writings that we find in the Old Testament today—no more, no less.

This is all the more impressive when we realize that the New Testament writers, as well as these other sources, knew of the non-canonical writings. They alluded to them, used ideas from them, and at times cited them. However, they never quoted them as Holy Scripture! We never find any using the phrase such as “It is written” God says,” “Thus says the Lord,” or “Scripture says” when citing these writings.

Consequently, from examining all of the evidence, we can say that a canon existed long before the time of Christ and that we know exactly which writings were part of that canon.

There is one more thing to note. The reason why we do not find any list of canonical Old Testament books, until after the New Testament era, is because there was no need for any such list. As long as the temple of Jerusalem was still standing, with the sacred Scriptures housed in the temple archives, there was no such need for a list of the Holy Scripture.

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It was only after the city of Jerusalem and the temple were both destroyed, and the holy writings carried away, that a need for a list arose. Once there was no central place where the sacred writings were housed the people needed to know, through other means, which writings were God-given and which were not.

5. No Other Books Qualify For The Old Testament Canon

This brings us to our last point. There is no evidence that the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha, belong in Holy Scripture. While these writings are accepted as authoritative Scripture by the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian communities the various reasons that have been given for their inclusion are not convincing. Though they may offer some insights into the history between the testaments, they provide no evidence of divine inspiration as is true with the Old Testament books. We will look at this issue in great detail in our book on the Old Testament Apocrypha.

In sum, when all the evidence is considered, we find that the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are clearly the only books that were considered to be divinely inspired by God. The Old Testament canon began with the books of Moses and was completed with the writings of the last of the prophets around 400 B.C. After that time, no divinely inspired writings were given by God to the human race.

Therefore, we can rightly conclude that we know that an Old Testament canon existed and that we also know exactly which books were included in the Old Testament canon.

Summary To Question 25

What Can We Conclude About The Old Testament Canon?

While there are a number of things that we do not know about how we got the thirty-nine books that make up the Old Testament, there are a number of things that we do know.

We know that the people recognized the divine writings during the thousand-year period in which the books were written—there was a progressive recognition of Scripture. They also recognized when prophecy ceased. No group of people, or council, religious or non-religious, made the decisions concerning which books were divinely given.

By the time of Jesus, the Old Testament writings were considered the authoritative Word of God—they were also believed to have been completed for a long time.

The evidence is that the Hebrew Scriptures were completed around the time of Nehemiah in 400 B.C. The Old Testament, the New Testament, and secular historians all confirm this. Therefore, the totality of evidence shows that the Old Testament was a completed body of literature long before the time of Christ with well-known limits.

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To sum up: When all the evidence is carefully examined, we can draw a number of conclusions about the Old Testament canon as well as its exact contents. These conclusions should be held by any unbiased thinking person.

There is really no real doubt as to where the evidence leads. Therefore, the believer can take comfort in these facts—nothing has been lost from the Old Testament and nothing has been added to it

Consequently, everyone, believer and unbeliever alike, can read the Old Testament with the complete confidence that it is God's divine Word to the human race.

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