



“Understanding the Bible”

Section 2: How Did We Get the Bible?

Unit 2.2: An Overview of Old Testament Origins



I) Is it Not Written?

- As we make a transition from the inspiration of Scripture to its duplication and canonization, we first need to look at the preceding transition made by the ancient world from an oral culture to a **literate** culture. In the beginning of biblical times, the Word of God was transmitted through oral proclamation, as the Holy Spirit inspired men to “*call out*” and others to “*retell*” the commands of the Lord. The ancient world was dominated by oral tradition, and the advent of reading and writing began gradually in small groups of elite scholars and scribes only. Writing systems were complex and required memorization of hundreds of signs and symbols. It wasn’t until the second millennium BC that the alphabet was finally introduced, and what was once hundreds of symbols was reduced to just a few dozen letters. This made literacy possible for the common people to learn and use, and also provided a way for God’s Word to be recorded, reproduced, and studied. The written Scriptures also set apart the God of Israel from every other false God of ancient times, because while other gods were identified by images, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was discovered in the text.

II) Let’s Read Into It

- Since the oldest books of the Bible were written sometime around 1400 BC (Genesis, Job), we know that a recognizable alphabet was already established. In fact, our greatest proof of Jewish transformation into a literate society is something we find in the actual stories of Scripture itself. The following list is a sample of Old Testament passages that uniquely demonstrates the growing importance of the written word among God’s covenant people:
 - Exodus 31:18** – When God delivered the Ten Commandments through Moses to the Israelites, He did so by *writing* the words on stone tablets.
 - Deuteronomy 6:9** – Moses exhorts the people to *write* the commands of God on the doorposts of their houses and their gates.
 - Joshua 24:26** – During God’s covenant renewal at Shechem, Joshua recorded the oral commitment of the Israelites to serve and obey God by *writing* the words of the event in the *Book* of the Law of God.
 - Ecclesiastes 12:12** – Solomon makes a bold claim when he says, “Of making many *books* there is no end, and much *study* is a weariness of the flesh.”
 - Isaiah 29:11** – The prophet Isaiah recorded a vision and referred to it as “the *words* of a *book* that is sealed” because some could not *read* it.

III) Coming Up With a Canon

- Continuing our investigation of the process of how the books of the Bible were collected and recognized as one authoritative volume, we need to understand the term “**canon**.” The word canon comes from the Greek word “*kanon*” which originally meant “*reed*” or “*measuring rod*,” but later came to be known as “*norm*” or “*rule*.” As Christians, when we use the term canon we are speaking specifically of the recognized collection of 66 books that make up the Holy Scriptures.

IV) Hearing the Whole Story

- Before we discuss the Old Testament canon, we need to first stop and address this common question: *Why do Christians recognize the Old Testament as part of the Bible?* On the surface, the Old Testament highlights the historical and theological formation of a Hebrew nation established by the Mosaic Law. As Christians, we are a spiritual nation established by the atonement of Christ. But the real answer is twofold: 1) All of God’s Word is for all of **God’s people**; 2) The nation of Israel is the beginning of the Christian story, with Christ coming as the promised messiah to fulfill the law’s requirements.

V) The Structure of Hebrew Scripture

- Now that we have a solid foundation for what a canon is, let us further examine the structure of the Hebrew Scriptures. The following list is a summary of the Old Testament found in our current English Bibles (building on what we discussed in Unit 1.1), as well as a comparison the current Hebrew Bible:
 - Size:** There are currently 39 Old Testament books in our English Bibles. The modern edition of the Hebrew Bible contains these 39 books, but they are condensed into 24 books. In the Hebrew Bible, 1 Kings and 2 Kings are combined to make one book, as well as 1 Chronicles with 2 Chronicles and Ezra with Nehemiah. Finally, the 12 Minor Prophets are also condensed into one book in the Hebrew format.
 - Language & Time Span:** These books in our English Bibles were originally translated from manuscripts written mostly in Hebrew, with a small sample of Aramaic (Daniel, Ezra), from 1400 B.C to 430 B.C.
 - Chapters:** There are 929 chapters of the Old Testament, and these chapter divisions were first created by Stephen Langton (1150-1228) who was the Archbishop of Canterbury. He inserted these chapter breaks in the early thirteenth century while he was lecturing at the University of Paris. His chapters were first added to the Latin translation of the Bible, but the chapters were kept in later translations.
 - Verses:** There are 23,214 verses of the Old Testament, and these verse divisions were first standardized by the Ben Asher family (Jewish scribes) around AD 900. When Langton's chapter divisions were later added to the Hebrew Bible, these chapters were sometimes adjusted to fit the Ben Asher scheme.
 - Arrangement:** The current arrangement of the English Bible divides the Old Testament into five sections including the Law (5: Genesis – Deuteronomy); History (12: Joshua – Esther); Poetry & Wisdom (5: Job – Song of Solomon); Major Prophets (5: Isaiah – Daniel); and Minor Prophets (12: Hosea – Malachi). The Hebrew Bible divides the books into just three sections including the Law (5: Known as the “*Torah*”); the Prophets (8: Known at the “*Nebhiim*”); and the Writings (11: Known at the “*Kethubhim*”).

VI) Going Over the Old Testament Guidelines

- Before we ask, “*How did the final collection of biblical books come together as one canon?*” a very important distinction needs to be made. God’s people who participated throughout the timeline of canonical formation never determined which books were divine; they simply discovered which books were divine. The same God who divinely-inspired the writing of Scripture, guided this process of canonization so that His Words made it into His Book. Having made that distinction, there were four general principles of discovery that guided the canonical process of both Testaments: 1) The credentials of the author (*Was it written by a prophet, apostle, or direct associate under divine inspiration?*); 2) The truthfulness of the content (*Did it come true, and is it consistent with the message of the other books with no contradictions?*); 3) The supernatural power of the content (*Are the words living and active with a supernatural quality?*); and 4) The universal acceptance of the content (*Did the people of God who originally received these writings universally recognize them as divine?*).

VII) Are the “Lost Books” a Lost Cause?

- Almost every year, articles and documentaries surface that talk about some “lost book” being discovered that should be included in the canon of Scripture. The truth is that these books were never lost; they were simply rejected a long time ago. These books primarily fall into two main collections: 1) The Pseudepigrapha (books written from 200 BC – 300 AD that attempted to emulate Scripture under the false name of a biblical character) and 2) The Apocrypha (books written in 400 year span between the two Testaments). Both collections easily fail to meet the canonical requirements listed above, and we will discuss both collections in greater length in Unit 2.4.

VIII) Dealing with Distance and Diversity

- If we are being honest, as Christians today we sometimes struggle to connect with the Old Testament for two main reasons: 1) Distance (written over a 3,000 year history), and 2) Diversity (foreign cultural and customs). While these issues present an obstacle, these obstacles can also be overcome. We need to remember that history and culture changes, but truth does not. When God speaks, His truth is eternal, and we need the Old Testament today as much as when it was originally written.