

The Old Testament Canon

By Martin Pickup

Some Jews I have talked with are surprised that my Bible contains the books of Genesis through Malachi. Christians call these 39 books “the Old Testament,” but they are Jewish Scriptures, documents that were first written to the people of ancient Israel. So why would Christians need these books? Perhaps it does seem strange on the surface. But the reason why Christians revere the Jewish Scriptures is simple: our Lord told us to. Speaking personally during his earthly ministry, and then later through his apostles, Jesus Christ affirmed that these writings were inspired of God and that they foretold him and his kingdom. He taught his followers to learn from these writings, not to denounce them or ignore them.

What Books Should Comprise the Old Testament Canon?

“The Scriptures,” “the sacred writings,” “the Law and the Prophets”—these are all designations that the New Testament writers use for the books of the Old Testament. Whatever terminology one uses, it is clear that Jesus affirmed the inspiration of the writings that the Jews accepted as the word of God. But what books comprised the Jewish Scriptures? Can we be sure that the books Jesus affirmed are the same 39 books we have in our Old Testaments today?

To answer this question, let me first say a word about the presence of a fixed canon of Scripture in the time of Jesus. The phrase “the Scriptures” (*hai graphai*) literally means “the writings.” But when ancient Jews used this terminology, they did not refer to just any

writings; they referred to *the* writings—a recognized collection of documents that all Jews revered. As the New Testament repeatedly illustrates, a passage from this corpus of documents could be cited using the simple introductory phrase, “It is written ...,” and everybody knew what writings were intended. As early as the 2nd century BC, Jews talked about “the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors” (*Sirach* 1; cf. Josephus’ *Against Apion* 1.8; *2 Esdras* 14; Philo’s *Contemplative Life* 25). One of the key documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q399) stressed obedience to “the Book of Moses, and the Prophets, and David.” This language is very similar to that which Jesus used in Luke 24:44 when he spoke of “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.”

The standard position of modern liberal scholars used to be that the Jewish canon was not closed at the time of Jesus. They said this because in AD 90 a group of rabbis met at the Palestinian city of Jamnia and discussed, among other issues, questions regarding the canonicity of Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Ezekiel. Liberal scholars concluded that these books, and perhaps some others, were not accepted as canonical by Jews until after the rabbis of Jamnia decided in their favor. But this assertion is now known to be false. The so-called council of Jamnia was not an authoritative body that convened to decide what the Jewish canon should be. It was a group of rabbis who discussed questions about books whose canonicity had been recognized for centuries. Most liberal scholars now acknowledge this fact and have backed away from their prior claims regarding Jamnia.

There is no question that the concept of a fixed Jewish canon did exist in the time of Jesus, and that it was this canon that Jesus affirmed as the inspired word of God. But knowing this still does not answer the question of precisely which writings comprised the

Jewish canon. How do we know that the Jewish Scriptures then were the same 39 books that we have in our Old Testaments today?

Sometimes 39 = 24, and 24 = 22

Neither Jesus nor any New Testament writer ever lists the books of the Jewish canon for us, but we can be certain which books they were. The Jewish Talmud lists by name the documents that Jews had always revered as Scripture, and they are the same 39 books that we have in our Bibles today. It is interesting, though, that the Talmud counted them as 24 in number. In fact many ancient people counted them as 24, including Tertullian, Jerome, and the author of *2 Esdras*. How did they arrive at this enumeration?

First of all, the two books that we call 1 & 2 Samuel were originally one book, and the same thing is true of 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles. When these three books were translated from Hebrew into Greek, each one had to be divided into two books because a single scroll could not contain the entire work. (In their Hebrew form, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles were each able to fit on a single scroll because written Hebrew does not use vowel letters. But Greek—like English—does use vowel letters, so each of these books took up two scrolls when they were translated into Greek.) This is why the documents that we count as six separate books (1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and 1 & 2 Chronicles) were counted as three books in ancient times.

The situation was just the reverse when it came to the Minor Prophets. Though these twelve works were all separate documents, each of them was too small to be copied onto its own individual scroll. So all of them were grouped together onto a single scroll and

counted collectively as one book. The same was true with Ezra and Nehemiah. The content of these two books formed a unit, so they were copied onto a single scroll and numbered as one book. This gave a total of 24 books, and because there were 24 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, it made for an easy way of reckoning the entire canon of Scripture.

The Greek alphabet, however, has just 22 letters, and so some people in ancient times liked to count the Jewish Scriptures as 22 books (e.g., Josephus, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome). They arrived at this number by appending the little book of Ruth to the scroll of Judges, and appending Lamentations to the scroll of Jeremiah. But no matter how these documents were enumerated, the content was exactly the same as what we have today in our Old Testaments. It may seem like a mathematical conundrum, but in this case 39 does equal 24, and 24 equals 22!

Neglected Scriptures

Before concluding this discussion, let me address the tendency that I observe today among some Christians and congregations to relegate *the study* of the Old Testament to a low level of priority.

In some congregations, the Old Testament seems to receive emphasis only in children's Bible classes. Adult classes may spend time surveying Old Testament history, but they often scarcely touch the prophetic books like Isaiah or Jeremiah. Many Christians have a hard time locating the books of Hosea or Zephaniah in their Bibles, much less know anything about them. Many Christians feel no obligation to gain a knowledge of the 39

books of the Old Testament. “We’re under the new covenant,” they reason. “The New Testament’s teaching is what’s important for us today. So it’s not necessary for me to study all of the books of the Old Testament.” I hear preachers quote Romans 15:4 a lot—“the things written aforetime were written for our learning.” But in my judgment Christians tend to apply these words only to the stories of the Old Testament. People read the historical books if they read anything from the Old Testament at all, but they see little need to study the Law, the Prophets, or the Psalms. The upshot of this kind of thinking is this: Christians say the Bible has 66 books in it, but for all practical purposes it might just as well contain 27. Our Jewish friends aren’t the only ones who fail to understand why our Bibles contain Genesis through Malachi.

2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” Contrary to what is often assumed, when Paul refers to “all Scripture,” he is speaking of the Old Testament books and not the New Testament books. The previous verse makes this clear, for the apostle was reminding Timothy of “the sacred writings” that “from childhood you have known” (v. 15).” It is of course true that what Paul says here about the nature of God’s revelation is a principle that applies equally to the books of the New Testament. But in this passage, Paul is talking specifically about the inspiration of the Old Testament and its profitability for the life of a Christian.

The same is true of Romans 15:4, the passage I mentioned above. Paul says, “Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope.” This concept would certainly apply to the writings of the New Testament, but Paul is referring to the fact that the Old Testament provides Christians with encouragement. Nor is he limiting this source of encouragement to the stories in the historical books of the Old Testament. Paul’s thought begins in the previous verse (v. 3) where he quotes Psalm 69!

If we look carefully at the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, we see that, in large part, he explicated principles that were first revealed in the Law of Moses and later elucidated by Israel’s prophets (see e.g., Matt. 5:17-48; 12:7). The Old Testament is the foundation of God’s revelation to man and it is important that a disciple of Christ come to know these writings. The fact that quotations from all portions of the Old Testament appear on page after page of the New Testament should tell us something. First-century converts to Christ were expected to gain a good knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures. God’s revelation to ancient Israel was understood to be of timeless benefit and it needed to find a home in the mind and heart of every Christian.

If the pages of your Bible from Genesis to Malachi still stick together like they did when your Bible was brand new, let me suggest that you un-stick them. Believers in Jesus need to put the Old Testament Scriptures to good use in their Bible study and in their life.