

The Canonicity of the Old Testament

By Kyle Pope

Introduction.

The possible scope of our assignment in this lecture is quite broad. It could encompass questions as sweeping as:

- What makes up the totality of the collection of books we call the Old Testament?
- How and when did these books come to be viewed as a closed group?
- Why were some books included while others were not?

If Jim had chosen to, entire lectures could have been devoted to each of these questions (and perhaps even subsets of them). That is not, however, the nature of this study nor of my assignment.

In this lesson, and the next on the New Testament canon, Jim has given us both great freedom and discretion about what to discuss. What I hope to do is offer an overview of how we may answer some of these questions, while summarizing a few challenging issues that I hope will prove helpful to us as preachers.

Over the years, I have been blessed to have had several opportunities to dig into this topic. When I first moved to Amarillo, the elders asked me to do a four-part series on “How We Got the Bible” that was put into book form with an appendix on Bible translations a few years later (*How We Got the Bible*, Guardian of Truth Foundation, Bowling Green, KY, 2010). In 2017, Mark Mayberry asked me to do a thirteen-part series in *Truth Magazine*, on the same topic but entitled “How the Bible Came to Us.” It attempted to explain these issues to a younger audience. Lord willing, it will also be put into workbook form before too long.

For this lecture, in order to expand and update my study of these questions, I have spent a significant amount of time in a book entitled, *The Canon Debate*, edited by Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002). It is a series of 32 papers written by scholars in this field examining major issues of Old and New Testament canonicity. While I would not agree with all of the views expressed in these essays, many of the sources cited in this study are taken from that work.

Three Approaches to this Issue

There are different ways we could examine this topic that might be profitable, but for simplicity, I will divide our efforts into three distinct ways to tackle it:

1. What the Bible Says about Itself
2. Extra-biblical Evidence
3. Answers to Critical Theories

As preachers we will likely encounter people from vastly different backgrounds in our efforts to teach them. Judgment regarding which approach to take may determine our success or failure. Some will need nothing more than exposure to the claims of Scripture. Others, who have been exposed to theories that undermine confidence in biblical claims, will need answers to these attacks. Still others, may require a sampling of all of these approaches to help them come to faith. My prayer is that this material can offer some tools to help us in these efforts.

I. What the Bible Says about Itself.

The Bible reveals three important phases in the biblical narrative that led to the development of the Old Testament canon:

A. The Giving of the Law of Moses.

The Bible records that after Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, God revealed to him the first five books of the Old Testament. The claim is emphatic that God revealed these texts to Moses:

- “These are the commandments which the Lord commanded Moses for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai” (Lev. 27:34).
 - “These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He made with them in Horeb” (Deut. 29:1).
 - “Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments” (Mal. 4:4).
 - “Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded Israel” (Neh. 8:1).
1. The Bible claims of itself that God gave the Law to Moses and that it was written by Moses. In the Pentateuch we find the phrases:
 - “The Lord spoke to Moses” (104x)
 - “The Lord said to Moses” (56x)
 - “The Lord commanded Moses” (28x)
 2. New Testament affirm a confidence that the Pentateuch was written by Moses:
 - “. . .Have you not read in the book of Moses. . .” (Mark 12:26)
 - “Did not Moses give you the law. . .” (John 7:19)
 - “The law was through Moses” (John 1:17)
- B. The Restorations of Hezekiah and Josiah.

In the line of the kings Judah, many of whom were blatantly unfaithful to the Lord, two of the shining exceptions were Hezekiah and Josiah. The efforts of both of these men appear to have played a significant role in the preservation and formation of the Old Testament canon.

1. When Hezekiah began to reign, he initiated a major effort to restore faithful service to the Lord (2 Chron. 29:1-31:21).
 - “Hezekiah gave encouragement to all the Levites who taught the good knowledge of the LORD” (2 Chron. 30:22a).

Some of this involved the copying of scriptural texts.

- “These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied” (Prov. 25:1).
2. Like his great-grandfather, Josiah initiated similar moves to restore faithfulness to the Lord. Early in his reign the Bible says, “Then Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, ‘I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the Lord.’ And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it” (2 Kings 22:8).
 - a. What was this “Book of the Law?” Was it a single book of the Law of Moses? Was it the entire law, spoken of as one book? Scripture uses the phrase “Book of the Law” frequently (Deut. 28:61; 29:21; 30:10; 31:26; Josh. 1:8; 8:31, 34; 22:11; 2 Chron. 17:9; 34:14; Neh. 8:1, 3, 18; 9:3; Gal. 3:10), yet the phrase “books” of the Law is never used.
 - b. Rabbinical sources claim that scrolls were usually written with four lines between different books (Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 13b). It is likely that the phrase “Book of the Law” refers to either one scroll or group of scrolls containing all five books of the Law.
 - c. “Now it happened, when the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, that he tore his clothes” (2 Kings 22:11). It is hard to imagine that they could have lost the “book of the Law,” but that is exactly what they had done.

- d. The recovery of the “Book of the Law” began a nationwide movement to return the nation to faithfulness to the Lord (2 Kings 23:1-3). This undoubtedly resulted in the restoration, publication, and preservation of the biblical books that had been revealed to that point in time.
3. The efforts of Hezekiah and Josiah did not succeed in moving successive generations to faithfulness to the Lord. Yet their work undoubtedly helped to establish and preserve the Scriptures in forms that would serve the faithful remnant through the coming Babylonian Exile.

C. The Work Ezra.

After the Exile, the Lord worked through a man named Ezra, when the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem under Persian rule.

- “. . .Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon Him” (Ezra 7:6).
- “. . .For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10).

Like Hezekiah and Josiah, he came to realize that his people were unfaithful the commands of God.

1. To address this, Ezra led the nation in a major return to respect for God’s word (Neh. 8:1-8).
2. The events that took place during these times (and through the final prophets that would come after this) served to complete the body of Old Testament Scriptures, preserve them, teach them, and hand them down.
3. While the Bible does not explicitly state that Malachi, the last prophet historically, brought the canon to an end, the closing words of the book declare:
 - “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:5-6).
 - a. Jesus identified John the Baptist as the fulfillment of this prophecy (Matt. 17:11-13), classing him as a prophet that ended the period of “the law and the prophets.”
 - “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John” (Matt. 11:13).
 - “The law and the prophets were until John. . .” (Luke 16:16a).
 - b. Since no prophetic Scripture is appealed to in the interval between Malachi and John the Baptist the inference is that the body of Scriptures known as “the law and the prophets” ended with Malachi and its fulfillment in John.

D. Divisions of Scripture.

The New Testament with use a few different phrases in reference to Old Testament Scriptures:

- “Law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; Acts 13:15; Rom. 3:21; cf. Matt. 5:17; 7:12; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:15; 28:23)
- “Prophets and the law” (Matt. 11:13)
- “Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44)

This has motivated significant discussion about what New Testament writers understood to constitute the closed canon of Old Testament Scriptures.

1. Modern Jews, and to some degree and ancient Jews divided the Old Testament into three sections: Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Nevim*), and Writings (*Ketubim*). They follow a different

ordering of the books that varies from the topical and chronological approach used in modern Bibles (as influenced by the Septuagint).

- If these divisions were in place in New Testament times, do New Testament references to only Law and Prophets indicate they did not consider the section called “Writings” and canonical?
- Does the inclusion of “Psalms” in Luke 24:44 indicate endorsement of only the book of Psalms or does it refer to the entire section of the “Writings” (of which the book of Psalms is the first book)?

To explore discussions of these issues see Julio C. Trebolle Barrera, “Origins of a Tripartite Old Testament Canon” *The Canon Debate*, 128-145 and Craig A. Evans, “The Scriptures of Jesus and His Earliest Followers,” *The Canon Debate*, 185-195.

2. In our judgement it is presumptuous to assume that references to Law and Prophets alone excludes the writings grouped in the division identified as “Writings.”
 - If Jesus uses “Psalms” in Luke 24:44 as a way of referring to the entire Old Testament canon it demonstrates His endorsement of Genesis to Malachi.
 - If He is only speaking of the book of Psalms it does not follow that He is rejecting other books included in the “Writings.”

II. Extra-biblical Evidence.

Ultimately, acceptance of the inspiration of Scripture and a confidence in its totality and completion is a matter of faith, however there is value in considering certain external evidence that has a bearing on questions of canonicity.

A. *What Did Ancient Writers Say about Events Relevant to the Formation of the Old Testament?*

1. Ancient writers believed it was written by Moses.
 - Manetho, an Egyptian Historian (ca. 240 BC) in speaking of Moses, says he was “... The man who gave them their constitution and laws” (Quoted by Josephus, *Against Apion*, Book One 26.4).
 - Josephus, the Jewish Historian (ca. 80-90 AD), in speaking of the Jewish Scriptures, says they are “... justly believed to be Divine, and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws, and the traditions of the origins of mankind till his death” (*Against Apion*, Book One 8.1).
2. Rabbinical writers believed that the work of Ezra and the prophets that followed him brought the period of inspired Scripture to an end. “The Great Assembly” (or “Great Synagogue”) is a term used by the Jews for this group of leaders who restored the Law together with Ezra.
 - The Jewish Mishnah claimed, “Moses received the Torah on Sinai, and handed it down to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the Men of the Great Assembly” (*Perke Aboth*, 1).

This period brought to an end Divine inspiration of Old Testament Scriptures. During this time (if not shortly afterwards), the Old Testament canon was closed. After this, all other religious writings were viewed as uninspired and of lesser value.

B. *What Did Ancient Writers Believe about the Old Testament Canon?*

1. At least three sources may testify to a closed canon very early.
 - The apocryphal Book of Ecclesiasticus or Sirach (ca. 190 BC) in its prologue claims, “Many and great things have been given to us by the LAW and the PROPHETS and by OTHERS ...my grandfather, Joshua, gave himself to the reading of the LAW and the

PROPHETS and OTHER books of our fathers.” Discussing translation of Hebrew, he speaks of “...the LAW itself, and the PROPHETS and the REST of the books ” (Prologue, emphasis mine).

- Philo of Alexandria (ca. 30 AD) speaks of a Jewish monastic sect “...studying in that place the LAWS and the sacred oracles of God enunciated by the HOLY PROPHETS and HYMNS and PSALMS...” (*On the Contemplative Life*, 25; emphasis mine).
 - The Jewish Historian Josephus (ca. 80-90 AD) claimed, “We have...22 books which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be Divine.” He explains, “...five belong to MOSES...from the death of Moses to the reign of Artaxerxes...the PROPHETS wrote down what was done in thirteen books...the remaining four contain HYMNS to God and precepts for the conduct of life” (*Against Apion*, Book One 8.1; emphasis mine).
2. Like Luke 24:44, if reference to “others,” the “rest,” “hymns,” or “psalms” refers to the Jewish division of “Writings” these early sources attest to an understanding that the canon of Old Testament Scriptures was completed.

C. The Old Testament into Greek.

1. A work known as the *Letter of Aristeas* offers an account of the translation of the Law of Moses into Greek during the reign of Ptolemy II (ca. 285-246 BC.), a Greek king who ruled Egypt. According to the document, Ptolemy used 72 Jewish scholars to make the translation. This translation is known as the Septuagint (abbreviated in Roman numerals LXX).
 - a. Scholars now question the reliability of this account but have actually discovered some evidence that translation of the Old Testament could actually have occurred even earlier (see Albert C. Sundberg Jr., “The Septuagint: The Bible of Hellenistic Judaism,” *The Canon Debate*, 68-90).
2. The Septuagint (LXX) utilized the Greek custom of naming books. For example, the name *Exodus* comes from the Greek *ex* “out of” and *hodos* “road, way,” referring literally to “the way out” of Egypt. Many of the names we use are from the LXX. The arrangement we use of the books of the Old Testament (i.e. Law, History, Poetry, and Prophecy) is derived from the LXX.
3. The LXX was the Old Testament of many early Christians. Some Old Testament quotes in the New Testament are directly from the LXX. While most modern translations use the Hebrew text as the basis for English translation, many of these conventions drawn from the LXX are still employed in modern editions of the Old Testament.
 - a. The existence of the Septuagint attested to a closed canon, but it raises another issue. . .

D. Extra-Canonical Books

1. Fourteen Jewish historical and religious texts dating from ca. 300 BC – AD 70 are included in manuscripts of the Septuagint.
 - a. These books, known as the Apocrypha are considered canonical by the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches and were included in the 1611 *King James Bible*.
2. Among the Jews, these books were viewed as uninspired supplementary readings that held no authority.
 - Josephus, in his work *Against Apion*, says that other works after Ezra “hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets from that time” (Bk. I, 8.1).

- The Babylonian Talmud, says Zechariah and Malachi came “at the end of the prophets” (*Baba Batra*, 14b).
3. Jesus and New Testament writers never quote from a single apocryphal book (although almost every canonical book is quoted). For a discussion of issues regarding the Apocrypha, see Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., “The Old Testament Apocrypha in the Early Church and Today,” *The Canon Debate*, 196-210.

III. Answers to Critical Theories.

A. *No Alphabet Theory*. At one point, critics of faith charged:

“The Law of Moses could not have been given in the fifteenth century BC because there was no alphabetic writing in use at that time.”

1. This was a formidable charge. The first known writing systems were *ideographic* (i.e. ideas expressed in pictographic symbols). The two most well-known were *hieroglyphic* (in Egypt) or *cuneiform* (in Mesopotamia, Persia, and the Levant).
2. The challenges of ideographic systems were, first their dependence upon artistic ability. Unless you could draw pictures or elaborate symbols, you couldn’t be understood. Second, this type of writing involved a large number of signs. For example, Chinese—one of the only ideographic languages still in use, in fairly recent times had to reduce the number of signs from 15,000 to 5,000! Imagine having to teach elementary school children 15,000 signs?
3. In 1905, Flinders Petrie and his wife Hilda discovered at Serabit el-Khadim (in the Sinai Peninsula) in the ruins of an ancient turquoise mine what may be the earliest form of alphabetic writing used from the nineteenth to the fifteenth century BC now known as *Proto-Sinaitic* (or *Proto-Canaanite*, because it has also been found in other places). Borrowing some signs from Egyptian hieroglyphics, it allowed Semitic languages (such as Hebrew) to be easily written, read, and understood and is now believed to have been the ancestor from which Phoenician, Greek, and even our own alphabet eventually developed.

B. *The Documentary Hypothesis*.

“The Law of Moses was not revealed by God or written by Moses but was composed by man through an evolutionary process from different documentary sources borrowed from cultures who first worshipped gods of different names.”

1. Julius Wellhausen, a 19th-century German scholar, developed a theory about Jewish origins (similar to Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theories of human origins) which included a theory about the origin of the Pentateuch known as the *Documentary Hypothesis*. Building on the prior work of Hermann Hupfeld (1853) and Karl Heinrich Graf (1866), in his work entitled *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (or in English *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, Berlin, 1882, available online at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4732>) he argued that the Pentateuch was formed from four different sources: 1. Source J (a source that used the name Jehovah [YHWH] for God); 2. Source E (a source that used the name *Elohim* for God); 3. Source D (the so-called “Deuteronomist” source); and 4. Source P (the so-called “Priestly” source). According to this theory these hypothetical sources were compiled together from 900-400 BC.
2. Like the no alphabet theory, this theory (while still taught in many public universities and cited as fact in some commentaries) is gradually losing any claim to credibility.

Several things have contributed to this, but perhaps the most significant is the work of Umberto Cassuto.

- a. Cassuto was an Italian historian, rabbi, and professor of the Hebrew Bible and Ugaritic literature. In his work, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch: Eight Lectures*. Israel Abrahams, trans. Central Press: Jerusalem, 1941 (available in PDF at: https://web.archive.org/web/20180220033847if/http://www.shalemexpress.co.il/download/Products/29_3_2011_55_29_cas%20gen.pdf) Cassuto conclusively demonstrated that various uses of YHWH and *Elohim* (in isolation and in combinations) have specific conceptual and contextual meanings that can be demonstrated throughout the history of the Hebrew language. This is evidenced in their use in the Pentateuch. This refutes any theory that they were drawn from different sources simply pieced together.
 - b. If this theory was true, these imagined compilers of various sources meshed different sources together into the five books we know as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And yet, in these books we see the phrase “LORD (YHWH) God (*Elohim*)” 47 times (Genesis – 26; Exodus – 13; Deuteronomy – 8). The words “LORD (YHWH)” and “God (*Elohim*)” in the same verse 413 times (Genesis – 37; Exodus – 50; Leviticus – 38; Numbers – 11; Deuteronomy – 277). Are we to believe that these imagined compilers carefully intermingled these different names for God in this way into their compositions from different sources in this way just to avoid detection? That is outlandish!
- C. The “Council” of Jamnia.
- “The Old Testament canon was not closed until a ‘council’ of Jews in the city of Jamnia voted which books to include and exclude.”
1. Jamnia (also called Yavneh or Javneh) was originally a Philistine city that was taken by Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:6). The Babylonian Talmud informs us that even before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70, it had become a seat of learning and study (*Gittin* 56a). After the fall of Jerusalem, it became the meeting place of the Great Sanhedrin (*Rosh Hashana* 31a).
 2. This theory that Jamnia moved from being a seat of learning and judicial meetings to an ecumenical council (of the style practiced in church history by the catholic church and its forerunners) developed from a discussion recorded in the Mishnah over the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. In Rabbinical terminology, touching a scroll on which an inspired book is written is said to “defile the hands.” It is a little unclear where this concept comes from, but it may refer to the sense in which it is holy.
 - a. In *Yadaim* 3:5 various discussions are recorded (that may have occurred at Jamnia) about whether these two books do or do not “defile the hands.”
 - b. From this slim evidence, in 1871, Heinrich Graetz proposed that the Old Testament canon had been closed at Jamnia in AD 90 (*Kohelet oder der solomonische Prediger*, Anhang I, “Der alttestamentliche Kanon und sein Abschluss” [Leipzig: C. F. Winter, 1871], 147–74). This proposal was gradually expanded until an unquestioned consensus developed that began to speak of the “council” or “synod” of Jamnia as a certain thing that had “closed” the Old Testament canon.
 3. While, like the two previous theories, you will sometimes still hear this spoken of as fact, the efforts of a number of scholars to question and properly reframe the discussions at Jamnia have diminished the degree to which this hypothesis is accepted.
 - a. Perhaps most notable among these efforts were the works of Jack P. Lewis, the respected language scholar who was associated with institutional brethren. In his paper, “Jamnia Revisited” (*The Canon Debate*, 146-162) he traces the development of this hypothesis that

led to an unquestioned consensus and surveys the efforts that have been made to reevaluate it.

- b. Notable among his evidence is the fact that Rabbinical sources that predate the discussions recorded in *Yadaim* 3:5 quote Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and other books as Scripture.
4. Yes, there is some evidence that some rabbinical sources held differing views on the inspiration of certain Old Testament biblical books. The same has been true in church history—Luther, called James a “book of straw”). But there is no evidence that a “council” was ever convened at Jamnia or presumed to mandate what was and was not considered a part of the canon.

Conclusion.

If the Bible is inspired it not the mere creation of man, it is the product of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is the revelation of an All-powerful God about His work, His will, and His expectations of us as His creation. To believe that such a God revealed such an important work, we must also recognize that He has done whatever was necessary to complete it, preserve it, and make it accessible to us. Praise be to God!

“All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever” (1 Pet. 1:24-25a)