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## HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE

### Step #3: The Canon of Scripture

Questions about the “canon” of Scripture refer to the determination of which writings should or should not be included in the Bible as “Scripture.” Why did Judaism and Christianity arrive at the listings of “inspired” writings that they did? Were some inspired writings missed in the past? Were some non-inspired works mistakenly included in the canon? Are there more “inspired” materials being produced today, which we fail to recognize because the canon is “closed?” We shall try to answer these questions in this section.

Because the inspired writings appeared over a 1500-year period, during which time other written works appeared as well (Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, pseudo-Acts/Gospels/Apocalypses), it is quite understandable why a “sorting/distinction” process would have to take place. Accordingly, standards had to be determined for such a distinction and this whole process is referred to as “canonization.” The word *canon* (reed) denotes a measuring stick or straight line (“rule of faith” - the standard, authoritative doctrine by which other things are measured).

### *The Hebrew Canon*

While the Hebrews considered their sacred writings to be “Scripture,” they did not refer to them as “canonical”. This term was coined by 4th century A.D. church fathers to distinguish “Scripture” from the many other writings that had surfaced over the years.

The presence of various written works is attested in the Bible books.<sup>1</sup> The OT Scriptures clearly claim to be recording divine communication. YHWH “wrote His words on the stone tablets.”<sup>2</sup> We then read that Moses “wrote”<sup>3</sup> and he also “took the book of the Covenant and read it” (Exodus 24:7) publicly. After this, the Law was to be “publicly read” throughout Israel every seven years (Deuteronomy 31:10:13). Joshua “wrote a copy of the Law” (Joshua 8:32) and wrote additions “in the book of the Law of God” (Joshua 24:26). There are more references to the “book of the Law”<sup>4</sup> and the “Law of Moses.”<sup>5</sup> Samuel “wrote the ordinances of the kingdom in a book” (1Samuel 10:25).

There are several non-canonical source records that were cited by the writers of Bible books, such as the “Book of Jashar” (Joshua 10:13; 2Samuel 1:18) and the prophetic chronicles of kings.<sup>6</sup> After decades of corruption and apostasy, there is mention of discovering the “Book of the Law” in the temple (2Kings 22:8,13) and the “book of the covenant” (2Kings 23:2).

As to the collection and limitation/distinguishing of inspired materials, there is evidence that the OT Prophetic canon was considered closed around 400 B.C. (Zechariah 13:3; 1Maccabees 14:41; 2Baruch 85:3). Several sources indicate that the bulk of OT Writings were collected,

generally agreed upon, and divided into three groups before the appearance of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> The three divisions were: The Law, The Prophets, and the Writings. During the Intertestamental era, there is mention in the apocryphal *Wisdom of Sirach* (49, Prologue, ca. 180 B.C.) of "The Law and the Prophets and the other books of our fathers." The book of first Maccabees refers to attempts to eradicate "the book of the Law" (1Maccabees 1:55-57). Jesus made clear reference to "the Law," the "Law & Prophets,"<sup>8</sup> the "Law, Prophets, & Psalms" (Luke 24:44), as well as the "Book of Psalms" (Luke 20:42) and even included the Psalms as part of the "Law" (John 10:34,35). Jesus testified that "Moses wrote" (John 5:45-47) and also mentioned the "Scriptures of the Prophets" (Matthew 26:56; Acts 13:27; Romans 16:26). The New Testament writings indicate that there was a commonly accepted body of OT writings by Jesus' time (Luke 24:44). Around the time of Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (70 A.D.), there are two separate sources of information about the writings the Jews held sacred. The Dead Sea Scrolls, which were preserved by the Qumran Community (ca. 66-70 A.D.), contained all of the OT books except Esther, along with numerous writings associated with that religious community. Shortly after Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome in 70 A.D., the first century A.D. Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, made clear mention of a well-established canon of Scripture for Judaism,

"I had also the holy books by Titus concession" (Life of Josephus 75)

"we have only twenty-two<sup>9</sup> books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them, five belong to Moses, which contain his laws, and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval was little short of three thousand years...the Prophets...in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life...no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them or take anything from them."(Against Apion 1:8)

Around 90 A.D., with Jerusalem/Temple destroyed, the only functioning center for Judaism in Palestine was a rabbinical academy established at Jamnia/Jabneh. This academy discussed the Jewish canon and agreed with the canon of the 39 books commonly accepted from then on. Questions were raised about Jonah; Ezekiel; Proverbs 26:4,5; Esther; Ecclesiastes; and Song of Solomon, but all were kept.

A post-apostolic Christian scholar, Melito, sought out the exact listing of Jewish Scripture around 170 A.D. and his record of the listing is as follows,

"...to obtain an accurate account of the Ancient Books, as regards their number and arrangement...I accordingly proceeded to the East, and went to the very spot where the things in question were preached and took place; and having made myself accurately acquainted with the books of the Old Testament, I have set them down below, and herewith send you the list. Their names are as follows: - The five books of Moses - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and the four books of Kings, the two of Chronicles, the book of the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon, also called the book of Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Job, the books of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, of the the Twelve contained in a single book, Daniel, Ezekiel, Esdras."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua 1:18; Daniel 9:2; 2 Kings 22:23; Nehemiah 8.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 32:15,16; 34:28?; Deuteronomy 4:13; 9:10; 10:4

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 24:4; Deuteronomy 31:9,22; 31:24; Joshua 8:31,32; John 5:45-47

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 29:21; 30:10; Joshua 1:8; 8:31,34

<sup>5</sup> Joshua 8:32; 23:6; 1Kings 2:3; 2Chronicles 13:18

<sup>6</sup> 1Kings 11:41; 14:19,29; 1Chronicles 29:29; 2Chronicles 9:29; 12:15; 13:22; 16:11; 20:34; 26:22

<sup>7</sup> Prologue of Sirach; 2 Macc. 2:13; LXX and Letter of Aristeas.

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<sup>8</sup> “Law & Prophets” (Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16,29,31; 24:27; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:13,23; Romans 3:21)

<sup>9</sup> Twenty-two books is the number when Ruth is joined to Joshua and Lamentations to Jeremiah, while 24 was also a commonly used Jewish figure.

<sup>10</sup> The Ante Nicene Fathers, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans), Volume VIII, “Remains of the 2nd-3rd Centuries: Fragments IV.” (p. 759). Also cited by Eusebius in H. E. IV:26.13-14.