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2 Kings 22:8, 23:1-3  
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## THE OLDEST TESTAMENT

As we continue in our sermon series on questions for God – this week’s question is, “Hey, God, when and how was the Old Testament formed?”

I am actually glad this question was asked, because, although I knew the basics, I wasn’t as sure as to how it all got put together.

And how that happened is a fascinating story, albeit a complicated one.

The Bible is like a small library that contains many books written by many authors. The word “Bible” actually comes from the Greek word *biblia*, meaning “books.”

It took well over 1000 years for all of these books to be written down, and it was many more years before the list of books now known as the Bible came together in one large book.

It is hard to say whether any Biblical writer knew that what he was writing, we would eventually call God's Word.

The writers of the Book of Kings, for example, knew that they were writing the religious history of Israel and Judah.

But, did they also have a sense that God was speaking through them OR was God's leading them more subtle than that?

Obviously, prophets knew they were writing what God was telling them to write.

However, did they think they were writing only for their immediate audience or did they know they were writing for all generations?

These questions are impossible to answer with any certainty because the writers tell us nothing about their process.

What is important to understand is that these books became part of the biblical canon (cannon is a word from the Greek that means “rule” and means to us, a collection of sacred writings),

...because of those who read them and evaluated their content, not because the writers self-claimed any inspiration for their work.

It can be said that the Old Testament developed in stages and its books were collected in groups.

Before the process of collecting books and putting them in some kind of order took place, individual manuscripts were made and hand-copied and passed among groups.

Of course, before anything in the Bible was written down, people told stories about God and God's relationship with the people we now read about in the Bible.

This stage of passing on stories by word of mouth is known as the oral tradition.

This stage of relating stories by word of mouth lasted for many years as families passed along the stories of their ancestors to each new generation.

The earliest literature of the Jewish people may date as far back as the time of Moses or earlier (about 1300 B.C.), while other literature found in the Old Testament (for instance Daniel) may have been written as late as the second century B.C.

That means the literature collected that would become the Old Testament was written during a period of nearly 1,200 years!

While the writing of Hebrew manuscripts was taking place, the process of collecting and editing was also going on.

One important collection of books was called "The Law," which included the first five books of the Bible.

"The Law" is also called by its Hebrew name, *Torah*, and by the name *Pentateuch* which is the Greek term for a five-volume book.

A second collection was called "The Prophets." In the Jewish Bible, this collection includes certain books that Christians would call "history books."

The last major group of books to be collected were simply called "The Writings."

They contain books of poetry and wise sayings, and books that Christians would consider prophetic or historical in nature.

The Hebrew word for Bible is *Tanak*, which is an acronym, or a word made from the first letters of the Hebrew words for each of the three aforementioned main sections: Torah (the Law), Nevi'im (The Prophets), and Kethuvim (The Writings).

The first five books of the bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) were the first to be accepted as canonical.

We're not sure when this occurred, but most scholars believe it was probably during the fifth century before Christ.

Of course, the Hebrews had the "Law" for many centuries already, but it was probably the work of the King Josiah that restored it to general use and fixed it once and for all as authoritative.

How about the rest of the Old Testament? The prophets' writings were also not brought together in a single form until about 200 BC.

The remaining Old Testament books were adopted as canonical even later. The complete Old Testament list probably not finally fixed much before the birth of Christ.

Early Jewish lists 24 as the number of books for the Hebrew Bible. This number differs from the Christian list because Christians split a few of the larger books in two (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings).

Also, 12 relatively small books by prophets were counted as one book by the Jews. They are known as the "minor prophets" and were the books we studied last summer.

Ancient writing materials consisted of many things before our modern type book evolved. Stone, clay, wood, pottery, leather, and papyrus were commonly used at different periods as material upon which to write.

Leather (animal skins) was the primary material used by the early Hebrews and papyrus (plant material) appears to have been widespread by 500 B. C.

Papyrus sheets were sometimes joined together (top and bottom), thus, the papyrus roll had an average length of about 30 feet long and nine to ten inches wide.

The Papyrus roll (so called because when not in use, it was rolled up) was simply laid down, usually on the floor or ground, and rolled out to be read.

In the first or second century A.D. the papyrus roll began to be replaced by what is known as the papyrus codex.

The codex manuscript is what we know today as a book, papyrus sheets placed together in the form of a book, instead of a roll).

Israel's reverence of the Word spurred them to create a copying system to preserve the Old Testament that is truly amazing! They understood it would be very easy to make copying mistakes.

They solved the problem of human errors creeping into the text by creating a set of copying rules.

For example, one copy rule was to count the number of words of a completed scroll and compare it with the original.

Another was that every line on a given page had to be the same in number of words, etc. as the original. And then when a copy was completed, another person was required to verify the middle letter of both the original and the copy were the same.

The Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek around 150 B.C. It is called the Septuagint, which is the Greek word for seventy.

The legend of how the Septuagint came to be, and how it got its name is told in a document called the "Letter of Aristeas."

The legend says that seventy scholars began translating the Jewish Scriptures from Hebrew, all at the same time.

They all finished at the same time, in seventy days, and that all seventy scholars discovered that their translations were exactly the same! (remember, it is a legend!)

This Greek version of the Bible was used by Jewish people scattered throughout the Roman world, because most of them spoke Greek instead of Hebrew.

Today, around Palestine, the Jewish Scripture is exactly what Protestants today call the Old Testament.

Outside the Holy Land some Jews include twelve to fifteen other books as part of Scripture.

The Septuagint contains these books that we now call the Apocrypha. (Apocrypha means “those hidden away.”)

Early Christians differed over whether these extra books should be considered Scripture or not. Those nearest Palestine tended to exclude them. Those closer to Rome tended to include them.

During the sixteenth-century Reformation, Martin Luther spoke strongly against the Apocrypha.

In reaction, the Roman Catholic Church convened a council in Trent (in present day Italy), where they declared the Apocrypha to be canonical.

To this day Catholics and Protestants disagree on this issue. Catholics uphold the Apocrypha. Protestants believe that the Apocrypha is useful but not inspired.

Both objective and subjective criteria were part of the process of canonization. Some or all of the following considerations led to the acceptance of the works into the Canon:

First, the document needed to be attributed to a writer who lived before 400 B.C.

In order for a document to be included in the Jewish category of inspired writings, it had to be associated with the period when people were still receiving messages from God.

After the fourth century B.C., the common belief that the prophetic age was over created a natural skepticism toward materials known to have been written after that date.

Second, the document should have received wide acceptance throughout the Jewish community.

The fact that the material was transmitted and reused in an oral age when written messages were not the norm gave the surviving material added credibility.

Third, the documents needed to be originally written in Hebrew. And finally, the writing should carry an authoritative message.

In A.D. 90, a Jewish synod called the "Council of Jamnia" met around and discussed the works which were considered authoritative from a Jewish perspective.

Although this council probably did not originate or resolve the issue, several works which were eventually given full Canonical status were seriously questioned.

The extreme pessimism of Ecclesiastes was deemed ungodlike. Song of Solomon was full of erotic imagery. And some questioned the validity of the book of Esther as it never mentions the name of God.

Another interesting fact: When the books of the Bible were originally written, they did not contain chapters or verses. For example, it is much easier to find "John 3:16" than it is to find "for God so loved the world..."

And so, to help us find Scriptures more quickly and easily, the Bible was divided into chapters in 1227 and into verses in 1448.

The chapter divisions we commonly use today were developed by Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Wycliffe English Bible of 1382 was the first Bible to use this chapter pattern. Since the Wycliffe Bible, nearly all Bible translations have followed Langton's chapter divisions.

And the Hebrew Old Testament was divided into verses by a Jewish rabbi by the name of Mordacai Nathan about two hundred years later.

Let me close with some interesting facts about the Old Testament.

### **OT books referred to in the NT**

Isaiah referred to 419 times in 23 New Testament books; Psalms, 414 times in 23 books; Genesis, 260 times in 21 books; Exodus, 250 times in 19 books; Deuteronomy, 208 times in 21 books.

**Men most mentioned in the Bible:**

David, mentioned 1118 times; Moses, 740; Aaron, 339; Saul, 338; Abraham, 306.

**Statistics regarding the Hebrew Bible** (the Old Testament):

39 books. 929 chapters. 23, 214 verses. 593, 493 words.

Longest book, Psalms.

Shortest book, Obadiah.

Although we often ignore the Old Testament, it was the culmination of many, many, writers, who lived many, many years apart, and spoke their truth about God.

I hope as we deepen our understanding of the Old Testament it will help us understand the New – which we will be looking at next week.

*Amen*