

HOW DID THE OLD TESTAMENT COME TO US?

Works Cited:

- McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell. 2017. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Beckwith, Roger T. *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism*. Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2008.
- Barry, John D., et. al., eds. 2016. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

A QUESTION OF CANON

The word *canon* comes from the root word *reed* (English word *cane*, Hebrew form *ganeh*, and Greek form *kanon*). The reed was used as a measuring rod and came to mean “standard.”¹

- The evidence clearly supports the theory that the Hebrew canon was established well before the late first century AD, more than likely as early as the fourth century BC and certainly no later than 150 BC. A major reason for this conclusion comes from the Jews themselves, who from the fourth century BC onward were convinced that “the voice of God had ceased to speak directly.” In other words, the prophetic voices had been stilled. No word from God meant no *new* Word of God. Without prophets, there can be no scriptural revelation.²
- The three divisions are the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Here are the main categories of the Hebrew canon found in modern editions of the Jewish Old Testament.
 - The Law (Torah): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
 - The Prophets (Nebhim): Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings (former prophets), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve (latter prophets)
 - The Writings (*Kethubhim* or *Hagiographa* [Greek]): Psalms, Proverbs, Job (poetical books), Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles (historical books)

Tanakh (תנ"ך, *ta'nakh*). Also spelled Tanach. The Hebrew name for the Hebrew Bible. The term is an acronym for the three major divisions of the Hebrew Bible: the Torah (Law), the Nebhim (Prophets), and the Kethubim (Writings).³

¹ McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell. 2017. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

² McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.

³ Barry, John D., et. al., eds. 2016. “Tanakh.” In *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

HAVE THE OT MANUSCRIPTS BEEN TRANSMITTED RELIABLY?

The Methods and Principles of Jewish Scribes

A. The History of Scribal Activity

1. *Early Evidence of Scribal Activity*

A formal group of scribes, the *sopherim*, known from rabbinic sources and the New Testament writings, may have originated with, or around the time of, Ezra.

Five scribal traditions that stand out from the time of Ezra in the fifth century BC to the end of the Masoretic era in the early twelfth century AD:

- (1) the scribal community at *Qumran*,
- (2) the scribes that produced the earlier paleo-Hebrew (a type of script) scrolls,
- (3) the school that preceded the *Masoretic Text*,
- (4) the medieval Masoretic scribal families, and
- (5) the medieval scribes that produced the Samaritan Pentateuch.

2. *The Chronology of Scribal Function*

Scholars have come to the following four conclusions concerning the earlier biblical texts

- The earliest biblical texts would have been written in a paleo-Hebrew script similar to that of other Semitic languages active in Iron Age Syro-Palestine (c. 1200 to 500 BC).
- While it is likely that a *scripto continua* (continuous writing) was used, some evidence shows that spaces and markers between words were in effect
- In the earliest periods of Iron Age transmission, texts were likely written on stone, clay tablets, wood, pottery, or even metal (e.g., Silver Amulets) and eventually replaced by scrolls made of either papyri or leather (cf. Jer. 36:2).
- Internal evidence seems to imply that these earlier texts would have been revered and maintained by scribes of the Levitical priestly caste.

⁷ McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.

- Further safeguards and protocols that aided in the preservation and transmission of the biblical texts:
 - Only parchments made from clean animals were allowed; these were to be joined together with thread from clean animals.
 - Each written column of the scroll was to have no fewer than forty-eight and no more than sixty lines whose breadth must consist of thirty letters.
 - The page was first to be lined, from which the letters were to be suspended.
 - The ink was to be black, prepared according to a specific recipe.
 - No word or letter was to be written from memory.
 - There was to be the space of a hair between each consonant and the space of a small consonant between each word, as well as several other spacing rules.
 - The scribe must wash himself entirely and be in full Jewish dress before beginning to copy the scroll.
 - He could not write the name Yahweh with a newly dipped brush, nor take notice of anyone, even a king, while writing this sacred name.
 - Later an entire tractate (a treatise) was devoted to the proper procedure for preparing a sacred scroll and included even more rules intended to assure an accurate text.

2. *Communities, Their Texts, and the Authority of Scripture*

- Variations that exist among different scribal communities active from the third century BC to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 need not be of great concern.
- The differences between the Judean Desert texts and Masoretic texts, although numerous, are frequently very slight, often ones that do not affect the meaning of the text for most purposes (e.g., spelling changes, omission, or addition of a conjunction).

- Its internal consistency clearly attests to the care, precision, and systematic rigor with which the Masoretic scribes copied the manuscripts;

- It provides the primary textual witness by which all other textual witnesses are measured.

The late classical biblical scholar Sir Frederic Kenyon surmised,

“The great, indeed all-important, question which now meets us is this—Does this Hebrew text, which we call Massoretic, and which we have shown to descend from a text drawn up about AD 100, faithfully represent the Hebrew text as originally written by the authors of the Old Testament books?”

The answer to Kenyon’s question came eight years later with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at the caves of Qumran in 1947.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls are very ancient indeed: the earliest ones found at Qumran date from about 250 BC or a little earlier; the latest were copied shortly before the destruction of the Qumran site by the Romans in AD 68.

B. The Non-Hebrew Sources

The Septuagint (LXX)

After the conquest of the Middle East by Alexander the Great (c. 330 BC), Greek became the *lingua franca* extending from Egypt in the east through Palestine, all the way to the region of Persia. At some point it became the dominant language of Hellenized Jewish communities, thus prompting the translation of the Hebrew-Aramaic manuscripts into Greek.

The content of the LXX differs from the Hebrew Old Testament in two respects: (1) number and order of books (issues relating to canonicity); and (2) variants within each book (an issue relating to textual criticism). The LXX contains additional books not found in the Hebrew tradition, some of which are preserved in Roman Catholic Bibles and normally referred to as the Apocrypha.

A. Oral Transmission in ANE Cultures

Widespread literacy is a relatively modern phenomenon.

Ancient Israel was primarily an oral culture.

Orally composed literature should not be caricatured as rustic or unsophisticated.

Our ears can be very demanding about the precise transmission of treasured traditions, and that would have been even more the case in a society in which oral transmission of tradition was the norm.

B. The Bible as Text

The Bible—that is, the collection of canonized books of the Bible as we have come to know them—was produced between the fifth century BC and the fourth century AD. This does not mean, however, that biblical literature was first composed or written down during this period

Strong evidence demonstrates that scribal writing existed long before this period, even among less advanced ANE cultures.

From this we can conclude plausibly that versions of the original biblical narratives existed, having been written as early as the late Bronze and early Iron Ages.

C. Archaeology and the Old Testament

We have a consistent level of good, fact-based correlations right through from circa 2000 BC (with earlier roots) down to 400 BC.

D. The New Testament View of the Old Testament

It is undeniable that Jesus himself, and the New Testament writers, considered the writings of the Old Testament both *inspired* by God and *authoritative* for their respective communities.

1. Jesus' View of the Old Testament

Both Jesus and his opponents knew and relied upon the Scriptures as determinative in disputes.

Both the Pharisees and Jesus assume the questions they are discussing are to be answered from the scriptures.

John 5:45–47 (ESV)

⁴⁵ Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶ For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for *he wrote of me*. ⁴⁷ But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

John 7:23 (ESV)

²³ If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that *the law of Moses* may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well?

2. New Testament Authors' View of the Old Testament

The Christians believed that the whole story of God's plans and purposes for Israel developed in the OT Scriptures had reached its completion in the life and work of Jesus.

There can be no question that the OT Scriptures were viewed by the earliest church as an authoritative source for Christian faith and life.

Mark 12:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ "Teacher, *Moses wrote* for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.

Luke 2:22 (ESV)

²² And when the time came for their purification according to *the Law of Moses*, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord

Luke 20:28 (ESV)

²⁸ and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, *Moses wrote* for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.

John 1:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ For *the law was given through Moses*; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John 1:45 (ESV)

⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found *him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote*, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

John 8:5 (ESV)

⁵ Now *in the Law, Moses commanded* us to stone such women. So what do you say?"

John 9:29 (ESV)

²⁹ We know that *God has spoken to Moses*, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

From this we can reasonably conclude that Jesus, the New Testament authors, and the early Christian Church viewed the Old Testament as inspired by God, originally written by or spoken through the prophets, and accurately transmitted through the generations to the time of Jesus Christ himself.

The Titles of the Canon – Chapter 3 (Beckwith, The OT Canon of the NT Church)⁸

- “Many titles and brief descriptions of the collection of inspired books which constituted the Jewish Bible or canon are already found in or before the first century AD.” (105)
- “Some of these names may have been peculiar to individual writers or teachers, while others were clearly in common use.” (105)
- Some of the common titles used for the collection of scriptures known as the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament to us were “the Law and the Prophets,” “Moses and the Prophets,” and “the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms” among others. (105)
- “The threefold structure of the Old Testament canon is clearly reflected in a post-Resurrection saying of Jesus’s recorded by Luke...He addresses his disciples as follows: ‘These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was yet with you, how that all things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and Psalms concerning me’ (Luke 24.44).” (111)

E. Is the Old Testament Authoritative?⁹

Based on the evidence given, it is reasonable to conclude the following: (1) The text of the Hebrew Bible was copied with a high degree of accuracy from the time of the first century AD through the MT to our present day exemplars; (2) while numerous textual traditions existed in the Second Temple Period, this would not have been a stumbling block for the overall view of the authority of the biblical books as this pluriformity was both fully acknowledged and accepted; (3) the identifiable variants between the primary textual traditions (e.g., MT, LXX, DSS) bear little significance to the core theological truths and historical accuracy contained within each text; and (4) the content of the textual witnesses of the Hebrew Bible correlate to the periods of antiquity in which they were supposedly written.

In conclusion, the words of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy seem especially appropriate:

⁸ Beckwith, Roger T. *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism*. Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2008.

⁹ McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell. 2017. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.