

How the Bible Came to Us - #3

The Formation of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles

1. As we have already noted, the Hebrew writings were formed or written between 1500 B.C. and 400 B.C. By contrast, the Christian Scriptures were all written between about A.D. 45 and A.D. 95 or 100. The earlier, handwritten copies of Old Testament books were largely written on scrolls. By contrast, the New Testament Letters and Gospels, etc. were probably initially written on codices. A codex was a thin papyrus book made of pages glued together at the binding. Eventually, both Hebrew groups and Christian groups felt it was necessary to distinguish between those books which they considered authoritative and those which they did not consider authoritative. That process took place for both Hebrew groups and Christian groups during a relatively short period of time, from about A.D. 100 to A.D. 300.
2. Why was that process—of deciding which books were authoritative—important? Some religious groups do not have sacred writings. However, the sacred writings of the Jews and Christians were used in worship services and were regarded as authoritative sources of information for doctrine and for practice.
3. Among the Hebrew people, the Pharisaic tradition became dominant after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. That meant that not only the Hebrew *Tanakh* but also the oral traditions, represented by the Babylonian Talmud and the Palestinian Talmud, were considered as authoritative.
4. Among Christians, there were certain issues that significantly delayed the final decision about which books were to be included. Some of those issues have not been resolved even today.
5. Let us review some of the major factors involved in the formation of the **Jewish Canon**.
 - 1) Although there was some variation between the different sects of Judaism, by and large, common usage had determined which books would be included in the Jewish Canon before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70.
 - 2) After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70, the Jewish people lost their central focus point—the Temple, including the sacrificial system. What was left that represented the “center” of their religion was Scripture—*Tanakh*, the “Old Testament.”
 - 3) Three of the major competing sects of Judaism were essentially destroyed, leaving Pharisaism as the dominant religious group. The community of the Essenes was destroyed. The Sadducees lost their reason for existence when the Temple was destroyed. The Zealots lost to the Romans and, in turn, were destroyed.
6. As Christianity exploded and became predominately a Gentile religion, the Jews responded by setting very strict bounds around Judaism.
 - 1) For many years, Christians and Jews in the Diaspora fought over who would be the primary owner of the Septuagint or Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures. As Christianity became more and more widespread, Jews finally rejected the Septuagint and returned to their Hebrew Scriptures as the sole authority for their religion. Other translations of the Hebrew Scriptures made by Theodotion, Aquila, and Symmachus did not rise to major importance among the Jewish people.

- 2) Some Christian groups adopted certain apocryphal writings which they added to the Septuagint (*LXX*) that they were using. That led to the rejection of the Greek Scriptures by the Jewish people.
7. During the years between the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the final destruction of the Jewish nation in the Bar Kockba revolt in A.D. 135, the fundamental decisions regarding the Hebrew Canon were made.
- 1) A great deal has been said about a council which took place around A.D. 90 among Jewish rabbis to determine what should be included in their Scripture. In fact, they probably only put a rubber stamp on what had already been decided by the community.
 - 2) In any case, by around A.D. 150, the Hebrew *Tanakh*, or Scripture had been formed, much as we know it today. There were 24 books in all—22 (there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet) if Ruth is put with Judges and Lamentations is put with Jeremiah. They were divided as follows:
 - a) *Torah*, or *the Law*: the five books of Moses.
 - b) *Neviim*, or *the Prophets*: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the 12 minor prophets—Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi—as a single book.
 - c) The *Ketuvim*, or *the Sacred Writings*: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Five books of *the Sacred Writings* were often grouped as the *Megilloth*: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), and Esther.
8. When we turn to the **Christian** Scriptures, called the New Testament, the process of deciding which books were authoritative took place very early but was accomplished with considerable conflict.
- a) The early stages of this process were completely natural. Church groups who received letters from apostles shared them with other church groups. Thus, a collection of writings was built up.
 - b) Differences of opinion about certain doctrines resulted in a difference of opinion about which books should be included.
 - 1) On one side, authors such as Tatian and Marcion wanted to leave out books that they were not comfortable with, thus limiting the size of the New Testament.
 - 2) In conflict with that view, Gnostic teachers sought an expansion of authoritative compositions. They wanted to add a number of Gnostic writings to the New Testament.
 - 3) The fundamental differences of opinion were over the conflict between soul and body—as it was “pushed” by the Gnostics—and the importance of a Creator-God.
9. Other teachers, such as Tertullian and Irenaeus of Lyon, pushed for a defined collection of writings which could be used to determine doctrinal points.
- 1) Irenaeus set up a three-fold definition of Christianity: the rule of faith, the Canon of Scripture, and apostolic succession.

- 2) Very important to his premise was the inclusion of the “Old Testament,” or Hebrew Bible, as the authoritative basis for the work of God to be continued through the ministry, life, and death of Jesus.
- 3) A fragmentary list, known as the Muratorian Canon, from the late 2nd century and probably written from Rome, illustrates the fact that many of the New Testament books were already formalized. However, there were still some which were not agreed upon.
10. About a century later, early in the 4th century, Eusebius and Athanasius defined the Christian Bible, and that was confirmed at the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397.
- 1) The New Testament consisted of 27 books:
- a) The Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John.
 - b) The Acts of the Apostles
 - c) The 14 letters of Paul (Hebrews was counted among them), the letters of James, Jude, Peter (2), and John (3).
 - d) The Revelation of John.
- 2) The Old Testament consisted of *the Sacred Writings* included in the Septuagint (LXX). Those are made up of *the Sacred Writings* of the *Tanakh* plus Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, and first and second Maccabees.
11. So we see that in the process of determining their individual Canons, both Judaism and Christianity defined themselves.
- 1) Among Jews, the writings of the *Torah* or *Tanakh* were read liturgically and honored as authoritative. But they recognized that the voice of God continued to speak through tradition.
- a) By around A.D. 200, the Mishnah had been formalized.
 - b) Between A.D. 200 and 600, the Babylonian Talmud and the Palestinian Talmud were developed and agreed upon.
- 2) Among Christians, Scripture played a dominant role in church services. It also served as “ammunition” in the ongoing debates over doctrine.
- a) By including the “Old Testament” in their authoritative Scriptures, they invited an often rancorous debate with Jewish scholars about what those Old Testament Scriptures really meant and what books they should include.
 - b) The newly-formed Bible served as a source for “proof texts” which were used as “weapons” in the long debates between various rival Christian groups.
12. In light of this history, which Old Testament source do you think has more authority: the Hebrew *Tanakh* or the Christian Septuagint?

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