

Old Testament Canon

An Introduction to the Hebrew Canon

by Daniel Stanfield, 2024.

Part I: Written and Oral Torah, Mishna and Talmud

Torah means "instruction/teaching/revelation" and there is both a **Written** Torah and an **Oral** Torah.

The Oral Torah refers to instruction given verbally by Moses and others. The memorized Oral Torah is the source of the **Mishna** (or Mishnah, AD 200), a written form of the Oral Torah. There are also two **Talmud**, which are authoritative commentaries on the Mishna, the Jerusalem Talmud (AD 400) and the Babylonian Talmud (AD 600).

Note that the Oral Torah was not yet codified into the Mishna during the time of Christ, but the verbal traditional instructions were taught with the same authority as the Written Torah.

The Written Torah

The word Torah can refer to the whole Hebrew Bible, but specifically refers to the Pentateuch. A better term for the whole Hebrew canon is the "**Tanakh**."

"Tanakh" is an acronym for the three sections of the Hebrew Bible.

TaNaKh = **T**orah, the **N**evi'im, and the **K**etuvim.

Part II: The Hebrew Canon

The **Hebrew canon** is identical in content to the **Protestant canon** of the Old Testament. There are differences in arrangement and some books are combined together. The Books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are each comprised of both volumes, and Ezra is comprised of both Ezra and Nehemiah.

- **Torah (Law):** Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy

- **Nevi'im (Prophets):**

- The Former Prophets - Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings
- The Latter Prophets - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel
- The Twelve - Hosea, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

- **Ketuvim (Writings):**

- Sifrei Emet (Poetic Books) - Psalms, Proverbs, and Job
- Five Megillot (Five Scrolls) - Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther
- Daniel
- Ezra (includes Nehemiah)
- Chronicles

As far as Canon establishment goes, the **Law** was always considered closed-canon, the **Prophets** seem to have been established by Ezra as part of the restoration of Israel from Babylonia, but by all accounts is considered closed by no later than 200 BC.

The **Writings** do not seem to have been held to be closed canon, but as an open canon, or separate category. As Ezra was establishing (or reestablishing) the canon of the Prophets, he himself was writing Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Chronicles, all of which are part of the Writings. Daniel, Esther, and some of the Psalms were still recent additions generally contemporary to Ezra. Other Writings including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Song of Songs were all poetic Books, and Ruth and Esther have romantic natures. None of the Writings except Daniel have the format of "thus saith the Lord to the prophet," which is the common format for the majority of the Pentateuch.

and all of the Prophets. Closed canon for the Writings, and the establishment of the whole Old Testament canon was formally addressed at the Synod of Jamnia between AD 70-100, and established no later than AD 200.

The Close of the full Rabbinic canon is defined to AD 600 with the publication of the Babylonian Talmud. Note that Gentile believers have never held either the Mishna or Talmud to be Scripture or authoritative to non-Jews.

Part III: Introduction to The Apocrypha

The Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and the various Oriental Orthodox churches add what we call the apocrypha and they call the deuterocanonical books (and chapters) - all of which are Old Testament, none of which are included in Masoretic texts, but come from the Septuagint. It is worth noting that these denominational canons differ from one another in which of these apocryphal books they included in their canon.

The primary manuscripts which use the Septuagint for the Old Testament and which include some or all of these books are the Codexes Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Venetus. Distinctively, Jerome's Latin Vulgate included them, but he refused to integrate them, adding them as an appendix.

Historically, neither the Jews or Christians accepted any of these books as Scripture, but considered them to be of historical and/or spiritual values. They were rejected from the Hebrew canon as formed around A.D. 100, and most of the early church fathers concurred. The Syrian version omits them, both Jerome and Luther separated them out, Luther giving them the title of "Apocrypha", meaning "secret" or "hidden". Coverdale was the first to distinctly separate the Apocrypha in the English Bible, and the Catholic Church did not establish them as authoritative until 1546 at the Council of Trent.

Which religions use which of these books?

Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches

Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah (often considered part of Baruch), Additions to Daniel, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees

Additions of the Eastern Orthodox Church

1 Esdras, Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, 3 Maccabees 4 Maccabees

Additions of various other religions

Jubilees, 1 Enoch, Book of Josippon, 1 and 2 Esdras, 3 Maccabees, 4 Baruch (Paralipomena of Jeremiah)

Source Notes: For Part I and Part II of this article, my primary sources were "Introduction to Rabbinic Literature" by Jacob Neusner (1994), "An Introduction to Early Judaism" by James C Vanderkam (2001), and "Back to the Sources" by Barry W Holtz (1984).

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