

# Canons of the Hebrew Bible

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As children, many of us Protestant Christians struggled in Sunday School class or in Vacation Bible School to remember all the books of the Bible in order. We even sang songs to help us remember whether Proverbs came before or after Psalms or where Hebrews was located. It never occurred to us that there might be more than one way to arrange the books of the Bible, or even that there might be more books in some Christian's Bibles than we had in ours! It was just, well, the Bible.

As accustomed as many of us are to seeing the books of the Bible in a certain arrangement, it is easy to forget that such arrangement is the product of a certain religious tradition, and that other religious traditions might have other ways of seeing the biblical books. For some, their own particular arrangement or selection of books to include is just the truth of the matter, and they will defend their own tradition's perspective. Others see the authority of Scripture as partly a function of use within the community of Faith over the centuries, and therefore place more emphasis on the message of Scripture rather than the particular books.

In any case, the issue here is the nature of the *canon*, the authoritative collection of books that we generally call Scripture. The word **canon** comes from a Greek word that means "standard" or "measurement." It simply refers to the list of writings that are considered authoritative within a religious group.

There was no "official" canon for either Judaism or Christianity until tensions between the two traditions forced the official lists to be made. The Jewish canon is usually associated with the Council of Jamnia around AD 90, while the Christian canon was not defined until the fourth century and could still be debated in the 16th century. Generally, for the Old Testament books the Christian tradition simply accepted the Jewish collection of books that were considered authoritative by their use in the community. However, since the Jewish canon was not officially set, some books were in use within Judaism that had not yet reached the status of being authoritative. That fact allowed different branches of the Christian church to take slightly different views of some of these books, primarily those that dated to the intertestamental period of the first three centuries BC. For example, some writings were accepted in the Western Church that were not as readily accepted in the Eastern churches.

The Christian churches tended to follow the arrangement of Old Testament books within the third century BC Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint. These were basically arranged topically, with the so-called "**law**" books first, followed by **historical** books, and ending with the **prophetic collection**. This arrangement fit well not only with the categorical thinking influenced by Greek philosophy, it also fit theologically with the role of prophets understood in the early church. Ending the Old Testament canon with the prophets, understood as predictors of the future, set the backdrop for the New Testament writings..

However, the Jewish tradition chose a more theological organization for the Old Testament canon. There is debate as to whether this was the retention of an older arrangement or was a deliberate attempt to distance itself from the Christian canon. In any case, the arrangement reflected the relative status of the three major divisions of the Hebrew canon. **The Torah** was the primary foundation of the community. **The Prophets** both Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) and Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Book of the Twelve), were the practical outworking of those foundational tenets. **The Writings** were the reflective and liturgical dimensions of the tradition. This difference in approaches to the canon explains the different order of books between the Jewish and Christian versions of the Hebrew Bible.

In both Judaism and Christianity, there were a great number of writings circulating within the various communities in addition to what we think of as the biblical books. Generally in Judaism, in spite of some

other writings appearing in the third century BC Greek translation, only the books that had gained authoritative status prior to the third century BC were accepted as part of the Jewish canon. This left out most of the apocalyptic works that flourished in the 200 years before Christ. An exception to this may be the Book of Daniel, which some scholars date to around 165 BC, a product of the Maccabean Wars.

However the Christian tradition was more open to these books. Over time, the Christian communities came to acknowledge some of these as authoritative while others, though helpful, were not authoritative. This resulted in the later Roman Catholic tradition accepting as authoritative those second and first century BC books known as the **Apocrypha**. These were included in the Catholic canon, although usually recognized as Deutro-canonical or a second canon, acknowledging them to be, at least in theory, of lesser status. However, during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, the Reformers rejected these apocryphal books entirely and so they are not included in the Protestant canon. Several other New Testament books were challenged by the Reformers, such as Hebrews and the book of James, but they were eventually fully accepted. The New Testament canon is virtually identical in all branches of Christianity.

Still, these differences in the Old Testament canon between traditions should not obscure the fact that the canon of the Old Testament is very similar for both Christians and Jews, as well as for different groups within Christianity. It is helpful to understand the differences and the reasons for them. But there probably should be more attention paid to the similarities, and the implications that has for understanding the Bible as Scripture for the Church.

### **Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal books are in *Italics***

<b>Jewish</b>	<b>Catholic/Orthodox</b>	<b>Protestant</b>
<b>Torah</b>	<b>Pentateuch</b>	<b>Pentateuch</b>
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy
<b>Prophets (Former)</b>	<b>Historical Books</b>	<b>Historical Books</b>
Joshua Judges  1-2 Samuel (1-2 Kings) <sup>1</sup> 1-2 Kings (3-4 Kings)	Joshua Judges Ruth 1-2 Kings (1-2 Samuel) <sup>1</sup> 3-4 Kings (1-2 Kings) 1-2 Chronicles Ezra (1 Esdras) <sup>2</sup> Nehemiah (2 Esdras) <sup>2</sup> <i>Tobit</i> <i>Judith</i> Esther* <i>adds: Additions to Esther</i> <i>1-2 Maccabees</i> <sup>3</sup>	Joshua Judges Ruth 1-2 Samuel (1-2 Kings) <sup>1</sup> 1-2 Kings (3-4 Kings) 1-2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah  Esther
<b>Prophets (Latter)</b>		
Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel Book of the Twelve <sup>4</sup>		

<b>The Writings</b>	<b>Wisdom Books</b>	<b>Poetic Books</b>
<b>Psalms</b> <b>Proverbs</b> <b>Job</b> <b>Song of Songs</b> <b>Ruth</b> <b>Lamentations</b> <b>Ecclesiastes</b> <b>Esther</b> <b>Daniel</b> <b>Ezra</b> <b>Nehemiah</b> <b>1-2 Chronicles</b>	<b>Job</b> <b>Psalms</b> <b>Proverbs</b> <b>Ecclesiastes</b> <b>Song of Songs</b>  <i>Wisdom of Solomon</i> <i>Ecclesiasticus</i> <sup>5</sup>	<b>Job</b> <b>Psalms</b> <b>Proverbs</b> <b>Ecclesiastes</b> <b>Song of Songs</b>
	<b>Prophets</b>	<b>Prophets</b>
	<b>Isaiah</b> <b>Jeremiah</b> <b>Lamentations</b> <i>Baruch</i> <b>Ezekiel</b> <b>Daniel*</b> <i>adds: Song of the Three Hebrew Children, Bel and the Dragon, Susanna</i> <b>The Twelve</b> <sup>4</sup>	<b>Isaiah</b> <b>Jeremiah</b> <b>Lamentations</b>  <b>Ezekiel</b> <b>Daniel</b>  <b>The Twelve</b> <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>In the Greek tradition (the Septuagint and some modern traditions that follow the Eastern church tradition), 1 and 2 Samuel are combined with the books of Kings, known as 1-4 Kings. In most Protestant canons of the Western Church, the books are known as 1-2 Samuel (1-2 Kings) and 1-2 Kings (3-4 Kings).

<sup>2</sup>The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally combined into a single book. The combined book, Ezra-Nehemiah, was sometimes referred to as Esdras (Hb: Ezra, Gk: Esdras) but called 1 Esdras in the early Greek translations to distinguish it from another book from the same period (containing 2 Chron 35-36, Neh 7:38-8:12, plus other material not found in the Old Testament) that was also known as Esdras. While this second book was sometimes also called 1 Esdras it later came to be known as 2 Esdras. Still a third pseudepigraphic book of apocalyptic visions entitled Esdras was circulated a little later and was also known as 2 Esdras. After Ezra-Nehemiah was split into two books, Ezra was known as 1 Esdras, Nehemiah as 2 Esdras, the expanded OT version book as 3 Esdras, and the apocalyptic book as 4 Esdras.

<sup>3</sup>There are also a 3 and 4 Maccabees, but these were never considered to be biblical books. The Greek Orthodox Church does not accept 1 and 2 Maccabees.

<sup>4</sup>The Book of the Twelve contains the remaining 12 prophetic books: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. These are sometimes called the Minor Prophets in Christian tradition due to their shorter length, while the longer prophetic books are called the Major Prophets.

<sup>5</sup>Also known as the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira or Sirach.