**Sage Creek Bible Church**

**How We Got Our Scriptures**

**The Canon**

**Worksheet – Version 1**

**Syllabus:**

**At the end of this course, you will be able to:**

**Have a working knowledge of what drove the selection of the Books of the Bible.**

**Be able to articulate to the best of your ability what the Canon is and how it came about.**

**Understand what part this plays in our everyday life.**

**Required materials:**

**Your Bible.**

**Prayer time. Never approach study time in your Bible without praying for wisdom.**

**Strong’s Concordance. If you haven’t used one before, please let the Pastors know that you’d like a quick overview on using one. You can download a free one at** [**http://www.onlinebible.net**](http://www.onlinebible.net) **along with other Bible study materials.**

**How We Got the Old Testament (The Content and Extent of the Old Testament Canon)**

**1 Corinthians 10:11 Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.**

The use of the Old Testament Scriptures by the church has been the subject of debate from the time of the early church fathers to the present.

The debate primarily concerns the question of what writings are truly in the canon of the Old Testament Scriptures.

The word *canon* is from a Greek word that means a "rule" or "standard"; in the second-century Christian church it came to be understood as "revealed truth."1

Yet for some Christians the truth represented a different number of books than for other Christians.

For example, [Augustine] regarded the church to be the custodian of Scripture and thus may easily have concluded that on matters of the extent of the canon the church had the authority to decide . . . Augustine seemed to consider church reception to be sufficient warrant for canonical authority; this he gave as the reason for accepting the Maccabean books as canonical.2

Some held that the canon extended to encompass all the books read in the church for edification, which would include the Apocrypha and sometimes the Pseudipigrapha (a collection of anonymous, apocalyptic writings).

*Define what the author meant by referencing the books of “Pseudipigrapha”.*

*Define what the author meant by referencing the books of “Apocrypha”.*

Others held that the canon represented simply the Jewish Bible, corresponding to the Protestant Bibles of today.3

Not until the age of the Reformation did the debate began to rage.

In 1546 when the Council of Trent made a formal statement that all who did not accept selected Apocryphal writings should be damned, the Protestants responded with an equally resolute voice.

Even today, the question of canonicity remains completely valid.

If there are disputes about what is Scripture, the legitimacy of faith itself is at stake.

As the theologian Roger Beckwith aptly states, "with no canon there is no Bible."4

**The Concept of the Old Testament Canon**

It’s ironic that evangelicals today base their beliefs solely on Scripture, and yet Scripture was recognized by tradition.

The way the canon was regarded in history played an integral role in the canon’s recognition.

The tradition and authority of the people of God throughout history have attested that there was a group of writings, divinely inspired, which were recognizable as such.

The internal evidence of the Old Testament itself affirms its divine origin.

Deuteronomy itself "also reaffirms in Israel the idea of a 'canon,' a collection of written materials by which the life of the nation would be administered."5

**Deuteronomy 31:24 And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished,**

**25 That Moses commanded the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying,**

**26 Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee.**

The believers between the testaments held that there was a known corpus of Scripture, for in their writings they would often refer to it with the authoritative phrases, "as it is written," or "according to Scripture," or "it is written."

In fact, references to almost all of the books of the Old Testament are considered to be Scripture by those of the intertestament and the New Testament eras.

Beckwith says of this period that with the exception of the three short books of Ruth, Song of Songs and Esther, the canonicity of every book of the Hebrew Bible is attested, most of them several times over . . . [It] is very striking that, over a period ranging from the second century BC (at latest) to the first century AD, so many writers, of so many classes (Semitic, Hellenistic, Pharisaic, Essene, Christian), show such agreement about the canon.6

In addition, there are at least twenty-eight documented separate titles for the Old Testament canon, proving that the individual books had become a collection sufficient enough to warrant various titles to the group (canon) as a whole.7

Church history heavily considered what Jesus and the New Testament writers thought about the Old Testament in determining canonicity.

The number of references to the Old Testament by New Testament writers is abundant, and it attests to the fact that there was an established canon at the time of their writing.

Probably the most complete secular evidence (in secular writings) on the concept of a canon resides in the work of Josephus.

Josephus not only understood that a canon existed, but he also listed what he believed that canon was (*Against Apion* 1.7f., or 1.37-43).

This list is identical to the Jewish and Christian canon with the exception of omitting either the Song of Songs or Ecclesiastes.8

Josephus mentioned that there were copies of Scripture in the temple itself, and before its destruction in AD 70 it contained a collection of books.

The Jewish community considered this collection canonical, for "the main test of the canonical reception of a book must have been whether or not it was one of those laid up in the Temple."9

This evidence reveals the fact that the concept of a canon did indeed exist before the beginning of the Christian era.

**The Construct of the Old Testament Canon**

Not only does the literature testify to the concept of a canon existing, but it revealed the construction of that canon as existing in three parts: the Law, the Prophets and the Hagiographa (meaning "holy writings").

*Take a moment to define what the author meant by referencing the books of “Hagiographa”.*

This method of arranging the various books emerged from numerous sources outside the Old Testament itself.

The earliest evidence of the arrangement stems from the prologue to the book *Ecclesiasticus* which specifically mentions on three occasions the three parts of the canon.

The author says, "Many great things have been communicated to us through the Law and the prophets, and the others who followed after . . . my grandfather Jeshua, after devoting himself for a long time to the reading of the Law and the prophets and the other books of our forefathers . . ."

Here the author clearly states that the canon contains three recognized parts; and these parts, having titles and sections, show that by the writer’s time (about 180 BC), the canon was considered closed.

*What is the book “Ecclesiasticus” and why is it not found in our Bible?*

**Luke 24:44 And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.**

Jesus Himself, the most authoritative witness for the Christian, states in Luke 24:44 the three sections of the Old Testament as "the Law of Moses and the Prophets and Psalms."

"Psalms" undoubtedly meant the whole Hagiographa, for Christ often referred to Daniel (which was a part of that third section), as well as the book of Psalms itself.

Philo, a first century AD Egyptian Jew, and the tenth-century Arabian writer al-Masudi both refer to the Hagiographa as the "Psalms."10

**Luke 11:50 That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation;**

**51 From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation.**

**Matthew 23:35 That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.**

Because the Jews placed the book of Chronicles in the Hagiographa, another statement of Jesus alludes to the three sections of the completed canon.

He said in Luke 11:50-51 (also in Matthew 23:35), "the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation; 51 From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation."

**2 Chronicles 24:21 And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the LORD.**

Jesus certainly refers to the Zechariah of 2 Chronicles 24:21.

This is significant, because His statement extends from the first of the three sections (such as Abel in Genesis) to the last of the three sections (Zechariah in Chronicles), implying the inclusion of the second as well.

Christ makes the same point by mentioning the prophets, for prophecy had virtually ended with the composition of 2 Chronicles, written about 400 BC.

Judas Maccabaeus and his associates compiled a list of the Prophets and Hagiographa in 164 BC, at least 250 years prior to the generally assumed date of the closing of the canon (AD 90, at the Council of Jamnia).

The historical book of Second Maccabees 2:14f described it this way: "And in like manner Judas (Maccabaeus) also gathered together for us all those writings that had been scattered by reason of the war that befell, and they are still with us. If therefore ye have need thereof, send some to fetch them unto you."

Beckwith states, Judas knew that the prophetic gift had ceased a long time before (1 Macc. 9:27; cp. Also 4:46; 14:41), so what is more likely than that, in gathering together the scattered scriptures, he and his companions the Hasidim classified the now complete collection in the way which from that time became traditional . . . The manner in which Judas Maccabaeus did his work was presumably by compiling a list, not by combining books in large scrolls . . . If Judas gave such structure to the canon, he must have had a definite collection of writings to work on.11

The Old Testament books, as grouped in the canon, had a recognized order.

Even though that order was different for different people, the fact that the books had order, however arranged, reveals that they were recognized as canonical and that the canon was closed at the time of its ordering.

The number of the books also played a vital role.

The evidence shows that the number of the canonical books was always assumed to be twenty-two or twenty-four.

The books themselves were the same in both groupings, just grouped differently.

"In earlier days they combined Ruth with Judges, and Lamentations with Jeremiah and thus made twenty-two books equivalent to the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet."12

It is "difficult to conceive of those books being counted, and the number being generally accepted and well known, if the canon remained open and the identity of its books uncertain . . . Agreement about their number implies agreement about their identity."13

**The Contents of the Old Testament Canon**

**The Canonical Books**

It makes sense that upon completion of an Old Testament book the book was canonical.

Theoretically this must be true, but actually, a book of Scripture was *considered* to be such by virtue of the authority of the human author.

So while the Pentateuch was completed with the death of Moses and the Prophets and the Hagiographa with its authors, the *recognition* of the canonicity of these books may have been centuries after their actual completion.

*What is the Pentateuch?*

Consequently, as opinions differed, there existed some dispute—largely about five books of the Old Testament, sometimes called the "antilegomena" or the "books spoken against."

These were: Ezekiel, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Esther.

The secular motifs in these books, as well the apparent contradictions with other undisputed canonical books, were the leading cause of concern to some scholars.

But the disputes themselves imply that the books in question were considered canonical, because contradictions in uninspired texts would have been assumed, and therefore, nonexistent.

Some scholars assume that the presence of the dispute proves that the canon was still open and not established until the Council of Jamnia in AD 90.

The motivation behind such an assertion stems from the desire to canonize some Apocryphal as well as some Pseudepigraphical books—books by anonymous authors.

*What part did Pseudepigraphical books play in the Canon?*

Beckwith offers a compelling argument that Ezekiel was not debated.14

He says it was part of the already closed Prophets and not the Hagiographa, which was the subject of debate at Jamnia.

In particular, only the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes were debated.

Indeed only Ecclesiastes was debated according to Rabbi Akiba.

Green quotes Rabbi Akiba from the Talmud regarding the Jewish opinion of the inspiration of the Song of Solomon:

"Silence and Peace! No one in Israel has ever doubted that the Song of Solomon defiles the hands [i.e. is Scripture]. For no day in the history of the world is worth the day when the Song of Solomon was given to Israel. For all the Hagiographa are holy, but the Song of Solomon is a holy of holies. If there has been any dispute, it referred only to Ecclesiastes. . . . So they disputed and they decided."15

And what did they decide?

"'The wise men desired to withdraw (*ganaz*) the Book of Ecclesiastes because its language was often self-contradictory and contradicted the utterances of David.

Why did they not withdraw it?

Because the beginning and the end of it consist of words of the law.' Sabbath 30b."16

The book of Second Esdras shows that Ezra republished the twenty-four books of the inspired law.

"How could such an assertion be made if five of the twenty-four books were known to have been added to the canon about AD 90, only ten years or so earlier?"17

In the end, the Hagiographa triumphed.

Two factors helped, says Pfeiffer:

The first was mere survival.

In ancient times, when books had to be copied laboriously by hand on papyrus or parchment, no literary work could survive for a few centuries unless it had attained considerable circulation. . . . We may wonder, for instance, why Esther should have survived among the Jews, while Judith perished, since the appeal of both was mainly patriotic.18

**The Non-Canonical Books**

The books which were recognized as non-canonical, primarily the books from the Pseudipigrapha and Apocrypha, could not be included in the canon for one reason:

their date is much later than the previously attested date of the closing of the canon recognized by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 BC.

The confusion comes in that many of the books in question are impeccable historical sources and are true in what they say.

But truth does not of necessity constitute a place in the canon.

The books such as First Maccabees, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, and Ecclesiasticus contain great value historically, but value is not enough to warrant canonicity.

Even within the valuable book of Ecclesiasticus lie personal biases Holy Scripture would not commend.

The author, Jesus the son of Sira, reveals a great deal of his personal character as he "not only expresses his views quite frankly on a variety of subjects, making no secret, for instance, of his intense dislike for the fair 'weaker' sex (9:8; 23:22-27. . .)."19

Even Augustine believed in the inspiration of some of the Apocrypha.

Nevertheless, in the heat of the argument, Augustine limits his Old Testament to the Jewish canon when he writes in his tract on "Faith of Things not Seen" appealing to the Scriptures as follows:

"Unless haply unbelieving men judge those things to have been written by Christians, in order that those things which they already believed might have greater weight of authority if they should be thought to have been promised before they came. If they suspect this let them examine carefully the codices of our enemies the Jews. There let them read those things of which we have made mention."20

Harris states,

"Philo . . . evidently accepted the twenty-two Hebrew books, for he quotes from many of them and from them only, as authoritative."21

Saint Jerome, as well as Rufinus, were crystal clear on the matter [of not considering them canonical] but their reaction to the pressure exerted on them indicates that many leaders thought the additional books ought to be recognized as inspired. . . .

Jerome yielded to the popular request in furnishing a translation to the church at large but never permitted his scholarly convictions to yield to the point of recognizing these books as canonical.22

The Essene canon contained some of the Pseudepigrapha which they claimed to be divine.

But most of these writings were midrash (commentary) on canonized books and logically therefore would not be Scripture.

For if the Pseudepigrapha contained a copy of a canonical book as well as commentary on it, why would it not negate the original canonical book, because the Pseudepigrapha with its inspired commentary would be much more valuable?

In addition, "If they were conscious of being inspired, why did they not have the confidence to use their own names?"23

**Jude 14 And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints,**

Even the quote in Jude 14 of First Enoch 1:9 does not require that First Enoch is Scripture.

To quote what is true in Scripture is different than saying that what is quoted *is* Scripture.

**Acts 17:28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.**

Even Paul quoted a pagan poet in [Acts 17:28](https://biblia.com/bible/nlt/Acts%2017.28), but he certainly did not regard it as Scripture but as simply true.

The Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes also all recognized a closed canon and generally saw that prophecy had ceased before the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha were written.

None of the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha were in the canon of the Jews, and it was to this canon that Jesus Himself and the Apostles appealed.

**Implications and Conclusions**

The implications of such a study are twofold.

For those who believe that the writings other than the Jewish and Protestant Old Testament are inspired, there needs to be serious reconsideration.

Jesus Himself implied that the last prophet was Zechariah in the book of Chronicles.

The undisputed value of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha is not the issue—the issue is whether they were ever even candidates for canonicity.

For those who believe the Jewish and Protestant Old Testament, there is the value of comfort and assurance.

The study of canonicity should awaken a deepening devotion to the Scriptures God has seen fit not only to reveal to us but also to uphold and confirm through many different agents.

**Isaiah 40:7 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.**

**8 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.**

1. Walter Bauer and others, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 403.
2. Samuel J. Schultz, "Augustine and the Old Testament Canon," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 112 #447 (July, 1955) 230,  232.
3. Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 2.
4. Beckwith, 5.
5. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III. *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 103.
6. Beckwith, 71, 76.
7. Beckwith, 105-107.
8. Beckwith, 80.
9. Beckwith, 86.
10. Beckwith, 111-112.
11. Beckwith, 152, 165.
12. R. Laird Harris, "Canon of the Old Testament," in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Regency, 1976), 189.
13. Beckwith, 262.
14. Beckwith, 274-275.
15. William H. Green, *General Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon* (London: Murray, 1899), 139.
16. Green, 138.
17. Beckwith, 275.
18. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1948), 62.
19. Pfeiffer, Robert H. *History of New Testament Times with an Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949), 366.
20. Schultz, 228.
21. Harris, 189.
22. Schultz, 231.
23. Beckwith, 359.