

## THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT<sup>1</sup>

- I. Introduction
  - A. “The term canon is derived from a Greek word *kanon*, which means straight rod, straight edge, ruler.”
  - B. The canon is composed of those writings which conform to the rule or standard of divine inspiration.
    - 1. The Hebrew scriptures contain thirty-nine canonical books as accepted by Jews and most Protestants.
    - 2. The Roman church adds to the 39 fourteen additional books commonly called the Apocrypha which also are accepted by them as divine in origin.
  - C. Two questions to consider are:
    - 1. “What makes a book of scripture canonical?”
    - 2. “When were these various books composing the Old Testament considered or accepted as canonical by God’s ancient people?”
- II The Division of the Hebrew Canon
  - A. The Septuagint (LXX) follows a topical arrangement—law, history, poetry and wisdom, and prophecy.
  - B. The Latin Vulgate follows the same order as the LXX with a few exceptions.
  - C. The Protestant Bible follows the topical order of the Latin Vulgate but omits all the apocryphal sections. “In order, the Protestant Bible follows the Vulgate, but in content it follows the Masoretic Text (MT).”
  - D. The MT enumerates the Old Testament books as follows.
    - 1. The Torah (*Pentateuch*)
    - 2. The prophets (*Nebi'im*)—former, latter, major, and minor
    - 3. The writings (*Kethubim*)—poetry and wisdom, the Rolls (*Megilloth*), and historical
  - E. “The order of the books composing the MT represent a later division.”
    - 1. The thirty-nine books were arranged in only twenty-four books at an earlier period.
      - a. Two books—1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Chronicles, 1 and 2 Kings, and Ezra and Nehemiah—were counted as only one book, thus making four books instead of eight.
      - b. The twelve minor prophets were counted as only one book.
    - 2. “Josephus, who wrote near the end of the first century A.D., gives evidence of a twenty-two book canon.”
      - c. The Torah (five books)
      - d. Thirteen prophets
      - e. Four hymns to God and practical precepts to men

---

<sup>1</sup>Adapted and quoted from Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1964), 59ff.

III. The Antilegomena (Books Spoken Against)

- A. Some Jews during the second century A.D. questioned the canonicity of various Old Testament books.
- B. Although these objections did not delay or deny the canonicity of said books, these objections were answered.
  - 1. Ecclesiastes
    - a. Some charged this book with pessimism, Epicureanism, and a denial of an afterlife.
    - b. But the author's purpose reflected in the context of the entire book suggested otherwise.
  - 2. Song of Solomon
    - a. This book was charged with excessive sensuality and eroticism.
    - b. In reply, a figurative interpretation—e.g. the love of God for Israel and later the love of Christ for his church—maintained the book's integrity and deeper spiritual insight.
  - 3. Esther
    - a. The name of God does not appear in this book.
    - b. While difficult to explain, one explanation affirmed the book itself as a record of divine providence working for deliverance of the Jews.
  - 4. Ezekiel
    - a. Disagreement of details between the latter day temple and ritual (chapters 40-48) and the Mosaic tabernacle and Solomonite temple was cause for controversy over this book.
    - b. However, differences were slight, and Ezekiel might be referring to a future temple rather than the second erected by Zerubbabel.
  - 5. Proverbs—a few apparent discrepancies (e.g. Pr. 26:4-5) bothered some.

IV Ancient Witnesses To The Masoretic Canon

- A. Jesus ben Sirach
  - 1. The earliest extant reference to the three main divisions of Hebrew scripture.
  - 2. He cites “the Law and the Prophets and other books of our fathers” in the prologue to Ecclesiasticus (ca. 190 B.C.).
- B. 1 Maccabees (ca. 130 B.C.)
  - 1. Refers to Daniel (1 Mac. 2:59-60) which belongs to the *Kethubim*.
  - 2. Quotes from Psalm 79:2-3 (1 Mac. 7:17) also in the *Kethubim*.
- C. New Testament
- D. Josephus of Jerusalem (A.D. 37-95)
  - 1. In *Contra Apionem* he acknowledges twenty-two divine books.
  - 2. He affirms the three-part division of Hebrew scripture as found in the MT. The latest date of any canonical writing was 464-424 B.C., the reign of Artaxerxes, son of Xerxes. No material of those twenty-two books was added during the time from Malachi to Josephus (425 B.C. to A.D. 90).
- E. Other witnesses include Melito of Sardis, Origen, Tertullian, and Jerome.