

## The “Three Stage” Theory of the Old Testament Canon:

### The Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew canon contains 24 books divided into three areas: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings.

The Law	The Prophets		The Writings		
	<u>Former Prophets</u>	<u>Latter Prophets</u>	<u>Poetical books</u>	<u>Five Rolls</u>	<u>Historical books</u>
Genesis	Joshua	Isaiah	Psalms	Song of Songs	Daniel
Exodus	Judges	Jeremiah	Proverbs	Ruth	Ezra-Nehemiah
Leviticus	Samuel	Ezekiel	Job	Lamentations	Chronicles
Numbers	Kings	The Twelve		Esther	
Deuteronomy				Ecclesiastes	

1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, and Ezra & Nehemiah were each combined into single books. The 12 minor prophets were also combined into one book called “The Twelve.” So the 24 books listed here correspond exactly to our 39 books.

### **THE THEORY: The view of liberal theologians asserts that the canon of the Old Testament was gradually recognized in three stages that match the three-fold division of the Hebrew Bible:**

**Stage 1:** The Pentateuch accepted as scripture by 400 B.C.

“By about 400 B.C.E. the Jews regarded the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) as authoritative and binding.”<sup>1</sup>

**Stage 2:** The Prophets accepted as scripture by 200 B.C.

“Next to be accepted were the prophetic books, which form the second major division of the Hebrew canon. By about 200 BC the former prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the Latter Prophets ([Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 minor prophets]) were regarded as sacred.”<sup>2</sup>

**Stage 3:** The Writings accepted as scripture by 90 A.D.

“As early as the mid-second century BCE a third category of Scripture was recognized... these ‘other volumes’ are the Writings (in Hebrew, the Kethuvim), whose contents were not clearly defined for many generations. Not until after the Romans had destroyed Jerusalem in 70 C.E. did the Jewish community attempt to set a precise limit on the number of books comprising the Writings... Following the Roman destruction of the Jewish state, a group of distinguished rabbis ... assembled at Jamnia on the Palestinian coast to define and consolidate the essential

<sup>1</sup> Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (Palo Alto, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 9,10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

teachings of the Jewish religion, including a statement on which books of the Hebrew Bible were to be accepted as sacred and authoritative.”<sup>3</sup>

### Problems with this view:

A. There is little support for the widely held view that a “council” was held at Jamnia.

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., Jewish religious leaders relocated to a town on the Judean coast called Jamnia (a.k.a. Yavneh). Even though the story about a council at Jamnia is widely repeated in college textbooks about the Bible, the truth is, there is no evidence to support that a council was ever convened! Scholars did gather at Jamnia over a long period of time to discuss many things, including two books of the Old Testament that some rabbis questioned, but no formal pronouncement about the canon was made.

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, “The suggestion that a particular synod of Jamnia, held c. 100 A.D., finally settled the limits of the OT Canon, was made by H.E. Ryle; though it has had wide currency, there is no evidence to support it.”<sup>4</sup> Any meetings that were held at Jamnia were certainly not a “council” in the sense people think of church councils.

B. The Jews accepted our current Old Testament as scripture long before Jamnia. This is important because it shows that no council was needed to determine the canon.

**Josephus:** Josephus was a Jewish historian who wrote from **75-99 A.D.**, 300 years before the Talmud’s tractate Baba Bathra, which is often used to support the liberal three-stage development theory. He is an especially credible witness on the Hebrew canon because he had the actual Temple scrolls in his possession. The Roman general Titus presented them to him as a gift after conquering Jerusalem. Josephus’ Old Testament was identical to our own.

“For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another (as the Greeks have), but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them, five belong to Moses, which contain his laws, and the traditions of the origin of mankind until his death. This interval of time is little short of three thousand years; but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life.

From Artaxerxes to our own time the complete history has been written but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the *earlier records* because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> F.L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, Second Edition* (Oxford, Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 726. For more on what did and did not happen at Jamnia, see *Jamnia Revisited*, by Jack P. Lewis in Lee Martin McDonald & James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002) pp. 146-162.

We have given practical proof of our reverence for our own scriptures. For, although *such long ages have now passed*, no one has ventured to add, or to remove, or to alter anything, and it is an instinct with *every Jew*, from the day of his birth, to regard them as decrees of God...<sup>5</sup>

Josephus assumes that the canon is widely known and accepted by “*every Jew*.” His statement that writings after the time of Artaxerxes (425 B.C.) are “not deemed worthy of equal credit with the *earlier records*” suggests that the canon had been closed for centuries, or as he puts it, “long ages,” prior to Jamnia.

Aside: Why does Josephus say there were 22 books in the canon of the Old Testament (5 books of Moses, 13 Prophets, and 4 Writings) when the Hebrew Bible has 24? The variation again has to do with how the books were grouped.<sup>6</sup> It’s likely that Josephus saw Jeremiah and Lamentations as one writing, along with Judges and Ruth.

**The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS):** Discovered in 1947, the DSS contain writings dating largely from 150 B.C. to 50 A.D. These writings reflect how Jews at Qumran viewed the Old Testament. It is clear that they recognized the same Old Testament canon that we do.

- Copies (partial or complete) of every Old Testament book except Esther have been found.<sup>7</sup>
- 26 of our 39 canonical books are quoted with the formulae “It is written” or “God said.” A commentary on Habakkuk indicates that Habakkuk was also considered to be inspired.<sup>8</sup>
- No book outside of the present Hebrew canon is quoted or referred to as scripture.<sup>9</sup> The apocryphal books, for example, are quoted, but *never with one of the above formulae* (more on the Apocrypha below).
- Like Josephus, an influential Essene book called *Jubilees* numbers the biblical books at 22.<sup>10</sup>

**Jesus:** Jesus quoted books *from all three divisions* of the Hebrew Bible and used the same Old Testament that we do today.

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<sup>5</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, book 1, paragraph 8.

<sup>6</sup> Solomon Zeitlin, “A Historical Study of the Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures,” in Solomon Zeitlin’s *Studies in the Early History of Judaism*, 3 vols. (New York: Ktav, 1974), 2:9-10; Sid Leiman, *The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1976), pp. 152-155; Charles Augustus Briggs, *General Introduction to the Study of the Holy Scripture* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Greenville, South Carolina: A Press, 1996), p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> See Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986) pp. 74-75, 364.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

(Luke 11:50-51) “I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecuted, so that that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, 51 *FROM the blood of Abel TO the blood of Zechariah*, who perished between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.”

The two murders Jesus mentions occurred at the beginning (Genesis) and end (2 Chronicles 24) of the Hebrew Bible, clearly implying that Jesus understood this to be the extent of the Jewish canon. So again we have evidence that the canon was established well prior to Jamnia.