

IS THE OLD TESTAMENT RELIABLE?

When Jesus died the church was not left without an authority. Jesus had commissioned apostles to preserve and spread his teachings. But even before these teachings were written down, the church had authoritative scripture, and that was the Hebrew Bible, or what we now call the Old Testament.

The reason the early church accepted the Old Testament as scripture is, quite simply, because Jesus did. The followers of Jesus recognized the continuity between the Old Testament and his life and teachings. According to Jesus, the Old Testament was God's specific revelation of himself, and as such, it was only through the Old Testament that they could correctly perceive God, the world around them, and most importantly, Jesus himself. The framework of the Old Testament was absolutely essential for a rich understanding Jesus and his teachings. And, in turn, Jesus' teachings, life, and death shed great light on the Old Testament. As a result of the Old Testament's importance to Christianity, the same questions must be asked of it that were asked of the New Testament. Where did it come from? Is it reliable?

Although the writings are between 2,400 and 3,400 years old, that's not why we call the Old Testament "old." When we say "old" all we mean is that it precedes the New Testament. Not surprisingly, Jews do not refer to their Scriptures as "The Old Testament" since there is nothing that followed it.

Although it's often referred to as the Hebrew Bible, the most precise name for it is the Tanakh. The word "Tanakh" is an acronym created from the first letter of each of the three sections of Scripture. The first section is the Torah, meaning "the Law." The first five books of the Bible, all attributed to Moses, comprise the Law. The second section is the Neviim, meaning "the Prophets." This section documents the lives of the prophets and their message. The third section is called the Ketuvim, meaning "the Writings." Wisdom literature, songs, and miscellaneous stories are found in this section.

At the time of Jesus' death the process of the canonization of Hebrew scripture had not been completed. The Hebrew canon was fixed sometime between AD 70 and 100. However, by the time Jesus died the Torah and the Prophets were not in dispute, and though the Writings were considered authoritative, they were not always given the same weight as the other two.

Like the New Testament, we don't have any of the original writings from the Tanakh. In the nineteenth century many liberal scholars believed not only that Moses didn't write what was attributed to him, but that he was not even literate. However, scholars now believe Moses himself was most likely literate because of his privileged upbringing and could have been literate in as many as three languages.

In addition to personal experience and direct revelation, Moses probably had a number of documents that had been passed down from generation to generation. The Hebrews' consciousness of their unique role as God's people would have been a motivating factor in

conveying what God had earlier revealed. We now know that people from this time often kept extensive written record of business deals, communications, and that the early Israelites probably had written stories and other sources recording the events of the patriarchs' lives.

There are a couple reasons Moses' writings were accepted by the nation of Israel as the inspired word of God. One reason is the many miracles they observed that Moses either performed or was involved in. These miracles were not for the benefit of Moses, but for those who were witnesses. They authenticated Moses as one who spoke for God. Another reason is that he conducted his ministry openly with no attempt to hide things from anyone. No one had any grounds to question his motives or his methods. The nation of Israel took what they saw at face value—Moses was a man through whom God had chosen to reveal Himself.

The writings of the prophets therefore had a criterion to meet. There would have to be some sign, primarily predictive prophecy, that would authenticate those who claimed to speak for God. The messages and histories of these people were preserved and accepted ultimately for the same reasons as Moses' works. According to tradition, from Moses to Nehemiah there appears to be a chain of prophets whose messages were recorded. After Nehemiah, the canon of the Neviim (the prophets) was, for all intents and purposes, closed. The chain of prophets came to an end.

The remaining books in the Tanakh were, for one reason or another, treated as scriptural. A primary indication of the high esteem held for these books, such as Psalms, Job, and Proverbs, is that there were commentaries written about them. Many examples of such commentaries were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Commentaries were not written for books that were not authoritative.

A great witness to the canonicity of the books is provided by the New Testament. In Matthew 23:35 Jesus mentions a span of time from the death of Abel til the death of Zechariah. Given that the death of Abel happens near the beginning of Genesis, and the death of Zechariah at the end of 2 Chronicles, the last book of the Tanakh, we see a reference to the Old Testament canon. Jesus also referred to many people and events in the Tanakh as being a part of real history. Following his lead, the New Testament writers also reference and appeal to the figures and events documented in the Tanakh as actual and reliable.

Of the 22 books of the Tanakh, the New Testament writers quote from 18 of them. And the four not explicitly quoted from are probably alluded to. Also, these quotes are prefaced with phrases like "It is written..." which indicates that the books were considered authoritative.

Jewish Roman historian records that Jews of the first century AD thought about the Tanakh. He speaks of the scriptures in a way that implies the books were not in dispute, that they were a de facto canon. This view was corroborated by Jewish leaders who met at Jamnia in AD 90 and 92. Their goal wasn't to fix a canon necessarily, but to envision what Judaism should look like without the temple and its sacrificial system. Although they did not claim the authority to decide a canon, the books were discussed and they suggested no change to the canon.

With the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, the Jews became decentralized. As they began to disperse to other regions, the need for a standardized text became very important if they were to remain a distinct people. As the people through whom God revealed himself, they needed to ensure that all the people had access to and a reminder of the revelation that had been given to them. They were people of the Book and as such, instituted measures to insure its

accurate transmission.

When you compare the Tanakh and the Old Testament, you will immediately notice a difference. The Old Testament has thirty-nine books, but the Tanakh only has twenty-four or twenty-two (depending on if Ruth is considered the end of Judges and Lamentations the end of Jeremiah). And the books that share the same names are often in a different order. A closer look, however, reveals that they contain identical text and differ only in formatting.

The longer books of the Tanakh, such as Chronicles, Kings, and Samuel, have been segmented in the Old Testament. Also, the minor prophets (prophets who didn't leave much writing) are collected in one book in the Tanakh, but are individual books of the Old Testament. This reformatting was not an innovation of the early Christians, but in fact, was done by the Jews themselves when the Tanakh was translated into Greek about 250 years or so before the birth of Jesus.

After the Hellenization of Palestine and Egypt in the fourth century B.C. under Alexander the Great, many Jews found themselves speaking Greek as their common language. Sometime about halfway through the third century, according to tradition, Ptolemy Philadelphus, the King of Egypt, commissioned a translation of the Torah into Greek. To do the work he contacted Eleazar, the Chief Priest in Jerusalem at the time. Eleazar arranged for six translators from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. These 72 men became the namesake of the translation, the Septuagint. "Septuagint" means 70 and is often referred to now using the Latin form of 70. By 200 – 150 B.C., the Neviim and Ketuvim were also translated into Greek, completing the work. Later versions also include apocryphal books, books rejected by the Jews as canonical but still considered important.

By the first century B.C., the Septuagint was the standard version of scripture used by the Jews and appears to be what Jesus and his disciples used. Like the New Testament, however, there are three text types. The Egyptian text type is what the Septuagint was based on. There is also a Palestinian text type and a Babylonian text type. By the end of the first century AD, the Jews were so put off by the appropriation of the Septuagint by the Christians that they abandoned the translation. By AD 130 or so the Jews had standardized the Babylonian text as their preferred tradition.

But just how accurately was the Tanakh copied? Because of the antiquity of the originals and the perishable materials they were written on, we can't get nearly as close to the autographs as we can with the New Testament. But we do know that the Jews were extremely careful when copying the scriptures.

A group of men called the Talmudists took on the responsibility of copying the Tanakh in Hebrew in the years following AD 70. The Talmudists developed a very strict set of rules for making copies. Each page of the codex must have the same number of text columns. The columns had to be at between 48 and 60 lines long. Each line had to be thirty letters long. The spacing between letters, lines, sections, and books had to follow very specific rules as well. The Torah had to end exactly at the end of a line. Nothing, not even a part of a letter, could be written from memory. The ink had to be black and had to be made in a very specific way. The name of God could not be the first thing written after dipping the pen in ink. The copyist had to wear specific clothes and follow certain rules about bathing.

Contrary to how we think, the Jews preferred the newest copies, not the oldest. Thus, if a Tanakh was found to be in error, damaged or blemished in any way, the copy was burned, buried, or given to schools for lessons.

From AD 500–900, the task of preserving and transmitting the Tanakh was assumed by the Massorettes. By this time there was a concern that the proper pronunciation of the Hebrew could be lost. The problem was that the Hebrew alphabet did not contain any vowels. To insure the accurate passing down of oral tradition the Massorettes developed a system of markings that surrounded the consonants and acted as vowels.

Like the Talmudists, the Massorettes also had rules for ensuring the accuracy of their copies. They would count the number of words and letters in each book and also calculate the middle word and middle letter. They even knew the number of times each letter of the alphabet appeared in each book. If a copy did not agree exactly with the original, it was destroyed. Because of the great pains that were taken by the scribes to ensure exact copies, it was long assumed that the text was very accurate, but there was no way to know for sure. That is, until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scroll.

Before 1947 there were about 700 known Hebrew manuscripts, none of them earlier than the Middle Ages. This changed dramatically with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls because the writings were stored in vessels that were kept in dry and arid climates that kept them from rotting. There are a number of versions of the story of how the scrolls were discovered. Although we will probably never know exactly how it happened with certainty, the basic story goes like this.

In 1947, seven ancient manuscripts were offered for sale by a Bethlehem antiquities dealer. He had bought them from a Bedouin shepherd who had found them in a cave near Qumran on the Dead Sea. The shepherd had been looking for a lost goat. Rather than crawl into every cave in the area, he decided to throw rocks into the caves and hopefully scare the goat out. But in one cave he heard the breaking of a clay jar. He let himself into the cave and found a number of large clay jars that contained ancient manuscripts written on parchment. The shepherd's first thought was that the old parchment could be used for sandal straps. So the scrolls were taken back to his tent and hung there for a time before being sold in Bethlehem. The scrolls were then resold, with some eventually finding their way to the international market.

The price of \$250,000 for several of the scrolls in 1954 ignited a gold-rush of sorts among the Bedouin as well as a number of archaeological expeditions. About 270 caves in the area were explored; ten of them contained more manuscripts. In all, over 40,000 fragments were discovered from 500 different books and writings. Of these books, every single book of the Old Testament except Esther was found. Most importantly, the writings dated from the third century BC (a portion of Samuel) to the first century AD—far older than the oldest previously known manuscripts.

Probably the biggest find was one of the first scrolls discovered in Cave 1: a copy of Isaiah from about 150–100 B.C. This discovery provided the opportunity to see just how accurately the Hebrew Scriptures had been transmitted. Comparison with a second, though incomplete, copy of Isaiah also found at Qumran showed more than a 95% agreement in the texts. The 5% of disagreement had to do with misspellings and copying errors.

More impressively, the Massoretic text, copied 1,000 years later, also agrees with the Isaiah scroll more than 95% of the time. For example, in Isaiah 53 the difference between the two texts is just 17 letters, 10 of which are spelling variances and four are stylistic changes. The three letters of real variance do not change the text in any substantial way. So we see that the gap between the end of the writing and the oldest copies was cut by over 1000 years by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

After the completion of the translation of the Tanakh into Greek, other writings containing the history of the Jews from the time of Malachi (c. 450 BC) to the birth of Jesus were translated as well. Although these books were held to be very important by the Jews, they were not considered scriptural. Their content not only contained some historical and factual errors, but also taught things that did not agree with scripture. They were, however, added to many versions of the Septuagint, creating what is sometimes referred to as the "Septuagint plus." When Jerome translated the Old Testament into Latin in the fourth century, he included these books, designating them as apocryphal. Like the Jews, he considered them as having some value but that they were not fit for the formulation of doctrine. With the caveat of their non-canonical status, the books continued to be included in Bibles until shortly after the Reformation. The apocryphal books were largely dropped from inclusion in the Bible except in versions authorized by the Roman Catholic Church or the Eastern Orthodox churches.

If the Old Testament does contain actual and accurate history then we can expect to archaeology to corroborate it. And this is just what we find. Some of the more important discoveries include the following.

The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser

In 1846 a 6.5 foot-tall pillar of black limestone was found in the biblical city of Calah. This four-sided monument commemorated, among other things, the receiving of a tribute by the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III from Jehu, son of Omri, in 841 BC. It contains the oldest known picture of an ancient Israelite. The obelisk can be seen in the British Museum.

The Cyrus Cylinder

In the nineteenth century a sixth-century-BC clay cylinder was found bearing an inscription concerning Cyrus the Persian. After taking control of Babylon in 539 BC, he issued a decree allowing Babylonian captives to return to their homes. This decree corresponds to an account of Cyrus in Ezra 1:1-3; 6:3 (cf. 2 Ch 36:23, Is 44:28). It resides in the British Museum.

The Taylor Prism

Sennacherib's library in Nineveh, dating from the 8th century BC, housed up to 100,000 texts including the Taylor Prism. This prism is a six-sided clay cylinder with an inscription detailing Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem. It also mentions Hezekiah as being "like a caged bird within his royal capital." 2 Kings 18-19, 2 Chronicles 32, and Isaiah 36-37 are all corroborated by the Taylor Prism. The Taylor Prism is currently housed in the British Museum.

The Gilgamesh Epic

Also found in the library at Nineveh was a set of twelve tablets containing an epic poem about a king named Gilgamesh. Tablet XI was the first find that contained a non-biblical account of the Genesis flood. Gilgamesh is noted as the fifth king after the great flood. Though the stories do not totally agree, there are many similarities. This is also in the British Museum.

The Moabite Stone

In 1868 a stone was discovered in Palestine that contained an inscription in ancient Moabite. Not only does the inscription mention Mesha, the Moabite king who rebelled against Israelite rule in 2 Kings 3, but it also mentions the name “Yahweh.” The Moabite Stone is housed in the Louvre.

The Tel Dan Stele

In 1993-94 the Tel Dan Stele was found in Israel. This is an Aramaic inscription apparently commissioned by Hazael to commemorate his victory at Ramoth Gilead (2 Ki 8:28–29). It is noteworthy for referring to the kingdom of Judah as the “House of David.” This is the first extra-biblical evidence for the fact that the dynasty of David ruled in Jerusalem

In conclusion, we see that although the Old Testament was written as long as 3,500 years ago, its content has been extremely well preserved and that we have good reason to consider treat it as trustworthy.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

***Apologetics Study Bible* Articles:**

Did Those Places Really Exist? By E. Ray Clendenon, 25

Is the Old Testament Trustworthy? By Walter C. Kaiser Jr., 345

Has the Bible been Accurately Handed Copied Down Through the Centuries? By Norman L. Geisler, 468

How Can We Know the Bible Contains the Correct Books? By Norman L. Geisler, 724

Has Historical Criticism Proved the Bible False? By Thomas R. Schreiner, 1467

How Has Archaeology Corroborated the Bible? By Walter C. Kaiser Jr., 1148

Doug Powell, *The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics*

Chapter 8, Is the Old Testament Reliable?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does the evidence persuade you to trust the Old Testament? If not, what are the weak points?
2. If the Dead Sea Scrolls had never been found, and no archaeological discoveries had been made, would there still be good reason for trusting the Old Testament?
3. In what way does the Old Testament help us understand Jesus?
4. Why do you think Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox churches accept the apocrypha as scripture when it is rejected by the Jews? Do you know of any doctrines based on apocryphal books?
5. Can you name any of the books mentioned as sources by the Old Testament authors? (Book of Wars, Book of Jasher, Chronicles of David, Book of Gad, Book of the Prophet Iddo, Book of Nathan, Book of Jehu, Book of Ahasuerus)