

## Complete Canon – Old Testament

When one uses the word “canon” with regard to the Bible, one is talking about the writings that are to be regarded as the authoritative revelation of God to man.

As we have it today, there are 66 “books” of the Bible divided into two parts: Old Testament and New Testament. There are 39 Old Testament “books” and 27 New Testament “books”. Why do Christians consider these books authoritative and not others?

Of major importance, if not the most important consideration when it comes to identifying authoritative writings, is authorship; that is, who wrote the book or books. (For more on authorship, see the Authoritative Authors section.)

So, which writings should be included in the Old Testament?

For the Old Testament, Christians have generally accepted those writings that were accepted by the Jews. Those writings were viewed as either penned by individuals regarded as prophets or as having a special relationship with God.

Perhaps the earliest indication of the number of Hebrew writings to be considered as canonical comes from Josephus, a Jewish-Roman historian living in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Writing in *Against Apion* (chapter 1, vss. 38-40) near the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (c. 95 AD), he indicated that the Jewish canon had been fixed since the time of Artaxerxes (mid 400s BC) and wrote that there were (at the time of his writing) 22 books considered by the Jews to be “divine”. He did not, however, list the 22 books.

For more information on Josephus’ writing, see:

- Against Apion, 1. [https://lexundria.com/j\\_ap/1/wst](https://lexundria.com/j_ap/1/wst)
- Josephus and the Old Testament. [https://amazingdiscoveries.org/S-deception\\_Bible\\_Josephus\\_Moses](https://amazingdiscoveries.org/S-deception_Bible_Josephus_Moses)
- Jewish Literature in New Testament Times: The Old Testament Canon. [https://www.bible-history.com/JewishLiterature/JEWISH\\_LITERATUREThe\\_Old\\_Testament\\_Canon.htm](https://www.bible-history.com/JewishLiterature/JEWISH_LITERATUREThe_Old_Testament_Canon.htm)

The second earliest indication of the contents of the Jewish canon probably comes from Melito, a leader in the early Christian church. His list can be dated prior to approximately 180 AD, the date of his death, and is found in *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 312-324 AD), a work by Eusebius (c. 260-339 AD), an early Christian historian. In it, Eusebius quoted Melito as indicating the following writings as the books of the Old Testament: “...Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy; Jesus Nave [Joshua], Judges, Ruth; of Kings, four books; of Chronicles, two; the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon, Wisdom also, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job; of Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah; of the twelve prophets, one book; Daniel, Ezekiel, Esdras.”

Depending on how the Greek is interpreted, some suggest that Melito actually has listed 22 books understanding “Wisdom also” as a separate book (i.e. the Wisdom of Solomon) instead of understanding “Wisdom also” as another name for Proverbs or Proverbs as containing the

wisdom of Solomon. That this is possible may be seen from the inclusion of the book *Wisdom of Solomon* in the deuterocanon (a second canon; see below).

For more information on Melito's list (and Eusebius), see:

- Eusebius of Caesarea, Church History [see Book 4, Chapter 26].  
[http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339\\_Eusebius\\_Caesariensis\\_Church\\_History\\_EN.pdf](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339_Eusebius_Caesariensis_Church_History_EN.pdf)
- Melito and Canon of Old Testament.  
<https://vivacatholic.wordpress.com/2007/09/26/melito-and-canon-of-old-testament/>
- Melito. <http://www.bible-researcher.com/melito.html>

The next list for consideration comes from Origen, a church leader from the early 200s (died 253 AD) which is also found in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. He quotes Origen as identifying the following 22 books as canonical: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Jesus the son of Nave [Joshua], Judges/Ruth, 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Kings [Samuel], 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> Kings, Chronicles, 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Esdras [Ezra], Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah/Lamentations and the Epistle, Daniel, Ezekiel, Job, Esther, and Maccabees. (Missing are the twelve minor prophets.)

Writing c. 350 AD in Catechetical Lecture 4, Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem (c. 313-386 AD), also indicated that there were 22 books. He wrote: "Far wiser and more pious than yourself were the Apostles, and the bishops of old time, the presidents of the Church who handed down these books. Being therefore a child of the Church, trench thou not upon its statutes. And of the Old Testament, as we have said, study the two and twenty books, which, if you are desirous of learning, strive to remember by name, as I recite them." Listed are: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nave, Judges/Ruth, 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> Kings, 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles, 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Esdras, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, the Twelve Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah including Baruch and Lamentations and the Epistle, Ezekiel, Daniel.

Writing in 367 AD, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, listed these 22 books as constituting the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Kings (2 books), Chronicles, Ezra, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job, the Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah with Baruch and Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel.

In the later 380s AD, Gregory of Nazianzus, also listed 22 books in this way: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Kings (2 books), Chronicles, Ezra, Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Canticles [Song of Songs], Proverbs, the Twelve, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

The last of the early writers we might cite is Jerome. Writing around 392 AD, Jerome listed these: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua benNum, Judges-Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah-Lamentation, Ezekiel, the Twelve Prophets, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Daniel, Words of the Days [Chronicles], Ezra, and Esther.

In comparing the six lists above, you can see that as early as the mid 200s AD and certainly by the mid to late 300s AD, there is general agreement regarding the writings that were sacred to the Jews. It would seem fair to trust that those writing closest to the time of Christ would know which books were considered by the Jews of the time to be sacred.

For more information on the 22 books, see:

- Eusebius of Caesarea, Church History [see Book 6, Chapter 25].  
[http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339\\_Eusebius\\_Caesariensis\\_Church\\_History\\_EN.pdf](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339_Eusebius_Caesariensis_Church_History_EN.pdf)
- Catechetical Lecture 4. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310104.htm>
- Athanasius on the Canon. <http://www.bible-researcher.com/athanasius.html>
- Gregory of Nazianzus on the Canon of Scripture.  
<http://www.bible-researcher.com/gregory.html>
- Jerome's "Helmeted Introduction" to Kings.  
<http://www.bombaxo.com/2006/07/27/jeromes-helmeted-introduction-to-kings/>

While it may (or may not) be interesting to consider the history of Christian adoption of Jewish writings, a simpler approach may be just to find out which "writings" the Jews of today consider "sacred" and compare that with what Christians have accepted.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Jews today identify 24 books as authoritative. These 24 are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the 12 Minor Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. This list of 24 is exactly the same as Jerome's 22.

For more on the 24, see:

- Hebrew Bible. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hebrew-Bible>
- The 24 Books of the Hebrew Bible. <https://torah.org/learning/basics-primer-torah-bible/>

So, how do we get from 22 or 24 to the 39 Old Testament writings found in Bibles today? It has to do primarily with division of the books.

From the 22 listed by Jerome, divide Judges-Ruth (+1), divide Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles into 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> of each (+3), change the 12 Minor Prophets from one book to 12 separate books (+11), divide Jeremiah into Jeremiah and Lamentations (+1), and divide Ezra into Ezra and Nehemiah (+1). Twenty-two plus seventeen gets us to 39.

For more on this, see:

- Ancient Hebrew Poetry. Jerome's Twenty Two Books: The Alphabet of the Doctrine of God. [https://ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com/ancient\\_hebrew\\_poetry/2011/09/jeromes-twenty-two-books-the-alphabet-of-the-doctrine-of-god-1.html](https://ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com/ancient_hebrew_poetry/2011/09/jeromes-twenty-two-books-the-alphabet-of-the-doctrine-of-god-1.html)

To get from the 24 books of Judaism to the Christian 39, again divide Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles into 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> of each (+3), change the 12 Minor Prophets from one book to 12

separate books (+11), and divide Ezra-Nehemiah into two separate books (+1). Twenty-four plus fifteen gets us to 39.

So it seems that Christians and Jews have, for centuries, agreed that the 39 Old Testament “books” found in today’s Bibles are the ones that are to be considered the Word of God to man.

There is, however, some exception. The Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches recognize the 39 books plus an additional seven books (and some short additions) as part of the canon. The writings are: Tobit, Judith, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach), and Baruch. Also included are additions to Esther and Daniel.

These seven books, known as the deuterocanon, are considered by Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches to be part of the canon due, in part, to their inclusion in the Septuagint, a translation of Hebrew scriptures into Greek made in the mid to late 200s BC.

Further reasons some have given for the inclusion of these writings in the Old Testament canon include:

- Some or all of these writings also appear in the Codex Sinaiticus (c. 350 AD), Codex Vaticanus (c. 350 AD), and Codex Alexandrinus (early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD; c. 400-440 AD).
- Early Christian writers consider at least some of the writings to be a part of Old Testament scripture (i.e. the Wisdom of Solomon (Melito), and Baruch (Athanasius)).
- The meeting of church leaders in Rome (382 AD), Hippo (393 AD), and in Carthage (397 AD) listed the following as part of the Old Testament canon: Tobit, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, and Ecclesiasticus.

The presence of these writings in the Septuagint or early codices would not seem sufficient to include them as a part of the canon. It should be noted that:

- there are other writings in the Septuagint that have not been included in the canon, and
- the three early codices are either missing one or more of the seven writings (notably 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Maccabees or both) or have additional writings (notably 3-4 Maccabees).

Further, the inclusion of the seven deuterocanonical writings is in marked contrast to earlier writings (ie. Josephus, Melito, Origen, Cyril, Athanasius, Gregory, and Jerome) in which there is no mention of Tobit, Judith, or Ecclesiasticus. (Wisdom of Solomon may have been noted by Melito; Maccabees is included by Origen, and Baruch is included by Cyril and Athanasius.)

The absence of the mention of Baruch in the lists from the three early councils may or may not be significant as Baruch could have been included as a part of Jeremiah.

The bottom line is that from the earliest time of the church, Christians have viewed the writings accepted by the Jews to be the Word of God and have included them as the 39 books of the Old Testament. At a later date, a portion of the church came to include additional writings.