Canon of the Old Testament

The word "canon" original meant a straight rod, and came to mean after time (in Greek) a carpenter's measuring rod. Later that meaning was stretched to mean a standard by which something could be measured. As applied to scripture, it means a measuring rod that distinguishes writings that are the inspired Word of God, and those that are not. The books that are considered the inspired Word of God are called the "Canon of Scripture."

Assigning scriptural texts to the "canon" is assigning them to a special place, apart from other writings, as the authoritative texts upon which worship of God is based. It establishes norms for religious life and practice. For such important texts, it is natural to wonder what the criteria are for inclusion in the canon, and who decided the texts were included in the canon? That is a little hard to say as these judgements were made for the most part nearly 2000 years ago for the Old Testament, and 1600 years ago for the New Testament. The truth is, much more was known about the origins and available versions of scripture at that time than is known now. We do not generally even know the names of the people involved in these decisions, much less anything about them. And yet the judgements they made still stand today, and we accept them.

The books in the canon of the Old Testament evolved over 3 millennia from the time of Moses until the present day. Some church bodies accept 53 books which include the Apocrypha, but all accept a basic 39 books, which include the following, divided into three groups:

The Law, Torah, or Pentateuch:

**Genesis:** The book of beginnings. Creation, the Garden of Eden, the first sin, the Flood, and the lives of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Everything that follows depends or builds on this, the beginning of everything.

**Exodus:** The book of going out. The birth of Moses, the plagues by which God delivered Israel from Egypt, the giving of the law, and the specifications for the tabernacle.

**Leviticus:** The duties of the Levitical priesthood and the ritual of tabernacle worship.

**Numbers:** Enumeration of the people of Israel and the journey from Egypt.

**Deuteronomy:** The second law with four addresses by Moses.
Nebiim or Prophets

Joshua: The story of Joshua, successor to Moses and how the people of Israel entered and conquered the Land of Canaan, dividing it up among themselves.

Judges: Israel from Joshua to Samuel. How the people of Israel repeatedly fell away from God, repented, and turned to him again. Each time God raises up leaders like Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, and Debora to overcome Israel's enemies.

I and II Samuel: The closing of the theocracy and early rise of the kingdom. Israel wanted a king like other nations. A tall, comely, skillful warrior, Saul became king but was not a man after God's own heart, David becomes king at his death. The books describe the last judge, Samuel, and Saul and David, Israel's first kings.

I and II Kings: The kings of Israel and Judah from the rise of Solomon to the captivity.

Jeremiah: Prophet from the time of King Josiah until the captivity. Went with a remnant to Egypt where he died.

Isaiah: One of the world's great masterpieces of literature. Passionate, striking, vivid, and vehement expression of moral and religious teachings, and foreteller of Christ's coming.

Hosea: The prophet with family problems that he used to portray Israel's sins and idolatry.

Joel: A plague of locusts and answering of the people's prayers.

Amos: Israel’s greatness comes through justice and judgment, not power and wealth.

Obadiah: Proclaims fall of Edom who gloated when Judah was deported into captivity, and predicts restoration of Jewish rule over all of its lands.

Jonah: Jonah's failure to minister to Nineveh reflects Israel’s failure in its moral and religious obligations to other nations.

Micah: Preached against the oppression of the poor by the rich and predicted the destruction of Israel and Judah.

Nahum: Nineveh will fall.

Habakkuk: Jerusalem will fall to the Babylonians.


**Zephaniah:** Prophesied against the sins of Israel and predicted a great doom on the whole world.

**Haggai:** Stirred up the people to rebuild God's temple after the return from captivity.

**Zechariah:** Build God's Temple and prepare for Christ's Kingdom.

**Malachi:** Turn to God. The Messiah is coming.

**Kethubim or Writings**

**Ruth:** The story of the great grandmother of King David, and of the customs and manners of biblical times.

**Psalms:** Principle devotional book of the Bible used in public and private ritual worship.

**Job:** "Why do the righteous suffer?"

**Proverbs:** Practical advice on how to act, what to do, and what to say.

**Ecclesiastes:** Nothing lasts.

**Song of Songs:** A love poem with both earthly and heavenly dimensions.

**Lamentations:** Jeremiah lamented fate of Israel at the time of captivity.

**Daniel:** Vivid stories and visions about history from the Medes to the Greeks with examples of faith.

**Esther:** God delivers Israel from its enemies in totally unexpected ways through Esther, a Jewish queen of the Medes.

**Ezra:** The return of the Jews from captivity and the rebuilding of the temple.

**Nehemiah:** The wall around Jerusalem is rebuilt and social and religious reforms are undertaken.

**I and II Chronicles:** Another view of the events of Samuel and Kings.

The Old Testament was not always counted as 39 books. Josephus at the end of the first century AD counts 22 books, namely 5 of the Law, 13 of the Prophets, and 4 of hymns and maxims. In the late second century AD the Talmud describes the scriptures
as 24 books, namely 5 books of Moses, 8 of the prophets, and 11 of writings. It says the order for Prophets is Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and the twelve Minor Prophets. The order of writings is Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra and Chronicles. To completely reconcile the 24 books with our 39, consider that we divide Samuel into two books, Kings into two books, and Chronicles into two books. Nehemiah was considered part of Ezra. Josephus probably cited 22 books because Ruth was often combined with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah.

The books of the Old Testament Canon evolved over a long period of time. Initially, authors were simply recording proscriptions of the priests, words of the prophets, verses of the poets, maxims of the sages, and the writings of scribes. In other words, they were written for practical reasons of memory, procedure, and history. In time it was realized that some of these writings were the Word of God expressed through these authors with authority, supporting the norms of religious worship and behavior. As their importance became apparent, many editors compiled and organized these writings in stages for various purposes.

In Deuteronomy 31:9 we read "And Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests the sons of Levi, who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel." (RSV). About 24 years later we read in Joshua 24:25-26, "So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a great stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD." (RSV). Then 328 years after that, in I Samuel 10:25 it says, "Then Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship; and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the LORD." (RSV) Finally, 454 years after that we read in II Kings 22:8, "And Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD."....... Then Shaphan the secretary told the king, "Hilkiah has given me a book." And Shaphan read it before the king." All of these refer only to a very limited "legal" set of writings even up to about 641 BC soon before the exile into captivity.

After the captivity, about 204 years later we read in Nehemiah 8:1-3, "and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it..." (RSV) It took from early morning to Midday to read it, and it probably included most of the Pentateuch, Joshua, and perhaps Samuel, Kings and some of the prophets. Zechariah (Zech 1:4 and 7:7) and Daniel were well aware of what prophets before them had said, and both preceded the return and rebuilding of the temple before Ezra and Nehemiah's time.
Other writers in the apocryphal books indicate that the writings of the prophets were included by 130 BC, including an introduction to Ecclesiasticus and Maccabees during the period between the testaments. The gathering of these scriptures is attributed to Judas Maccabaeus. By 66 AD, II Timothy 3:15-16 tells us, "and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (RSV)

Final Jewish rabbinical decisions of which books should be in the Old Testament Canon appear to have been finalized in 90 AD at Jamnia. This was not done without controversy. Among the writings of the prophets, it was felt by some that Ezekiel should not be in the canon. In the writings, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Song of Songs were strongly disputed. There was some dispute also against Ruth and Proverbs. Many wanted to include Ecclesiasticus. The final decision was essentially the canon as we know it today.

There were a number of reserved books or apocrypha. Some of these books were very close to inclusion in the canon but were excluded. These include I and II Esdras, Tobit, Judith, additions to Esther, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Epistle of Jeremiah, Susannah, Song of the Three Holy Children, Bel and the Dragon, the Prayer of Manasseh, and Maccabees I and II. Books that were definitely excluded were Enoch, IV Ezra, Odes and Psalms of Solomon, and Maccabees III and IV.

Among Christian authorities, Origen (died 253 AD) and Jerome (died 420 AD) accepted the limited rabbinical Old Testament Canon as correct. Greek and Eastern Churches did accept the deuterocanonical books, and in some cases the psuedepigrapha. In 1546, the Roman Catholic Church proclaimed deuterocanonical books as part of the Old Testament Canon at the Council of Trent. Today the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox Churches accept 53 books in the Old Testament. Jews and Protestant Christians accept the more restricted 39 book canon only.

There is some discussion of the correctness of the choice for the Old Testament Canon, and some dispute concerning the procedures and criteria for the decisions about inclusion or exclusion from Old Testament Canon. At each stage of development, decisions were made by people we don't know, and for reasons that we have not always heard. When these decisions were made, chances are the decision maker knew a lot more about the source of documents and their providences than we do now. Of course, they were limited by their own cultural biases and knowledge of the world. According to scholars, the oldest texts of the Old Testament books we
have, namely the Dead Sea Scrolls, appear to have been standardized by the first century BC, and have been faithfully transmitted, with minor errors, from that point. With no new information, the modern Bible reader will probably have to accept that the motives of the transcribers, editors, and scholars who contributed to and decided upon the Old Testament Canon were pure, and that they were diligent in providing the scriptures to us today. Many see the hand of God in the transmission of the record of God's words and actions in our world in the Old Testament Canon. The Bible shows us that imperfect men with flawed motives, given the hand of God, still further God's purposes and are a contributing part of his plan.