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The Story of the Old Testament

By Dean O. Wenthe

How Did We Get the New Testament?

By Charles A. Gieschen

The Text of the Bible— Where Did It Come From?

By Cameron A. MacKenzie

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7 How Did We Get the New Testament?

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When we look at our leather-bound copy of the Bible, we may wonder how the 27 different writings that make up the New Testament ended up there. It is important to realize that we did not receive the New Testament through a simple process. An edited and bound copy of the New Testament did not drop to earth from God in heaven shortly after Jesus ascended.

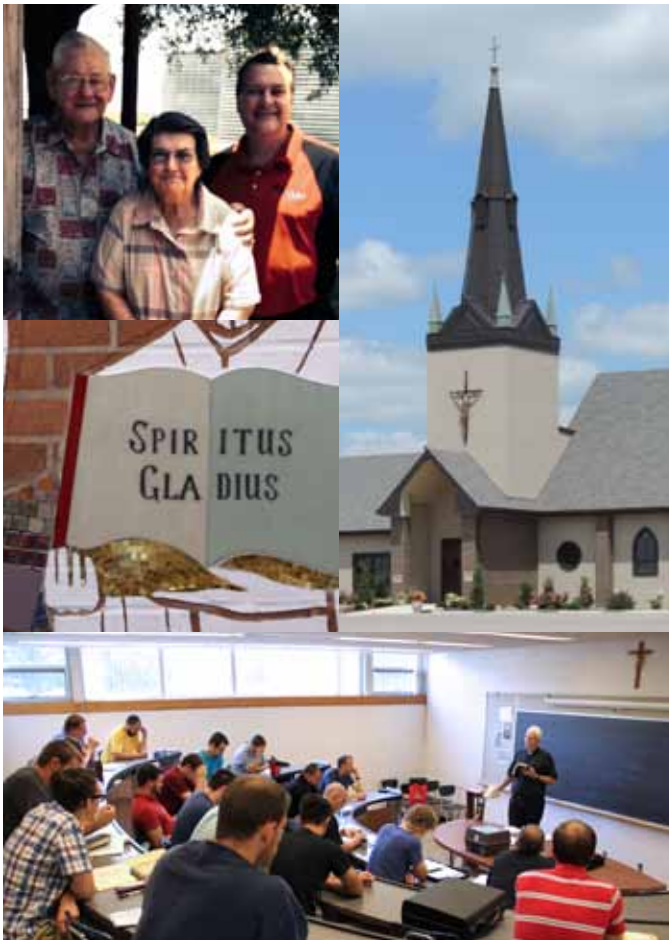
10 The Text of the Bible—Where Did It Come From?

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One can demonstrate the doctrines of our faith from modern Bibles as well as from the older versions. But, it's still true that all Bibles are not created equal. So we need our seminaries to continue training men who can make sense out of what's going on in textual criticism and translation theory. They can help the rest of us differentiate between "good" Bibles and "not so good" ones.

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The Story of the Old

By Dean O. Wenthe

The first book of the Old Testament—historically called the Torah—was written by Moses and his circle around 1400 B.C. The content is a narrative description of events and revelation that stretches from creation (Genesis 1 and 2) to the death of Moses (1406 B.C.) just prior to Israel’s conquest and occupation of the land of Canaan.



Frontispiece, Schocken Bible, 1300.

Testament

The writing, formation and preservation of the Old Testament witness to God’s gracious engagement of rebellious creatures and creation itself. Through His chosen spokesmen and in their inspired words, the Triune God discloses who He is and who we are as the apex of His creative work—man and woman created in His image.

The first book of the Old Testament—historically called the Torah—was written by Moses and his circle around 1400 B.C. The content is a narrative description of events and revelation that stretches from creation (Genesis 1 and 2) to the death of Moses (1406 B.C.) just prior to Israel’s conquest and occupation of the land of Canaan. About 250 B.C., the Torah was translated into Greek in Alexandria, Egypt, and divided into five chapters or books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Subsequently, Greek, Latin and translations into other languages, including English, reflected this five-fold division.

In antiquity, the Torah stands out as a remarkable document. It far surpasses the epic texts of Egypt, Canaan and Mesopotamia in its length and detailed portrayals.

Two aspects of the Torah particularly distinguish and separate it from other Near-Eastern literature. First, in contrast to the polytheism of the surrounding cultures, the Torah is clearly monotheistic, i.e., it portrays and teaches that there is but one God (Deut. 6:4). Secondly, God is revealed as the One who has chosen to redeem the world through the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), the seed of Abram (Gen. 12:1-3), the seed of Isaac (Gen. 25:21-23), the seed of Jacob (Gen. 35:9-12) and the seed of Judah

(Gen. 49:8-12), i.e., through the Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth.

Moses was the prophet par excellence. The root meaning of prophet (נָבִיא) is spokesman. Moses embodied and defined the office: “And he (God) said, ‘Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles’” (Num. 12:6-8a).

A similar statement in Deuteronomy 34 underscores Moses’ pivotal role as the quintessential prophet, “And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deut. 34:10).

Acts 7:22 indicates that Moses “was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.” Such wisdom would include linguistic and literary knowledge.

From Moses onward through Israel’s history, the prophets and their disciples would serve as God’s instruments by speaking and writing His words. The Torah-born people would hear God’s message through a thousand years of history that culminate in the message of Malachi (circa 430 B.C.).

While their historical contexts and situations varied significantly, the prophets interpreted reality from God’s perspective by delivering His words. The

In addition to the Torah and the prophets (early collections include Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings among “the former prophets”), the Old Testament contains these writings: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. Each of these books discloses another aspect of God’s character and actions in varied and distinctive settings.

calls of Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1 and Ezekiel 1-3 explicitly ground their message in God’s call. Throughout the major and minor prophets, key phrases claim a Divine content: “the word of the Lord came to me,” (וַיְהִי דְבַר-יְהוָה אֵלַי) “thus says the Lord,” (כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה), “an utterance of Yahweh” (נְאֻם יְהוָה).

In addition to the Torah and the prophets (early collections include Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings among “the former prophets”), the Old Testament contains these writings: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. Each of these books discloses another aspect of God’s character and actions in varied and distinctive settings.



The important and vital role of the Old Testament in God’s revelation remains for the church today. It is God’s word for God’s people. To understand Jesus rightly, it is crucial to know what it means to be “the second Adam, Abram’s seed, David’s seed, the Paschal Lamb, the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, the Son of Man” and to understand the nature of God’s redemptive plan. The wonder and beauty of God’s presence in Christ is expounded by the apostles with the vocabulary and semantic content of the Old Testament.

While there is sometimes clear indication of authorship (e.g., Baruch’s recording of Jeremiah’s words—Jer. 36:4; or David’s writing of Psalm 3), a number of Old Testament books do not clearly specify authorship.

Nonetheless, God’s people, through time, discerned and collected the books that they regarded as authoritative, i.e., as God’s Word. Traditional dating has associated the formation of the canon or collection of the Old Testament books into a corpus of texts with Ezra, the “second Moses” (Ezra 7:12), around 440 B.C. Historic Jewish thinking has similarly located the formation of the canon in the Great Synagogue with Ezra as its founder and first president. The Great Synagogue is referred to in 1 Maccabees 14:28—one of the apocryphal books from the Second Temple period.

It is clear that by the time of Jesus, the scope and content of the Old Testament was widely recognized. For example in Luke 24:44, Jesus said this to the disciples; “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Since the Psalms were the first “book” of the writings, this text reflects the early Jewish division of the canon into the Torah, Prophets and Writings. It is also striking that when the New Testament authors appeal to Scripture, they exclusively use Old Testament texts.

Another remarkable witness to God’s gracious care is the preservation of the Old Testament canon. Due to a variety of factors, the oldest complete Hebrew text of the Old Testament—*Codex Leningradensis*—is dated to the eighth century A.D. Scholars had speculated and suggested that numerous changes had occurred through editing and revision so that one could not be sure that our texts were those for which the prophets were responsible.

Then, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1950s created a sensation. For here were many texts that antedated *Codex Leningradensis* by as much as a thousand years. To the delight of many and the disappointment of others, the texts were virtually the same, i.e., none of the variants required any change in doctrine or practice. This remarkable continuity surprised those who thought the texts would be fluid or plastic.

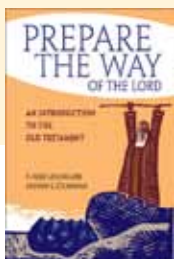
The important and vital role of the Old Testament in God’s revelation remains for the church today. It is God’s word for God’s people. To understand Jesus rightly, it is crucial to know what it means to be “the second Adam, Abram’s seed, David’s seed, the Paschal Lamb, the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, the Son of Man” and to understand the nature of God’s redemptive plan. The wonder and beauty of God’s presence in Christ is expounded by the apostles with the vocabulary and semantic content of the Old Testament.

In a time when some endeavor to co-opt and remake Jesus into their preferred type of individual with the vocabularies of leadership, psychology, therapy and success, we can rejoice that God has provided and preserved the appropriate and accurate vocabulary to communicate the true and saving character of Jesus of Nazareth, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). 🏠

For further details on “The Story of the Old Testament” see:



Sid A. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence*. Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences 47. 2nd ed. (New Haven, Connecticut: Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1991).



R. Reed Lessing and Andrew E. Steinmann, *Prepare the Way of the Lord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014).

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