

# THE ORIGIN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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## PART I. THE ORIGIN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT (39 BOOKS)

Christianity did not begin with the first coming of Christ, but with the creation. The whole Bible (the Old Testament and the New Testament) is the foundation for the teachings and life of Christians.

### A. EVENTS THAT LED TO THE WRITING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

#### **1. God spoke directly to people.**

The special revelation of God began before the fall of mankind into sin. God spoke directly to the first people<sup>1</sup>. In the book of Genesis, God spoke especially to Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham (2167-1992 B.C.), Isaac (2067-1887 B.C.), Jacob (2007-1860 B.C.) and Joseph.

#### **2. God's words were passed on orally and recorded.**

From Deuteronomy 6:6-9 and Psalm 78:1-8 it is clear that God himself was concerned that his words would not be forgotten. So he gave fathers, grandfathers and the following generations the responsibility to pass his words on to the next generation. The words of God should be taken into the heart, memorised, discussed and lived.

In later times there existed complete schools where God's words were learned without mistakes by heart! There are three reasons why the oral tradition of God's words remained without error:

- the human race was relatively small and not yet spread over all the earth
- people lived several hundreds of years and thus several generations overlapped one another
- God commanded some people to record his words

#### **3. The writers made use of older manuscripts (from creation to 1447 B.C.).**

More than 4000 years ago in Babylonia and Egypt there already existed libraries filled with "books" and "recorded history", which were written on clay tablets<sup>2</sup> and scrolls or books (codices)<sup>3</sup> made from papyrus. These histories were also used to write the Old Testament.

In the first Bible book, Genesis, Moses had combined several smaller "historical accounts" into one book: Genesis 5:1; Genesis 6:9; Genesis 10:1; Genesis 11:10,27; Genesis 25:12,19; Genesis 36:1,9 en Genesis 37:2. The discovery of the **Tel Amarna Letters** (360 clay tablets in Assyrian language as diplomatic language)(15-14<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.) in Egypt proofs that the exchange of letters was already a fixed tradition during the time of Moses (1447 B.C.). Also different alphabets and scripts were widely known in that period. It is therefore only very probable that God's words and acts were recorded in several documents.

#### **4. Hebrew and Aramaic.**

**Hebrew:** The oldest form of Biblical Hebrew, Archaic Hebrew or Paleo-Hebrew, is found in poetic sections of the Bible and inscriptions dating to around 1000 B.C., the early Monarchic Period.

**Aramaic:** In the Bible mainly in Ezra 4:8 to 6:18 and 7:12-26 and Daniel 2:4b-7:28 and also in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. During the Babylonian captivity of the Jews (586-538 B.C.) the language spoken by the Jews started to change from Hebrew to Aramaic and the Aramaic square script replaced the Old Hebrew alphabet. Among the Jews, Aramaic was used by the common people, while Hebrew remained the language of religion and government and of the upper class. After the Achaemenid Empire (of Cyrus the Great to Xerxes I) annexed the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C., Aramaic became the main language of public life and administration. Darius the Great declared Imperial Aramaic to be the official language of the western half of his empire in 500 B.C. and it is that Imperial Aramaic that forms the basis of Biblical Aramaic. Biblical Hebrew is the main language of the Hebrew Bible. Aramaic accounts for only about 250 verses out of a total of over 23,000 verse in the Old Testament. Biblical Aramaic is closely related to Hebrew as both are in the Northwest Semitic language family.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:28

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 34:27-28

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 31:24

## **B. THE BOOKS OF THE LAW (MOSES) (1447-1407 B.C).**

The books of the Law (or just ‘the Law’) consist of the five books of Moses in the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The books of the law were written by Moses between 1447 and 1407 B.C.

### **1. Moses: a historian (1527-1407 B.C.).**

“Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians and was a man of power in words and deeds”<sup>4</sup> Moses grew up in Egypt as the adopted son of Pharaoh’s sister Queen Hatshepsut, who was regent of Pharaoh Thutmose III (1501-1447 B.C.) for the first 21 years of his reign. He was well acquainted with the geography, cultures and languages of Egypt and Sinai. He was a historian who collected “written genealogical and historical accounts”<sup>5</sup> that formed the basis of the Book of Genesis.

Genesis consists of “the historical account of the heavens and the earth on the day they were created”<sup>6</sup>, “the written historical account of Adam’s line”<sup>7</sup>, of Noah<sup>8</sup>, of Noah’s sons: Shem, Ham and Japhet<sup>9</sup>, of Terach, which included his son Abraham<sup>10</sup>, of Abraham’s son Ishmael<sup>11</sup>, of Abraham’s son Isaac<sup>12</sup>, and of (Isaac’s sons) Esau<sup>13</sup> and Jacob<sup>14</sup>, which included his son Joseph.

Some of these accounts were from thousands of years before Moses. In order to compile the Books of the Law<sup>15</sup> Moses made use of these ancient genealogical and historical accounts, “the Book of the Wars of the LORD”<sup>16</sup>, other written records available in Egypt and finally God’s direct speaking to him<sup>17</sup>.

God spoke directly to Moses<sup>18</sup> and revealed himself and his will to him. He especially told him how he would save his people from slavery in Egypt, and about his moral, ceremonial and civil laws for his people Israel. God commanded Moses to record his words<sup>19</sup>. An authorised copy of **the Book of the Law** was placed beside the Ark of the Covenant as a witness against God’s people<sup>20</sup>. The five books of the Law were immediately acknowledged by God’s people as the words of God to man.

Joshua succeeded Moses and he was acquainted with the Book of the Law<sup>21</sup>. Joshua even copied the Law on stones for public reading by everyone, including the women, children and aliens<sup>22</sup>.

God not only inspired the writing of the books of the Law, but also preserved them throughout history, in spite of the fact that the books of the Law condemned Israel’s sins and hardened hearts. Therefore the preservation of the books of the Law cannot be credited to Israel’s account!

The books of the Old Testament were originally written in the Hebrew language, except for a few chapters that were written in the Aramaic language.

### **2. The contents of the books of the Law.**

The book **Genesis** (1447 B.C.) describes the history of God’s deeds and words from the beginning of the creation and humanity until the time Jacob (Israel) and his descendants moved to Egypt (1877 B.C.)<sup>23</sup>.

The book **Exodus** (1447 B.C.) describes the history of how Israel became a large nation in Egypt, how the Egyptians oppressed them and made slaves of them and how God saved them from this slavery in Egypt. The book contains God’s moral law<sup>24</sup>, a series of social laws<sup>25</sup> and a number of ceremonial laws, especially about the tabernacle (Exodus 25–40).

The book **Leviticus** (1446 B.C.) contains God’s ceremonial laws about sacrifices, the priesthood and the religious festivals.

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 7:22

<sup>5</sup> Hebrew: sefer toldot

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 2:4

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 5:1

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 6:9

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 10:1

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 11:27

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 25:12

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 25:19

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 36:1

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 37:2

<sup>15</sup> John 1:17

<sup>16</sup> Numbers 21:14

<sup>17</sup> Exodus 3:1-22

<sup>18</sup> Exodus 3:4

<sup>19</sup> Exodus 17:14; Exodus 24:4,7; Exodus 34:27-28; Numbers 33:2; Deuteronomy 31:9,24,2

<sup>20</sup> Deuteronomy 31:26-27

<sup>21</sup> Joshua 1:8

<sup>22</sup> Joshua 8:32-35

<sup>23</sup> Genesis 47:28; 50:22; Exodus 12:40

<sup>24</sup> Exodus 20:1-17

<sup>25</sup> Exodus 21:1–23:33

The book **Numbers** (1446–1407 B.C.) describes the history how God led Israel through the desert for a period of 40 years until they reached the Promised Land, Canaan (1447–1407 B.C.).

The book **Deuteronomy** (1407 B.C.) contains a reminder of all God’s great deeds and laws. Moses called this book “the Book of the Law” (Deuteronomium 31:24-26).

The words ‘Book of the Law’ or simply ‘the Law’ (Hebrew: Torah) refers to all the five books of Moses. They were written before 1407 B.C. and contain the histories of God’s deeds with people, God’s words and the effect his deeds and words had on people.

### **3. God’s words are inspired and authoritative.**

The words of God in the Books of the Law were written, not only in books, but had to be written in the hearts and minds of God’s people. God commanded that his people should talk about his words, memorise them and live according to them<sup>26</sup>. God commanded that his people should meditate and obey his words<sup>27</sup>. The Books of the Law were immediately acknowledged by Israel as God’s Word for man<sup>28</sup>.

Jesus Christ believed that the Books of the Law were inspired by God and were authoritative<sup>29</sup>. Also the apostles of Jesus Christ said that the Law was written by Moses<sup>30</sup>.

## **C. THE HISTORICAL BOOKS (1400-460 B. C.)**

The historical books in the Old Testament are the 12 books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1& 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. The historical books were written by the prophets and their disciples between 1400 and 460 B.C. In the Hebrew Bible they are called ‘the Early Prophets’ instead of ‘the Historical Books’.

### **1. God commanded that the history of his people must be recorded.**

God himself commanded the Israelites not to forget his deeds and words. They had to tell them to their children and grandchildren so that they would not forget God’s deeds and commands<sup>31</sup>! This stimulated the Israelites to record the history of Israel and to gather them together in books.

The nations around Israel also wrote books, but they mixed history with fantasy and myths. In contrast to them, the historians of Israel recorded real facts from history which have been corroborated again and again by the discoveries from archaeology and secular history! The fact that these historians not only recorded the good aspects of Israel’s history, but also the sin and rebellion of Israel, proves that the historical records in the Bible were not simply based on the decisions and choices of historians, but are based on the command and inspiration of God himself! The historical books in the Bible recorded Gods acts and words within Israel and within the surrounding nations. It particularly describes how Israel broke God’s covenant again and again, how God punished their sins and how God saved only ‘a remnant’ from the whole natural nation of Israel<sup>32</sup>.

The Historical Books could have been compiled as follows:

- Joshua basically composed by Joshua himself with evidence of later editorial work (1405-about 1300 B.C.)
- Judges and Ruth were probably composed by the prophet Samuel or his student (about 1000 B.C.)
- 1 and 2 Samuel were written by other prophets making use of prior written sources (between 931 – 721 B.C.)
- 1 and 2 Kings were probably written by the prophet Jeremiah or someone in Babylon (after 586 B.C.)
- The great Book: Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah was probably written by the scribe Ezra who also made use of prior written sources (between 450-425 B.C.)
- Esther was written by an unknown eye-witness (about 465 B.C.).

### **2. The historians made use of smaller historical compilations.**

In the Old Testament we read about smaller historical collections that were later gathered into larger collections and thus formed the historical books we possess in the Bible today. The general Joshua and the prophet Samuel made use of ‘the Book of Jashar (the upright)’<sup>33</sup>. Various short compilations were made of the histories of the kings of Israel. We read of ‘the Book of the annals of Solomon’<sup>34</sup>, ‘the Book of the annals of the kings of Israel’<sup>35</sup>, ‘the Book of the annals of the kings of Judah’<sup>36</sup> and that Esther decreed that the regulations concerning the Purim Festival had to be recorded for their descendants in regard to their times of fasting and lamentation<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Deuteronomy 6:6-9

<sup>27</sup> Joshua 1:7-8

<sup>28</sup> Exodus 19:3-8; Exodus 24:3-4,7; Deuteronomy 26:17

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 4:4; cf. Deuteronomy 8:3

<sup>30</sup> John 1:17; John 5:45-47; Romans 10:5

<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 4:9; Psalm 78:1-8

<sup>32</sup> 2 Kings 19:4,30-31

<sup>33</sup> Joshua 10:13; 2 Samuel 1:18

<sup>34</sup> 1 Kings 11:41

<sup>35</sup> 1 Kings 14:19

<sup>36</sup> 1 Kings 14:29

<sup>37</sup> Esther 9:31-32

### 3. The historians were inspired by God.

Although we do not know who compiled the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, we do know that these books were written by the prophets. *The prophets wrote history from God's point of view*: “the records of Samuel *the seer*, the records of Nathan *the prophet* and the records of Gad *the seer*”<sup>38</sup> and “the vision of *the prophet* Isaiah in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel”<sup>39</sup>! History was evaluated and recorded from God’s point of view. For example: “Asa did what was right *in the eyes of the LORD* as his father David had done”<sup>40</sup> and “Nadab did what was evil *in the eyes of the LORD*, walking in the ways of his father and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit”<sup>41</sup>.

## D. THE POETICAL BOOKS (1900-400 B.C.)

### 1. The poetical books.

The poetical books in the Old Testament are: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. Lamentations of Jeremiah is also a poetical book (after 586 B.C.). The poetical books were written between 1900 and 400 B.C.

Job was probably written in North-Arabian or Aramaic and translated into Hebrew in about 1900 B.C.

Psalms are songs accompanied by a stringed instrument, embodying a personal response of the believer toward the goodness and grace of God. A few Psalms contain the thoughts and revelations from God Himself<sup>42</sup>. The Psalms have been written by various authors between 1400 and 400 B.C. and were brought together in larger collections. Psalm 90 was composed by Moses (1407 B.C.). The Psalms of David, Asaph and Solomon were composed before 971 B.C. The Psalms by the sons of Korah and the Esrahite were composed before the exile in 587 B.C. Psalm 126 and 137 are Psalms from after the return from exile. There is no evidence of any Psalm after 500 B.C.

The Psalms were collected and divided into 5 Books.

- Book I (Psalm 1-41) was probably arranged by David. Possibly the earliest edition of the Psalter also contained Psalm 51- 72 of David (between 1020-975 B.C.).
- Book II (Psalm 42-72) included the Psalms of Asaph and the sons of Korah<sup>43</sup>.
- Book III (Psalm 73-89) may have been collected during the revival movement under king Josiah (638-608 B.C.) or just as likely during the reform programme of king Hezekiah (726-686 B.C.).
- Book IV (Psalm 90-106) and Book V (Psalm 107-150) are two collections of miscellaneous Psalms of uncertain date, any time between the Exodus and the Exile.
- Book V (Psalm 107-150) is a collection of miscellaneous Psalms of uncertain date. No historical allusions or situations are presupposed in Psalm 90-150 which do not accord with the events in Hebrew History prior to 430 B.C.

Proverbs consists of 800 verses with a title and 8 sections:

- Proverbs 1:7 to 9:18 are Solomon’s own sayings
- Proverbs 10:1 to 22:16 are Solomon’s own sayings
- Proverbs 22:17-24:22 are sayings of the wise collected by Solomon before 931 B.C.
- Proverbs 24:23-34 are sayings of the wise collected by Solomon before 931 B.C.
- Proverbs 25 to 29 are sayings collected by the committee of Hezekiah before 685 B.C.
- We have no information about Agur,
- Lemuel
- or the author of “the wife of noble character” in Proverbs 30-31.

Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon before 971 B.C.

Song of Songs was written by Solomon before 971 B.C.

### 2. Hebrew poetry: a response to God's goodness and grace.

The discovery of a growing number of poetry of the Akkadians in Babylon and the Egyptians confirms the fact that Israel’s neighbours wrote poetry as early as 2000 B.C. Poems in Ugaritic (a Canaanite language close to Hebrew) from 1500 B.C. have also been found. Thus, the Israelites not only composed poetry, prayers and songs and learned them by heart, they also recorded them at the time they were composed and transmitted them to the next generations. Hebrew poetry consisted of songs accompanied by a stringed instrument and embodying a personal response of the believer towards the goodness and grace of God. The Messianic Psalms are revelations from God himself<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> 1 Chronicles 29:29-30

<sup>39</sup> 2 Chronicles 32:32

<sup>40</sup> 1 Kings 15:11

<sup>41</sup> 1 Kings 15:26

<sup>42</sup> Psalm 2

<sup>43</sup> Psalm 42-50

<sup>44</sup> Psalm 2

### 3. Hebrews wisdom literature: how man should live.

Most characteristic of the Semitic Wisdom Literature are the practical principles and instructions about how one could best live and should live. They are based upon a canny observation of the laws of human nature, human behaviour and their consequences. They record rules how to succeed in social life, commerce and even politics. They establish morality on the basis of principles common to humanity everywhere. In its highest form, the Hebrew Wisdom Literature sought to discover the essence of God’s truth and grasp the general spiritual principles. Hebrew wisdom was of a practical rather than of a theoretical-philosophical nature<sup>45</sup>. The wise man was a person who knew how to do things well<sup>46</sup>. He could find the right solutions in critical situations<sup>47</sup>. The word ‘wisdom’ came to be applied to the art of getting along successfully with God and with man: with the rich and the poor, with kings and slaves, with friends and enemies, with neighbours and people from the opposite sex. A wise man spoke the right things at the right times<sup>48</sup>.

There seems to have been a prominent school of wise men in the ancient Hebrew Society, who applied themselves to the observation of human character as such, seeking to analyze conduct, studying actions in its consequences, and establishing morality upon the basis of principles common to humanity at large. In its highest form, the Hebrew Wisdom Literature sought to discover the essence of God’s truth. Wisdom literature reflected upon all natural and moral phenomena and experiences in order to apprehend more perfectly the final ground of life and the principles by which it is governed. Men of all nations came to listen to the wisdom God gave to Solomon<sup>49</sup>.

## E. THE PROPHETICAL BOOKS (788-420 B.C.)

### 1. The prophetic books.

In the Hebrew Bible they are called ‘the Latter Prophets’. The prophetic books in the Old Testament are the four major prophets with their five books: Isaiah, Jeremiah (and his Lamentations), Ezekiel and Daniel and the 12 minor prophets. The prophetic books were written between 800 and 420 B.C. They were written in the 8<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

<b>(1) Joel</b> (800 B.C.)	<b>(7) Nahum</b> (660 B.C.)	<b>(13) Ezekiel</b> (593-571 B.C.)	<b>(17) Malachi</b> (432-420 B.C.)
<b>(2) Amos</b> (788-737 B.C.)	<b>(8) Zephaniah</b> (639-630 B.C.)	<b>(14) Obadiah</b> (after 586 B.C.)	
<b>(3) Jonah</b> (783-743 B.C.)	<b>(9) Jeremiah</b> (627-550 B.C.)	<b>(15) Haggai</b> (520 B.C.)	
<b>(4) Hosea</b> (754-714 B.C.)	<b>(10) Lamentations</b> (586 B.C.)	<b>(16) Zechariah</b> (520-518 B.C.)	
<b>(5) Micah</b> (737-714 B.C.)	<b>(11) Habakkuk</b> (608-605 B.C.)		
<b>(6) Isaiah</b> (740-680 B.C.)	<b>(12) Daniel</b> (604-537 B.C./2 <sup>nd</sup> cent)		

### 2. God spoke through the prophets.

All the prophetic books in the Bible maintain that the God of the Bible is the Author of the prophetic books. More than 2700 times the prophetic books say: “The word of the LORD came to me, saying”<sup>50</sup> or “This is what the LORD says”<sup>51</sup>! These words show that the prophets were the inspired mouthpieces of God. God revealed himself, his words and his will to the prophets and spoke to his people through his prophets. Note that the God who spoke through the prophets is called ‘the Spirit of Christ’<sup>52</sup> or ‘the Holy Spirit’<sup>53</sup> in the New Testament. Thus the God of true prophets is the God of the Bible who revealed himself through Christ and the Spirit.

### 3. God commanded the prophets to record his words.

The prophet Isaiah had to record God’s words twice: first on a clay tablet so that people could read it immediately in public and secondly in a book made of papyrus or leather so that later generations could also read it<sup>54</sup>. Thus the recording of God’s Word served as a witness to all later generations.

Sometimes the prophet made use of a scribe to record what he dictated. For example, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now. Perhaps, when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin.” So Jeremiah called Baruch, son of Neriah, and while Jeremiah dictated all the words the LORD had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll<sup>55</sup>. Thus the recording of God’s words served as a testimony for all later generations!

The Book of Jeremiah probably had several editions, the first three during his lifetime:

- The 1<sup>st</sup> edition was destroyed by king Jehoiakim<sup>56</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Proverbs 1:1-7

<sup>46</sup> Exodus 31:3-5

<sup>47</sup> Genesis 41:39

<sup>48</sup> Genesis 41:39; 2 Samuel 14; 1 Kings 3; Proverbs 15:1,18,22,23,28

<sup>49</sup> 1 Kings 4:29-34

<sup>50</sup> Jeremiah 1:4

<sup>51</sup> Jeremiah 2:5

<sup>52</sup> 1 Peter 1:10-11

<sup>53</sup> 2 Peter 1:20-21

<sup>54</sup> Isaiah 30:8

<sup>55</sup> Jeremiah 36:1-4

<sup>56</sup> Jeremiah 36:4

- The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition<sup>57</sup>
  - The 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (a shorter edition with chapters arranged in a different order, was published in Egypt during Jeremiah's lifetime. This edition was preserved in the Septuagint.
  - The 4<sup>th</sup> and final edition (a more comprehensive collection was probably made by Baruch with material arranged in a more logical order and published after Jeremiah's death. This edition was preserved in the Masoretic Text.
- Daniel made a Bible study out of several 'books' (plural) of Jeremiah<sup>58</sup>.

#### **4. The prophetic books were studied and quoted and survived the prophecies of the false prophets.**

'The Latter Prophets' (i.e. the prophets after the exile)(607-538 B.C.) studied and quoted the books of 'the Earlier Prophets' (i.e. the prophets before the exile) and pointed out that the prophecies of the earlier prophets proved to be true and trustworthy<sup>59</sup>. The prophets studied one another's books. For example, the prophet Daniel studied the books of the prophet Jeremiah<sup>60</sup>.

The prophets regarded one another's prophecies as God's Word, inspired by the Spirit of God<sup>61</sup> and quoted one another's prophecies in their books. For example, the words in Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-3 are exactly alike. Because they were contemporaries of each other, we cannot tell who quoted who.

It is remarkable that in spite of the fact that the prophets spoke openly against the sins and disobedience of the Israelites and the false prophets<sup>62</sup>, the Israelites *did not and could not destroy these books of the Bible* containing prophecies against them! While the prophecies of the false prophets in Israel were lost, in a sovereign way God saw to it that the prophecies of the true prophets in Israel were preserved for all later generations.

## **PART II. THE TRANSMISSION AND TRANSLATION OF MANUSCRIPTS AND THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

### **F. THE TRANSMISSION OF THE COPIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS**

#### **1. The hand-written manuscripts of the Hebrew Old Testament.**

**How could the original revelation from God be passed on accurately from one generation to the next generation?**

Almost all the original books of the Old Testament were written in the Hebrew language. A hand-written document in the Hebrew language is called 'a Hebrew manuscript'. The Hebrew text we possess today is called **the Masoretic Text**, because it is derived from the Masoretes and has been transmitted to us by making hand-written copies over a period of more than 2000 years. The earliest book of the Old Testament (Job) was written about 1900 years B.C. and the latest book (Daniel chapters 7-12) was completed about 150 years B.C.

In the early days there were no printing presses. Every book was originally written by hand and several handwritten copies were made by synagogues in other cities. These were the first generation of manuscripts. After many years of use, this first generation of manuscripts would begin to tear and become too old for use. Therefore a second generation of handwritten copies were made of these first generation manuscripts. But again, after many years of use also the second generation of manuscripts became too old for use. So a third generation of handwritten copies were made of this second generation of manuscripts. Etc.

We no longer possess the infallible original manuscripts of the various books of the Old Testament, but we have found copies of the original manuscripts from several generations of copies! The earliest Hebrew manuscripts which have been preserved to us are in some instances no closer than a thousand years to the time of original composition!

#### **2. The Old Testament manuscripts before the Christian era.**

The most important Old Testament manuscripts from before the Christian era are part of **the Dead Sea Scrolls**. In 1947 thousands of fragments of Hebrew manuscripts in clay pots were discovered that were hidden in caves in a dry desert near Qumran in Palestine in about 68 A.D., shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem. About 40,000 fragments were carefully pieced together to form about 500 scrolls, dated between 200 B.C. and 68 A.D.

The two most important scrolls were both Hebrew manuscripts of the book of Isaiah. The first so-called **Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah** was a complete copy of the book of Isaiah and was dated 125 B.C. It belonged to the same manuscript family as the Masoretic Text and was about 1000 years older than the next oldest Hebrew manuscript that still exists (dated 850 A.D.). The second so-called **Hebrew University Scroll of Isaiah** consisted of large parts of Isaiah chapters 41-66 and was dated 50 B.C. The text was even closer to the Masoretic Text. Nothing in the discoveries found at Qumran endangers the essential reliability and authority of our standard Hebrew Bible Text: **Kittel's Biblia Hebraica**.

<sup>57</sup> Jeremiah 36:32

<sup>58</sup> Daniel 9:2

<sup>59</sup> Zechariah 7:7-10

<sup>60</sup> Daniel 9:2

<sup>61</sup> Zechariah 7:12

<sup>62</sup> Jeremiah 23:9-32

When we compare the Hebrew text we possess today (the Masoretic Text) with the Hebrew texts of these two scrolls of Isaiah, we must conclude that the Old Testament manuscripts were very accurately transmitted throughout the centuries.

### **3. The careful copying of the Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts.**

**What was done to ensure the faithful copying and transmission of the original Bible books, so that we can have confidence in God's Word today?**

Three groups of people contributed to the faithful transmission of the Hebrew text through many centuries. They were the Sopherim, the Talmudists and the Masoretes.

- **(1) The Sopherim (the standardisers of the Hebrew consonant text) (457 B.C. to 200 A.D.).**

The Sopherim were an order of scribes and teachers of the law which had its beginning under Ezra, the scribe. In Ezra 7:6,10 we read, "Ezra was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses ... Ezra had devoted himself to the study and the observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel". And in Nehemiah 8:13 we read how the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. The Sopherim functioned between about 457 B.C. to about 200 A.D. For more than 600 years the Sopherim were the official Bible Publication Society of that time. Their great achievement was to standardise a pure consonant text of the Hebrew Bible.

#### **The first critical edition of the Hebrew Old Testament (before 174 B.C.).**

The Qumran discovery (the two scrolls of Isaiah) point to a critical re-issue of the Hebrew Old Testament Bible before the period of the Maccabees (before 174 B.C.) and to the activity of a standardising committee under official supervision, who consulted, compared and verified all existent handwritten Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament (including the official copies in the temple archives) and produced a Standard Text for the Hebrew Old Testament, very much in the manner Westcott-Hort or Nestle-Aland produced a Standard Text for the Greek New Testament.

#### **The second critical edition of the Hebrew Old Testament (about 100 B.C.).**

The Sopherim made sure that every new handwritten copy of an Old Testament book agreed with this standard text. The Sopherim *counted all the verses, all the words and all the letters (consonants) of each book in the Old Testament and recorded these numbers at the end of each Bible book!* In this ingenious way anyone could determine whether he had a perfect copy of the Old Testament book before him or not. *The Hebrew consonant text of the Old Testament was standardised about 100 B.C.!*

- **(2) The Talmudists (the transmitters of the interpretations of the Hebrew text) (100 B.C. – 500 A.D.) .**

The Talmudists were those Jews who first by oral tradition and later in writing preserved an enormous amount of traditional interpretations of the Law and the rest of the Old Testament Books. The Talmudists functioned between 100 B.C. and 500 A.D. (600 years) and were the transmitters of the interpretations of the Old Testament books.

Their products included interpretations of the Old Testament books, together with folklore embellishments, anecdotes (historical facts) and homilies (sermons) of various sorts. Much of the material was practical and legal questions or intricate details of ritual matters. This mass of traditions has been preserved in three collections, called **the Midrash**, **the Talmud** and **the Tosefta**. They are important, because *they contain many quotations from the Old Testament books*. These quotations help us to see that the Hebrew text we possess today is very accurate. The many years of transmission by handwriting did not change the Hebrew text!

**The Midrash** (means 'study of the text' or 'interpretation of the text' derived from the word 'darash' which means "to search or investigate") (100-300 A.D.). It is a doctrinal and homiletic exposition of the Old Testament. It is a Commentary on the five books of the Law. It consists of two parts:

- **The Halakah** (meaning 'method' or 'procedure'). It is a commentary on the five books of the Law.
- **The Hagada** (meaning 'explanation'). It is a commentary on the entire Old Testament and includes other proverbs, parables and tales. These contain the earliest sermons of the synagogues. They are important because of their numerous quotations from the Old Testament text, occasionally in a slightly different form than the Masoretic Text.

**The Tosefta** (meaning 'supplement'). It contains a collection of teachings and traditions of the Tannaim (teachers) which were closely related to the Mishnah.

**The Talmud** (meaning 'instruction'). It grew between 100-500 A.D. and has two parts:

- **The Mishnah** (meaning 'repetition'). It contains a digest (collection) of all the oral laws which were supposedly communicated by word of mouth from Moses to his 70 elders and contains traditions and explanations of the Old Testament. It is divided into 6 'Sedarim' (meaning 'orders'): agriculture, women, civil law, criminal law, sacrifices or holy things, and unclean things.
- **The Gemara** (meaning 'completion') was composed in Aramaic and consists of a supplement or expanded commentary of the Mishnah. There are two forms:

\*The Palestinian Gemara (about 200 A.D.) is smaller.

\*The Babylonian Gemara (about 500 A.D.) is much larger.

- **(3) The Masorettes (the standardisers of the Hebrew vowel text). (500 – 950 A.D.).**

The Masorettes were the scholars who gave the final form to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament books. They functioned between 500 - 950 A.D. Almost all the original books of the Old Testament were written in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew script originally had only 22 letters and all of them were consonants. The vowels were added mentally when the Hebrew text was read. Only after 500 A.D. points representing vowels were added to the consonant text.

**The third critical edition of the Hebrew Old Testament (about 500 A.D.).**

The Masorettes received the Hebrew consonant text from the Sopherim and *inserted the vowels in the form of points. The points gave each Hebrew word its exact pronunciation and grammatical form.* The Masorettes committed themselves to the accurate preservation of the Hebrew Old Testament books. They were more diligent and devoted to the preservation of the accurate Hebrew Old Testament text than any other endeavour to preserve ancient secular or religious literature in the history of human civilisation! They were so conscientious in their task that they did not even venture to make the most obvious corrections in the consonant text. They transmitted the ancient Hebrew text down to us exactly as it came to them!

Conclusion: The faithful copying and transmission of the standard text of the Bible books by the Sopherim, the Talmudists and the Masorettes was ensured by counting the verses, words and letters of each Bible book and by refusing to make any improvement in the text. Today we possess a form of the Hebrew Scriptures which in all essentials duplicates the second critical recension which was considered authoritative already a century before the days of Jesus Christ and his apostles!

The discoveries at Qumran show that this second critical recension was based on the first critical and authoritative recension of the Old Testament books which was made on the basis of the most reliable manuscripts available in the previous centuries for collation (comparison and verification).

This third critical recension of the Hebrew consonant and vowel text brings us very close to the original autographs themselves and furnish us with an authentic record of God's revelation.

#### **4. The Old Testament Hebrew manuscripts which form the basis for Kittel's Hebrew Bible.**

The most important Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts we possess today are the following:

- **The Codex Orientalis 4445 in the British Museum.** A manuscript dated 850 A.D. It contains the five books of the Law.
- **The Codex Cairensis.** A manuscript dated 895 A.D. It contains the historical books and the prophetic books.
- **The Aleppo Codex.** A manuscript dated 900 A.D. It is withheld from publication by Sephardic Jews in Aleppo.
- **The Samaritan Pentateuch in Nablus.** It is the oldest Samaritan Pentateuch and is withheld from publication.
- **The Leningrad Manuscript.** A manuscript dated 916 A.D. It contains the prophetic books.
- **The Leningrad MS B-19A or Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus.** A manuscript dated 1010 A.D. containing the entire Old Testament.

*This last manuscript forms the basis for **the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Old Testament** which has been published in Kittel's Hebrew Bible (3<sup>rd</sup> edition onwards). All translations of the Old Testament in other languages in the world are based on this manuscript!*

Conclusion. Because of the faithfulness of the people who transmitted the copies of the Hebrew Old Testament books throughout the centuries to us, we have today the most accurate possible Hebrew Old Testament!

## **G. THE EARLIEST TRANSLATIONS OF THE HEBREW OLD TESTAMENT**

**Why are the earliest translations of the Old Testament books important?**

### **1. The Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Old Testament (the Aramaic Targums).**

During the exile of the Jews to Babylonia between 586-538 B.C., the international language of the Persian Empire, Aramaic, replaced the Hebrew language of the Jewish exiles in Babylonia. During the services it became necessary to repeat the reading in Hebrew Scriptures with a translation into Aramaic, but the interpreter would often (especially with the Prophets) explain the message by paraphrasing it. This continued after the exiles returned from Babylonia. During the Babylonian Exile (586-538 B.C.) and especially after the banishment of the Jews from Palestine (138 A.D.) these interpretations were committed to writing as **Targums** (interpretations). These translations are important, because they were made more than 500 years before Christ! They help us to see that the original Hebrew text, on which these Aramaic translations were based, was very accurate.

The best known Targums are:

- (1) **Targum of Onkelos**, an interpretation of the Torah produced by Jewish scholarly circles in Babylon (3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.).
- (2) **Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel**, more free rendering interpretations of the prophets (Joshua-Kings, Isaiah to Malachi) produced by Babylonian circles (4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)

## **2. The Greek translations of the Hebrew Old Testament (the Septuagint).**

### **(1) The Septuagint: a translation of the Jews from Alexandria.**

About 285 B.C. the Egyptian king caused a Greek translation to be made from the Old Testament and this was completed by about 150 B.C. The Greek speaking Jews received their copies from the Royal Library at Alexandria. The translation was done for the convenience of the Greek speaking Jews who lived in Egypt and knew no Hebrew. The word 'Septuagint' means 'seventy' (LXX), because it was translated by about 70 translators from another Hebrew text than the Hebrew Masoretic Text.

- The five books of the Law were translated with greater accuracy than the other books, because they had to serve as a kind of Targum (interpretation) at synagogue worship services for Jewish congregations in Egypt.
- The Early Prophets (the historical books) and Psalms were translated with considerable fidelity to their Hebrew text.
- However the Latter Prophets (the prophetic books) and other Writings show a tendency towards paraphrase (freedom of rendering).

When we study the Septuagint, we must make allowance for this tendency to paraphrase and for actual mistakes. A Jew from Palestine, Jesus the son of Sirach (about 130 B.C.) in his prologue to a book written by his grandfather said about the Septuagint: "For the same things expressed in Hebrew do not have equal force when translated into another language. Not only so, but even the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (in the Septuagint) differ not a little (from the Hebrew text) as to the things said in them."

Nevertheless, the passages where the Greek text differs from the Jewish text accord with the Samaritan text and in the whole the Septuagint text accords much more with the Hebrew text than with the Samaritan text. However, the Alexandrian Jews attached the greatest possible authority to the Septuagint and so it spread all over the Greek speaking Roman Empire (the eastern part of the Roman Empire).

Especially the Septuagint (the Greek text) was used in early times to make translation into other languages.

The Septuagint added the so-called 'apocryphal books' as well as some additions to the books of Esther and Daniel.

The original of the Septuagint of course is extinct. But we possess fragments of the Septuagint translation in:

- The **John Rylands Papyrus** (458) (150 B.C.)
- The **Chester Beatty Papyrus (Oxyrynchus)** from Egypt (150 B.C.)
- The **Qumran Septuagint** (100 B.C.)
- The **Freer Greek manuscript V** (3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.) contains all the Minor Prophets except Hosea
- The **Codex Vaticanus (B)**(325-350 A.D.) contains most of the Old Testament in Greek
- The **Codex Sinaiticus (Aleph)**(375-400 A.D.) contains parts of the Old Testament in Greek
- The **Codex Alexandrinus (A)** (325-250 A.D.) contains parts of the Old Testament in Greek.

The variations (in some cases considerable variations) in the Septuagint from the Masoretic Text may have been a Hebrew Text from a different family. But we must make considerable allowances for the liberty of paraphrasing and actual mistakes.

During the time of Jesus and the apostles, Greek was the most important language in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. Jesus and the apostles quoted from both the Hebrew Old Testament as well as the Greek Old Testament in the books of the New Testament.

### **(2) Three other translations into Greek.**

The addition of the apocryphal writings in the Septuagint and the polemic between the Jews and Christians caused a need for more accurate translations in the Greek. Three translations into Greek are important.

- **The translation of Aquila**, a Jewish proselyte from Pontus (northern Turkey) in 126 A.D. directed to oppose passages which Christians were accustomed to cite from the Septuagint as applicable to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is so literal that the sense is sacrificed.
- **The translation of Symmachus**, an Ebionite (a kind of semi-Christian) in the second century A.D. written in pure and good Greek.
- **The translation of Theodotion**, an Ebionite in the second century. Because his knowledge of Hebrew was limited, his translation was based on the Septuagint.

The inspiration and authority of the Septuagint was not universally accepted by all Christians. The use of the book of Daniel in the Septuagint fell in disuse and was replaced by the book of Daniel in the translation of Theodotion.

### **(3) The Hexapla.**

The church father Origen (185-254) worked in Alexandria and Caesarea. He amended the Septuagint by his Hexapla (a book in 6 columns), which contained the Hebrew text, the Hebrew text expressed in Greek letters, the version of Aquila, the version of Symmachus, the Septuagint and the version of Theodotion. The Hexapla is best known from a Syriac translation which was made from it.

### **(4) The critical recensions of the Septuagint in Syria and Egypt.**

In the fourth century A.D. two recensions of the Septuagint were made as attempts to revise the Septuagint:

- **The recension of Lucian**, a presbyter (elder) of Antioch in Syria
- **The recension of Hesychius**, an Egyptian bishop.

These two recensions were much used in the Eastern (orthodox) churches.

### 3. Other translations of the Hebrew Old Testament.

The Old Testament was also translated in other languages:

- **Latin**, the language of the Western Roman Empire
- **Syrian**, an important language in the Eastern Roman Empire
- **Coptic**, a language in Egypt

## **H. THE CANON OR LIST OF THE INSPIRED AND AUTHORITATIVE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

### 1. The books which truly belong to the Old Testament.

**Why does the Old Testament have these 39 books?**

The Old Testament has these 39 books, because these books claim divine inspiration and divine authority.

- It was God himself who performed the deeds and spoke the words and who commanded the writers to record these deeds and words in books.
- The writers of the Bible books also acknowledge that the Author of the Old Testament books is God himself, because they again and again use the words, “Thus says the LORD” or “The word of the LORD came to me”.
- The historical books in the Bible show that the Old Testament books received immediate recognition and acceptance by the faithful believers as soon as they were made aware of these books.

The books which are regarded as truly belonging to the Old Testament are called ‘**canonical books**’. The word ‘**canon**’ means a straight reed or a ruler used as a measuring stick. Applied to literature, the word ‘**canon**’ means *the list of books which conform to the standard of divine inspiration and divine authority*.

The Jews throughout the centuries and the apostles, the early Christian Church and the Christian Churches after the Reformation, all considered these same 39 books of the Old Testament as inspired by God and authoritative for what people should believe and how they should live.

### 2. The division of the Old Testament books.

**These 39 books were divided into three parts: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings.**

#### **(1) The Hebrew Masoretic text**

**The Hebrew Masoretic Text is divided into three parts: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings.**

Already about 130 B.C. the prologue of the apocryphal book ‘Ecclesiasticus (the Wisdom of Sirach) spoke of the three main divisions of the Old Testament books, namely “the Law, the Prophets and the Books by others who have followed in the steps of the prophets”. In about 130 B.C. the apocryphal book “1 Maccabees’ quotes from the Psalms and describes two scenes from the book of Daniel. Apparently the writer regarded both as canonical.

The New Testament usually refers to the Hebrew Scriptures simply as: ‘**the Law and the Prophets**’<sup>63</sup>. In one place even a passage from the Psalms<sup>64</sup> is spoken of as being written “in your Law”<sup>65</sup>. In about 30 A.D. Jesus said, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms”<sup>66</sup>. So also Jesus knew that the Old Testament was divided into three parts. Besides the Psalms, other books belonging to the Writings are also used in the New Testament as the Word of God. Daniel 9:27, 11:31, 12:11 is used in Matthew 24:15. Proverbs 3:11-12 is used in Hebrews 12:5-6. And Lamentations 2:1 is alluded to in Matthew 5:35.

In about 90 A.D. a famous Jewish writer, called **Flavius Josephus**, wrote in *Contra Apionem* 1:8 about the canon or “the fixed list of the Old Testament books, which were regarded as inspired and authoritative.” He said, “We do not have tens of thousands of books, which disagree and conflict with each other, but only 22 books containing the record of all time, which people rightly believe to be divine.” He mentions that the Law consists of the 5 books of Moses, the Prophets consists of 13 books and the remaining 4 books consists of hymns and practical wisdom for people how to conduct their lives. He said that the succession of the prophets ceased during the time of king Arthaxerxes, who died in 424 B.C.<sup>67</sup> He also said that since that time “no one has dared to add anything to them, or to take anything from them, or to alter anything in them”! He alluded to the apocryphal material, but it is plain that he used them merely as a historical source and not as divinely inspired books.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew 5:17; Matthew 7:12; Matthew 22:40

<sup>64</sup> Psalm 82

<sup>65</sup> John 10:34

<sup>66</sup> Luke 24

<sup>67</sup> However cf. Matthew 11:13; Luke 16:16.

Flavius Josephus thus maintains that:

- The 22 canonical books of the Old Testament are the same 39 books of the Old Testament we possess today! Together with the Jews of his time he combined the following books into one book: Judges and Ruth formed one book, the two books of Samuel formed one book, the two books of Kings formed one book, the two books of Chronicles formed one book, Ezra and Nehemiah formed one book, Jeremiah and Lamentations formed one book, and finally the twelve minor prophets formed one book. Thus, the 39 books were ordered into 22 books.
- After the time of the prophet Malachi (432-420 B.C.) no more canonical books were written.
- Josephus' division shows that the assignment of Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel and Song of Songs to the third division of the Hebrew Canon happened later than the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. and therefore the argument against the authenticity of the book Daniel, based on its final assignment to the Writings, lacks validity.

Thus hundreds of years before the New Testament period, the list of 39 Old Testament books in the Bible were firmly fixed as the only inspired and authoritative books in the Old Testament!

An authoritative copy of the Law was placed beside the ark<sup>68</sup>. The prophets belonged like Moses to the prophetic order<sup>69</sup>. The revelations they received directly from God they proclaimed and recorded. And they composed their account of Israel's history from God's point of view. The inspired books that did not belong to the first two groups were included under "the Writings".

Later, rabbis divided the Hebrew Masoretic Text (the Hebrew Bible of today) as follows:

• <b>Law (Torah)</b> <i>Books of the Law:</i> Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	(5)	5
• <b>Prophets (Nebi'im)</b> <i>Former Prophets:</i> Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings	(4)	
<i>Latter Prophets:</i> Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, 12 Minor prophets	(4)	8
• <b>Writings (Ketubim)</b> <i>Poetry and wisdom:</i> Psalms, Proverbs, Job	(3)	
<i>Rolls (Megilot):</i> Song of Songs, (Ruth), (Lamentations), Ecclesiastes, Esther	(5)/(3)	
<i>Historical books:</i> Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1&2 Chronicles	(3)	11/9
		<u>24/22</u>

The reason why Ruth was separated from Judges and Lamentations from Jeremiah was because they were later used in the Jewish liturgical year as follows:

- The book Song of Songs is read during 1<sup>st</sup> month (Passover)
- The book Ruth is read during 3<sup>rd</sup> month (Pentecost)
- The book Lamentations is read during 5<sup>th</sup> month
- The book Ecclesiastes is read during 7<sup>th</sup> month (Feast of Tabernacles)
- The book Esther is read during 12<sup>th</sup> month (Purim)

The reason Daniel was assigned to the Writings was because he was not regarded as a prophet, but as a civil servant. Although he possessed a prophetic gift he was not anointed to be a prophet. Ezra was not a prophet, but a scribe. Nehemiah was not a prophet, but a governor.

Thus, *the Hebrew Masoretic text has 22 books which are arranged in 39 books in modern Bibles.*

In 170 A.D. bishop Milito of Sardis went to the Orient to investigate the number and order of the Old Testament Books. He mentions all the Bible books except Lamentations (which was arranged under Jeremiah) and Nehemiah (which was arranged under Ezra). He only left out the book Esther for some unknown reason. He did not include a single apocryphal book.

Christian apologists appealed to the Old Testament in their polemic with the Jews and utilised the Jewish division of Bible Books. Thus, Tertullian (160-250 A.D.) mentions 24 canonical books and Origenes (185-254), Athanasius (365) and Jerome (340-420) mention 22 canonical books.

## (2) The Greek Septuagint translation.

The Greek Septuagint translation follows has a different order than the Hebrew Masoretic text. The order is more topical. *The Septuagint adds several apocryphal books.*

- **Law** Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
- **History** Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings (the last 4 books are generally called 1-4 Kingdoms), 1&2 Chronicles, *1 Esdras (apocryphal)*, 2 Esdras (=Ezra), Nehemiah, *Tobith (apocryphal)*, Esther (*with apocryphal additions*)
- **Poetry** Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, *Wisdom of Solomon (apocryphal)*, *Wisdom of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus (apocryphal)*
- **Prophecy** **Minor Prophets:** Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

<sup>68</sup> Deuteronomy 31:26

<sup>69</sup> Deuteronomy 18:14-22

**Major Prophets:** Isaiah, Jeremiah, *Baruch (apocryphal)*, Lamentations, *Epistle of Jeremiah (apocryphal)*, Ezekiel, Daniel (*with three apocryphal portions called: Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Song of Three Holy Children*)

- **Supplement** **History:** *1&2 Maccabees (apocryphal)*

### **(3) The Latin Vulgate translation.**

The Latin Vulgate follows the order of the Greek Septuagint with some exceptions. There are considerable additions to Esther.

### **(4) Modern translations of the Bible**

Modern translations of the Bible follow the Latin Vulgate *order*, of course without the apocryphal additions, and the Hebrew Masoretic Text in *content*.

## **3. The books of the Old Testament spoken against (the so-called “Antilegomena”).**

### **Jewish controversy about the Canon of the Old Testament.**

The Mishnah (100-200 A.D.) mentions the existence of a controversy in some Jewish circles during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. about the canonicity of the books Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Esther. Some had doubts about Proverbs. The Gemara (before 300 A.D.) mentions discussions about the authority of the book Ezekiel. The disciples of the rabbi Shammai contested the canonicity of Ecclesiastes, while the disciples of the rabbi Hillel upheld it vigorously. The scholarly discussions held at Jamnia (90 A.D.) sustained the claims of both Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs to divine authority.

### **Jewish charges brought against certain Old Testament Books.**

- **Ecclesiastes.** The book was charged with alleged pessimism, Epicureanism and denial of the life to come. However, the purpose of Ecclesiastes is to convince people of the uselessness of any worldview which does not rise above the horizon of man himself. Having shown the vanity of living for worldly goals, the author claims the way for a truly adequate worldview which recognizes God himself as the highest value of all, and the meaningful life as the one which is lived in his service.
- **Song of Songs.** The book was charged with physical attractiveness in bold and enthusiastic imagery bordering on the erotic. However, the allegorical interpretation of Hillel and later Christians says that the book speaks about the relationship of love between God and man.
- **Esther.** The objection was that God is not mentioned in it at all. However, the drawback was more than offset by the unavoidable manifestation of divine providence working through every circumstance to deliver his Jewish race from the greatest threat to its existence ever faced in history.
- **Ezekiel.** The problem was that it disagreed in the details of its description of the latter-day temple and ritual with the tabernacle of Moses and the temple of Solomon. However, they accepted the book, explaining that it might not describe the second temple of Zerubbabel, but possibly a future temple. Anyway, the Jews believed that the future coming of the prophet Elijah would explain these difficulties to the faithful.
- **Proverbs.** The problems centred on apparent contradictory precepts as in Proverbs 26:4-5.

These minor objections should not be construed as having delayed the canonicity of the above books, any more than Martin Luther's 16<sup>th</sup> century objections against James and Esther delayed canonical recognition of these books.

## **4. The books which do not belong to the Old Testament Canon: ‘The Apocrypha’.**

The word ‘apocryphal books’ means ‘books of doubtful authenticity’. The apocryphal books may not be called ‘deuterocanonical books’<sup>70</sup> as if these books are part of the Canon of the Bible!

### **Arguments in favour of including the Apocrypha in the Canon.**

- **Argument 1. The Earliest Versions (translations) of the Old Testament contained the Apocrypha.**

This is only partly true! The earliest translation which contained the Apocrypha was the Greek Septuagint (made in Egypt). Later translations which were based on the Septuagint (namely: the Latin Itala, the Coptic, Ethiopic and Syrian versions) also contain the Apocrypha. But the Aramaic Targums did not acknowledge the Apocrypha. The Syriac Peshitta in its earliest version does not contain the Apocrypha. And Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgata, did not recognize the Apocrypha as being of equal authority with the canonical books.

But even in the Septuagint the Apocrypha maintained a rather uncertain existence.

**The Codex Vaticanus (B)** lacks 1&2 Maccabees (regarded by Roman Catholics as canonical), but includes 1 Esdras (regarded by Roman Catholics as non-canonical).

**The Codex Sinaiticus (Aleph)** omits Baruch (regarded by Roman Catholics as canonical), but includes 4 Maccabees (regarded by Roman Catholics as non-canonical).

**The Codex Alexandrinus (A)** includes 1 Esdras and 3 and 4 Maccabees (regarded by Roman Catholics as non-canonical).

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<sup>70</sup> As in the Dutch NBV, a combined translation of Protestants and Roman Catholics.

Thus the three oldest manuscripts of the Septuagint (all uncials) show considerable uncertainty as to which books constitute the list of Apocrypha. *The 14 Apocrypha accepted by the Roman Catholic Church are by no means substantiated by the testimony of the great uncials of the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.!*

• **Argument 2. The so-called Alexandrian Canon (Egypt) included the Apocrypha.**

It is by no means certain that all the Apocrypha in the Septuagint were considered canonical even by the Alexandrian Jews themselves. Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C. to 40 A.D.) frequently quotes from the canonical books, but not once from any apocryphal book! The Alexandrian Jews in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. accepted Aquila's Greek Version (130 A.D.) even though it did not contain the Apocrypha.

A more reasonable deduction of these facts is what Jerome says. The Alexandrian Jews chose to include in their edition of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) both the books they recognized as canonical and also the books they regarded as 'ecclesiastical' that is, considered valuable and edifying, but not inerrant.

This view is supported by the discovery of at least two apocryphal books (Ecclesiasticus and Tobith) at Qumran in the heartland of Palestine where the so-called Palestinian Canon should have been authoritative.

• **Argument 3. The New Testament usually employed the Septuagint in its quotations from the Old Testament.**

The argument is that since the Septuagint contained the Apocrypha, the apostles must have recognized the authority of the entire Septuagint as it was then constituted.

It is true that the New Testament sometimes makes appeal to the works outside the (Hebrew) Palestinian Canon. Only of one quotation (Jude 14-16) from the apocryphal book of Enoch 1:9 survived, but only in the Ethiopian language.

In the New Testament there are also quotations from pagan Greek authors. In Acts 17:28 Paul quotes from the *Phaenomena* of Aratus (line 5). In 1 Corinthians 15:33 he quotes from the comedy *Thai* of Menander. Surely no one would suppose that quotations as these establish the canonicity of either Aratus or Menander!

On the contrary, the testimony of the New Testament is most decisive against the canonicity of the 14 apocryphal books. The New Testament authors quoted from 35 of the 39 Old Testament Books, namely not from Ruth, Ezra, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs (although Romans 8:20 seems to reflect Ecclesiastes 1:2 with respect to meaninglessness). It is true that a mere quotation does not necessarily establish canonicity! But it is inconceivable that the New Testament authors could have considered the 14 Apocrypha of the Roman Catholic Canon as canonical and yet never once quoted from them or even alluded to any of them!

• **Argument 4. The Church Fathers quoted from the Apocrypha.**

While some early Christian writers (1 Clement, Epistle of Barnabas and Augustine of Hippo) appear to accept the Apocrypha, others (Athanasius) take a clear stand against the Apocrypha.

This argument is presumptive, because Jude (14-15) may quote Enoch (because the quotation is true in this case), without necessarily endorsing the whole book of Enoch as canonical.

Augustine was rather uncritical and even inconsistent. On the one hand he was in favour of including the Apocrypha in the Canon at the Council of Carthage (397 A.D.). On the other hand, when an appeal was made by an antagonist to a passage in 2 Maccabees to settle an argument in his favour, Augustine replied that that person's cause must be weak if he had to resort to a book not in the same category as those received and accepted by the Jews (the canonical books).

Athanasius (276-373)(bishop of Alexandria in 328) was highly regarded by Christians in the East and in the West, discussed in his 39<sup>th</sup> letter (paragraph 4) "the particular books and their number" and proceeded to enumerate the same books as found in the Masoretic Text and in approximately the same order as in the Protestant Bible. Then (in paragraph 6 and 7) he says that "the extra biblical books (the Apocrypha) were not included in the Canon, but were merely appointed to be read".

The Eastern (Orthodox) Church nevertheless accepted the Apocrypha at the second Council of Trullan (692). Many Christians in the East continued to have their misgivings about some of the Apocrypha. Finally the Greek (Orthodox) Church in Jerusalem in 1672 narrowed the number of Apocrypha down to four: Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, Tobith and Judith.

**The 14 Apocrypha<sup>71</sup> included in the Roman Catholic Canon.**

- (1) 1 Esdras (150 B.C.) – rebuilding after the exile.
- (2) 2 Esdras (100 A.D.) – seven apocalyptic visions
- (3) Tobith (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.) – Pharisaic novel
- (4) Judith (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.) – Pharisaic novel
- (5) Additions to Esther (100 B.C.) – prayers and letters from Arthaxerxes
- (6) Wisdom of Solomon (40 A.D.) – purposed to keep the Jews from scepticism, materialism and idolatry
- (7) Wisdom of Jesus Sirach or Ecclesiasticus (180 B.C.) – proverbs

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<sup>71</sup> In the Dutch NBV. 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras and additions to Esther are arranged under "Ester (Greek)". Susanna, Bel and the Dragon and The Three Hebrew Children arranged under 'Additions to Daniel.' The Letter to Jeremiah is arranged under 'Baruch'.

- (8) Baruch (100 A.D.) – explains Jerusalem’s destruction in 70 A.D. It included ‘the Letter to Jeremiah’.
- (9) History of Susanna (Daniel chapter 13)(1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.)
- (10) Bel and the Dragon (Daniel chapter 14) (1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.) – a legend
- (11) Song of Three Hebrew Children (added after Daniel 3:22 in the Septuagint and Vulgate)
- (12) Prayer of Manasseh (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.) – purpose to explain 2 Chronicles 33:19
- (13) 1 Maccabees (1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.) – the history of three Maccabean brothers: Judas, Jonathan and Simon relates the history of the struggle of the Jews against their Greek rulers between 175-134 B.C. (Flavius Josephus also relates this).
- (14) 2 Maccabees (1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.) – the same history, but only of Judas the Maccabee.

There are other books included under the Apocrypha: the Epistle of Jeremiah, 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees.

### **A historical summary of the exclusion of the Apocrypha from the Canon.**

- The philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C. to 40 A.D.) quoted from the Old Testament, but never once from the Apocrypha!
- The historian, Flavius Josephus (37-95 A.D.) described the Canon as consisting of 22 books and says that no other book had been added since 425 B.C.! He excluded all the Apocrypha from the Canon!
- Jesus Christ (30 A.D.) and his apostles (43-97 A.D.) quote from almost all the 39 books in the Old Testament, but not once from the Apocrypha!
- The Jewish scholars of Jamnia (90 A.D.) rejected the Apocrypha.
- No Christian Council during the first 4 centuries A.D. ascribed inspiration to the Apocrypha.
- Many Church Fathers rejected the Apocrypha, notably Origenes (185-254 A.D.), Athanasius (276-373 A.D.) and Cyrillus (315-386 A.D.).
- Jerome (340-420 A.D.) translated the Greek Septuagint into the Latin Vulgate, including the Apocrypha, but rejected the Apocrypha as part of the Canon.
- Many Roman Catholic Scholars rejected the Apocrypha during the Reformation.
- All leaders of the Reformation rejected the Apocrypha.

### **A historical summary of the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the Roman Catholic Canon.**

In 382 A.D. Pope Damasus commissioned Jerome to revise **the Itala** (a Latin translation of the Septuagint completed in 200 A.D.) with reference to the Septuagint. However, Jerome perfected his Hebrew and translated the Old Testament including the Apocrypha (from Hebrew Masoretic text and the Greek Septuagint). His translation (the *Vulgata*) received more or less official acceptance as the new, authoritative Latin Bible for the Western Church.

Over the subsequent centuries, the Vulgate was published in parallel columns with the Itala, but also received some corruption from the Itala.

Only after many Roman Catholic scholars had debated against the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the Vulgate, the Apocrypha were accepted officially by the Roman Catholic Church as part of the canonical books at **the Council of Trent (1546)**, which was a council specially called to combat the Reformation.

The **Council of Trent** also appointed a commission to produce an expurgated edition of the Vulgate and this indirectly resulted in **the Sixtine Edition of the Vulgate** which was published in 1590. This edition was amended in **the Clementine Edition of the Vulgate** in 1592. Both editions included the Apocrypha.

Finally in 1672 the Greek (Orthodox) Church in Jerusalem narrowed the number of Apocrypha down to four: Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, Tobith and Judith.

### **Evaluation of the Apocrypha.**

Jesus Christ and the apostles quote from almost every one of the 39 Old Testament books, but not once from the apocryphal books! We must therefore conclude that the Apocryphal books in the Roman Catholic Bible do NOT belong to the original Bible! They are NOT divinely inspired and they are NOT authoritative for doctrine or life of Christians!

### **5. Summary of the formation of the Hebrew Canon.**

Whenever the matter comes up, the biblical authors indicate clearly that the various books of the Bible are canonical from the moment of their inception, by virtue of two reasons:

- The books claim to have divine authority: “Thus says the LORD”.
- The books received immediate recognition and acceptance by the faithful believers as soon as they were made aware of the writings

An authoritative copy of **the Law** was made not long before the death of Moses (1407 B.C.).

**The Prophets** were canonized about 400 B.C. The criterion was that an author had to belong to the prophetic order (Deuteronomy 18:14-22). A prophet either received his revelations directly from God (the prophetic books) or composed an account of the history of salvation from the perspective of God (not man)(the historical books).

**The Writings** were also canonized about 400 B.C. The Writings consist of all the inspired books not belonging to the first two groups.

#### **6. The only true test of canonicity.**

##### **What makes a book in the Bible ‘canonical’?**

‘Canonicity’ is the testimony of God the Holy Spirit to the truth and authority of his own Word, the Bible. This testimony found (and still finds) a response of recognition, faith and submission in the hearts of God’s people who walked (and still walk) in a covenant relationship with him.

If ‘canonicity’ was only a quality somehow imparted to the books of the Bible by any kind of human council or decision (e.g. as the Roman Catholic Church and also the liberals have done), then perhaps a set of mechanical tests could be set up to determine which books should be accepted as authoritative and which books should be rejected.

The people who reject the claim of the Bible to be the uniquely inspired revelation of God’s will, must necessarily cast about for some more rationalistic, down-to-earth explanations of the origins of these books. Because of their anti-super naturalistic presuppositions, they must be true to their philosophical principles in rejecting all biblical data which testify to direct revelation from God. They must regard statements as “Thus says the LORD” as legendary.

But, if, on the other hand, a sovereign God has taken the initiative in revelation and in the production of an inspired record of that revelation through human agents, *‘canonicity’ must simply be a matter of recognition and acknowledgement (by faith and obedience) of the inherent quality of these books*, namely, that they are inspired by God and are authoritative for what people must believe and how they must behave.

When a child recognizes his own parent from a multitude of other adults, he does not impart to them any new quality of ‘parenthood’ by such an act. He simply recognizes a relationship which already exists. So also with the list of the inspired and authoritative books of the Bible (the Canon) which was drawn up by the councils of the Church. The councils of the Church did not impart canonicity to a single page in the Bible by means of any decision. The Councils simply recognized and acknowledged the divine inspiration and authority (e.g. the canonicity) which were inherently canonical from the time these books were first composed. And the Councils formerly rejected other books (e.g. the Apocrypha) for which canonicity had been falsely claimed!

The biblical authors say clearly that the books of the Bible are ‘canonical’ (divinely inspired and authoritative) from the moment of their inception by virtue of divine authority behind them: “Thus says the Lord”. The canonical books do have merely human authority, but have divine authority. The canonical received immediate recognition and acceptance as divinely inspired and authoritative for doctrine and life by the faithful believers as soon as they were made aware of these writings.