

The recognition and acceptance of the Hebrew canon

1. Twenty-four or twenty-two?

- a) There is a tradition that the entire Hebrew canon had been recognised by the time of Ezra, the scribe. This is reflected in the first century AD Apocryphal book of 2 Esdras:
 - (1) "So during the forty days ninety-four books were written. And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying, 'Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people.'" (2 Esdras 14:44-46)
 - (2) These "twenty-four books" that were to be made public correlate well with the standard number of books in the Hebrew canon and it is not at all implausible that Ezra would have known all those that had been written by his lifetime.
 - (3) An older tradition records Ezra's contemporary Nehemiah gathering together a library:
 - (a) The same things are reported in the records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah, and also that he founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings. (2 Maccabees 2:13)
 - (b) Here, "the writings of David, and letters of kings ..." might have reference to books later categorised as "the Writings" - as distinct from the "Law and the Prophets."
 - (4) So there are traditions that support the recognition of a complete Hebrew canon several hundred years before the time of Christ. These may not be as reliable as we might wish them to be, and there are those who maintain that the canon was not recognised in its complete form until much closer to the end of the first millennium BC.
- b) In his defence of the Jewish people against Apion of Egypt, written at the close of the first century AD, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (AD 37 - c.100) claims that the Hebrew Bible contained twenty-two books.
 - (1) "We have not 10,000 books among us disagreeing with and contradicting one another, but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all time, and are justly believed to be divine. Five of these are by Moses, and contain his laws and traditions of the origin of mankind until his death... From the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets who succeeded Moses wrote down what happened in their times in thirteen books; and the remaining four books contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life. Our history has also been written in detail from Artaxerxes to our own times, but is not esteemed equally authoritative

with the books already mentioned, because there was not then an exact succession of prophets.”¹

- (2) Though the identity of some of these books is indisputable, such as the five books of Moses, we cannot be so certain as to the complete contents of this twenty-two book canon. It may well be that it contains the same books as the twenty-four book canon of 2 Esdras, perhaps combining Ruth with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah, but no further details are given.
- (3) In his *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, E. Earle Ellis suggests the following likely arrangement.

Moses (5)	Prophets (13)	Hymns (4)
Genesis	Joshua	Psalms
Exodus	Judges - Ruth	Proverbs
Leviticus	Samuel	Ecclesiastes
Numbers	Kings	Song of Songs
Deuteronomy	Chronicles	
	Ezra/Nehemiah	
	Esther	
	Isaiah	
	Jeremiah - Lamentations	
	Ezekiel	
	Daniel	
	The Twelve	
	Job	

- (4) Samuel, Kings and Chronicles are counted as single volumes respectively, as was the norm, along with Ezra and Nehemiah which are also counted as one.

2. Early Christian witness

- a) In around AD 170, Melito, bishop of Sardis, wrote of the number and order of books in the Old Testament as it had been received in Palestinian Jewish (or Jewish Christian) circles in the second century.
- b) “Accordingly when I went East and came to the place where these things were preached and done, I learned accurately the books of the Old Testament, and send them to you as written below. Their names are as follows: Of Moses, five books: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy; Joshua son of Nun, Judges, Ruth; of Kings, four books; of Chronicles, two; the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon or Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job; of Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah; of the twelve prophets, one book ; Daniel, Ezekiel, Esdras.”²

¹ Josephus, *Against Apion*, I. 8

² Melito of Sardis, quoted by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Book IV, 26.14

c) We might arrange these like this:

of Moses			of Prophets
Genesis	Joshua	Psalms	Isaiah
Exodus	Judges	Proverbs (or Wisdom)	Jeremiah
Leviticus	Ruth	Ecclesiastes	The Twelve
Numbers	1 Kings	Song of Songs	Daniel
Deuteronomy	2 Kings	Job	Ezekiel
	3 Kings		Esdras
	4 Kings		
	1 Chronicles		
	2 Chronicles		

- d) There are twenty-five books listed. The books of Samuel are counted as 1 and 2 Kings, Lamentations is presumably counted under Jeremiah and the only notable omission from the canon with which we are familiar is Esther (which some suggest might be accidental). Ezra and Nehemiah, which were always counted as one book until the third century AD, are listed under the Greek name Esdras.
- e) In general, the order of the books within Melito's canon is much closer to that found within the Septuagint, as are the names of the books, and must have been based upon an earlier listing.

3. Later Jewish witness

- a) The Babylonian Talmud contains traditional teachings of the Jews, much dating back before the third century AD.
- (1) Much of the Talmud is written in the form of questions and answers as seen in the following excerpt. In the tractate Baba Bathra (14b) from Seder Nezikin, we read:
- (2) Our Rabbis taught: The order of the Prophets is, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Twelve Minor Prophets. Let us examine this. Hosea came first, as it is written, God spake first to Hosea. But did God speak first to Hosea? Were there not many prophets between Moses and Hosea? R. Johanan, however, has explained that [what It means is that] he was the first of the four prophets who prophesied at that period, namely, Hosea, Isaiah, Amos and Micah. Should not then Hosea come first? — Since his prophecy is written along with those of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, and Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi came at the end of the prophets, he is reckoned with them. But why should he not be written separately and placed first? — Since his book is so small, it might be lost [if copied separately]. Let us see again. Isaiah was prior to Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Then why should not Isaiah be placed first? — Because the Book of Kings ends with a record of destruction and Jeremiah speaks throughout of destruction and Ezekiel commences with destruction and ends with

consolation and Isaiah is full of consolation; therefore we put destruction next to destruction and consolation next to consolation.

- (3) The order of the Hagiographa is Ruth, the Book of Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther, Ezra and Chronicles. Now on the view that Job lived in the days of Moses, should not the book of Job come first? — We do not begin with a record of suffering. But Ruth also is a record of suffering? — It is a suffering with a sequel [of happiness], as R. Johanan said: Why was her name called Ruth? — Because there issued from her David who replenished the Holy One, blessed be He, with hymns and praises.³

b) Its arrangement looks like this:

Torah (5)	Prophets (8)	Hagiographa (11)
Genesis	Joshua	Ruth
Exodus	Judges	Psalms
Leviticus	Samuel	Job
Numbers	Kings	Proverbs
Deuteronomy	Jeremiah	Ecclesiastes
	Ezekiel	Song of Songs
	Isaiah	Lamentations
	The Twelve	Daniel
		Esther
		Ezra
		Chronicles

- c) The order and contents of the Torah is taken for granted. That the order of the canonical books is the concern of this passage suggests that there was no question as to their identity – that is, the limits of the canon were clearly recognised. With the exception of the order of Isaiah, Ruth, Song of Songs and Esther, the order agrees with the later form of the Hebrew Bible preserved within masoretic circles and upon which text our Old Testament is dependent.

4. The witness of Origen

- a) Origen was an eminent Christian scholar and prolific writer, born in Alexandria, Egypt, in the late second century AD. Sometime before AD 231, when he was forced to leave Alexandria and took up residence in Caesarea, Origen wrote an exposition of the first Psalm. Within this, according to Eusebius, “he gives a catalogue of the sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament as follows:”

³ *Talmud, Seder Nezikin, Baba Bathra* 14b (Soncino edition)

- (1) It should be stated that the canonical books, as the Hebrews have handed them down, are twenty-two; corresponding with the number of their letters ...
- (2) The twenty-two books of the Hebrews are the following: That which is called by us Genesis, but by the Hebrews, from the beginning of the book, Bresith, which means, 'In the beginning'; Exodus, Welesmoth, that is, 'These are the names'; Leviticus, Wikra, 'And he called'; Numbers, Ammesphekodeim; Deuteronomy, Eleaddebareim, 'These are the words'; Joshua, the son of Nun, Josoue ben Noun; Judges and Ruth, among them in one book, Saphateim; the First and Second of Kings, among them one, Samouel, that is, 'The called of God'; the Third and Fourth of Kings in one, Wammelch David, that is, 'The kingdom of David'; of the Chronicles, the First and Second in one, Dabreïamein, that is, 'Records of days'; Esdras, First and Second in one, Ezra, that is, 'An assistant'; the book of Psalms, Spharthelleim; the Proverbs of Solomon, Meloth; Ecclesiastes, Koelth; the Song of Songs (not, as some suppose, Songs of Songs), Sir Hassirim; Isaiah, Jessia; Jeremiah, with Lamentations and the epistle in one, Jeremia; Daniel, Daniel; Ezekiel, Jezekiel; Job, Job; Esther, Esther. And besides these there are the Maccabees, which are entitled Sarbeth Sabanaiel.” He gives these in the above-mentioned work.⁴

b) For ease of comparison, we might arrange these like this:

Genesis	Joshua	Psalms	Isaiah
Exodus	Judges-Ruth	Proverbs	Jeremiah-Lamentations
Leviticus	1-2 Kings	Ecclesiastes	Daniel
Numbers	3-4 Kings	Song of Songs	Ezekiel
Deuteronomy	1-2 Chronicles		Job
	Esdras		Esther

- c) Origen uses the Greek (Septuagint) titles but records also the Hebrew titles (here in italics) along with their meanings. He recognises that Judges and Ruth are counted as separate books in some traditions but as one in others (accounting for the different number of books in the Hebrew canon of Josephus and the rabbinic and masoretic traditions). This is true also of the books of Kings, and of Jeremiah and Lamentations, though to these Origen also adds an epistle.
- d) The total number in this list comes to twenty-one, suggesting that the ‘Twelve Prophets’ has been omitted by a scribe quite by accident. The books of Maccabees are included as additional and presumably not intended to be considered as part of the recognised canon.

5. The ‘canon’ of Athanasius

- a) We mentioned last time that the earliest use of the word “canon” in relation to the Scriptures seems to have occurred in about AD 367 in a letter written by

⁴ Origen, quoted by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Book VI, 25.1–2

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, one of the most important centres of Christianity at this time.

- b) He used the word ‘canon’ in reference to a list of those books to be regarded as “divinely inspired Scripture.” In his annual ‘festal letter’ of about AD 367 he wrote:
- c) “There are, then, of the Old Testament, twenty-two books in number; for, as I have heard, it is handed down that this is the number of the letters among the Hebrews; their respective order and names being as follows. The first is Genesis, then Exodus, next Leviticus, after that Numbers, and then Deuteronomy. Following these there is Joshua, the son of Nun, then Judges, then Ruth. And again, after these four books of Kings, the first and second being reckoned as one book, and so likewise the third and fourth as one book. And again, the first and second of the Chronicles are reckoned as one book. Again Ezra, the first and second are similarly one book. After these there is the book of Psalms, then the Proverbs, next Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Job follows, then the Prophets, the twelve being reckoned as one book. Then Isaiah, one book, then Jeremiah with Baruch, Lamentations, and the epistle, one book; afterwards, Ezekiel and Daniel, each one book. Thus far constitutes the Old Testament.”⁵
- d) His total is twenty-two, the same as that of Origen, and his ‘canon’ looks very much like Origen’s too except that he lists Ruth separately and omits Esther.

Genesis	Joshua	Psalms	The Twelve
Exodus	Judges	Proverbs	Isaiah
Leviticus	Ruth	Ecclesiastes	Jeremiah-Lamentations
Numbers	1-2 Kings	Song of Songs	Ezekiel
Deuteronomy	3-4 Kings	Job	Daniel
	1-2 Chronicles		
	1-2 Ezra		

⁵ Athanasius, Festal Letters, XXXIX, 3, in Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers: Athanasius, Select Works and Letters*