

How we got our Old Testament

Christian views of the Old Testament

Throughout church history attitudes towards the Old Testament have varied, ranging from rejecting it as sub-Christian to believing that only Christians can understand it and seeing references to Christ everywhere in it. I have often heard Christians dismissing it, and some never read it except for the Psalms and some other familiar passages. There is also confusion and ignorance about its origins and this is nothing new; a 13th century Franciscan called Bonaventure believed that the Virgin Mary wrote the Psalms!

Does it matter?

Yes. It is God's word to us as much as is the New Testament, which refers to it a lot and assumes a familiarity with it; if we are ignorant of the Old Testament we will not properly understand the New or even the Gospel. Jesus, the apostles and the early church all accepted it as inspired and authoritative Scripture and so should we.

How did it come into being?

Of course before the birth of Christianity, the Old Testament existed as the Jewish Scriptures, but it was not delivered in one package. Its books were written over 1000 years or more, starting with collections of laws at the time of Moses. A considerable amount was probably in existence by the time of Ezra and Nehemiah in the 5th century BC and collected together at that time, and although records of Jewish history after that until the coming of Christ are sketchy, it is likely that a body of authoritative Scriptures had been accepted by the 2nd century BC. By the time of Christ it seems that this collection was completed, though arranged differently to our Old Testament. The books were originally written on scrolls, not bound together, so their order was not fixed.

How was it transmitted?

Much of the material was delivered and transmitted orally before being written down, the text then copied by hand over the centuries. To us that might raise questions of accuracy, but we must remember that the Jews, despite their up and down relationship with God, revered his word, and the scribes copied and preserved the manuscripts very carefully. It is true that the oldest complete Hebrew manuscripts we have date from about 900 AD, but among the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in the mid 20th century there is an entire manuscript of Isaiah from the 2nd century BC, and it is almost identical to the text which had been passed down the centuries. The Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek in the 2nd or 3rd century BC, and it was this Greek version which was used by the early church. Of course printing came a lot later and it was not until the late 15th century that a complete Hebrew Old Testament was printed.

How were its contents decided?

It is often claimed that the Jewish synod at Jamnia in about 90 AD decided the canon (the accepted books constituting the Old Testament). However, although around this time decisions were made about some of the books, this was part of a process rather than a once for all ruling, and involved a formal recognition of something which had already been accepted for a considerable period. At no time did Jews or Christians sit down and decide the contents of the Old Testament, but they recognised books already acknowledged as authoritative, Christians from the outset accepting the same books as the Jews. There was discussion about some of them, although most ordinary Christians would have been unaware of these debates. The Jewish Scriptures might be cited as consisting of 22 or 24 books rather than the 39 in our Bible, but they group together some books we have separately, and the contents are the same.

However, the Greek translation, the Septuagint, did include other Jewish writings now called the Apocrypha, which became largely accepted in the western church as part of Scripture, were included in the Old Testament by the Council of Trent in the 16th century and are still printed in Roman Catholic editions of the Bible. But at the Reformation the Hebrew Scriptures, which had never included these books, were reverted to, and the Apocryphal books rejected as part of the Bible, variable in historicity and doctrine, though still profitable to read.

So do not neglect the Old Testament. It is God's word, preserved for us throughout many centuries. Although parts of it are difficult to read and understand, it is in the words of Paul, 'God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 *Tim 3:16*). Remember it is to what we call the Old Testament that Paul refers as that was the only Scripture he had!