

FORMATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible is the inspired word of God. This does not mean that every word written in it was spoken by God. A student of the Bible may have come across some information about the various books or epistles that are related to the Bible but are not part of the sixty-six (66) books of the Bible. Such a student may have some concerns which would require investigations. This paper is a product of such concerns and investigations but will focus on the Old Testament (OT) part of the Bible. Series of questions which are raised in the minds of people may include: who wrote the Bible? Why does the entire Bible contain sixty-six books? Why do we have thirty-nine books in the Old Testament? Are there other books that did not make into the accepted books? What criteria was used for the inclusion and exclusion of some books? Do we have the original manuscripts? If not, what about the copies? Are they reliable? Do we have sufficient numbers of manuscripts available, that by careful comparison we can be confident of what the text should be?

The answers to these questions do not necessary authenticate the truthfulness and reliability of the Bible but also its inspiration. Therefore, having a knowledge of these things goes a long way to build our confidences in understanding what we have and how we got it. An adequate knowledge about the formation of the Old Testament canon helps readers of the Old Testament to appreciate the providence of God in helping mankind to have His inspired word and also to know how efforts were made by the past generation through God's hand to minimize human errors in copying, preserving, and translating God's Word into various languages of the world. There are detailed works done in times past that can provide immense

information for a student who would want to dig deeper. This paper is aimed at introducing readers to this subject.

❖ DEFINITIONS

Canon is a term that refers to the rule of law used to decide whether a book measures up to a standard. In relation to the Bible, the canon refers to the identity of the collection of writings to be included in the Scriptures. The original use of the term canon can be traced to the ancient Greeks who used it in a literal sense as: a rod, ruler, staff, or a measuring rod (Geisler and Nix, 2003). It comes from the Greek word “kanon” which is believed to have been derived from the Hebrew word “kaneh.” A canon was usually a straight rod or bar, having one side true to a straight line, used for measuring, and ruling. Carpenters and masons used them for measuring and to keep things straight. The Hebrew term “kaneh” (a measuring rod) for example was used by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 40:3, 42:16). It is the standard by which any book could be added to the fraternity of scriptures. There were words or phrases that were used by the Jews to refer to the same idea of canonicity. These words include sacred writings, Authoritative writings and the “books that defile the hands” (Mosher 170). The word canon is therefore used to refer to the total books of the Bible. So “canon” implies that the individual books of the Old Testament were believed to have been divinely inspired and recognized as “word of God.”

Canonicity refers to the state of being canonical. It is the right of place which a book has in the sacred rule base on the canon. Uncanonical signifies those books that do not measure up to the sacred rule.

❖ DISCOVERY OF THE CANON

Canonicity is determined by God Almighty. God inspired His prophets to write down things (example: Exo. 17:14, Jer. 30:2 Hab. 2:2; Isa. 8:1, etc.) and what were written according to God's inspiration had a measuring standard which was discovered by man. Man does not determine canonicity but discovers it. A book is canonical if that book is inspired and measures up to the standard of those written before or after it. The antiquity of a book, a mere acceptability of a book by a religious community, and respect for the book by people do not in any way warrant its canonicity. There are three things that are essential in the discussion of canonicity. First, the writing of the books God breathed, second, the identification of the books as an approved of God, and third, the coalition of those books. By the time of Jesus' coming to earth, all of the Old Testament books had been written and accepted by the Jewish community who knew the authors to be inspired prophets. These Jewish communities were able to carefully recognize the books of the OT and accepted them to be inspired. The communities then collected all the books into one volume.

These three things namely, the writing of the Old Testament books by prophets of God by inspiration, recognition of those inspired books and collecting of them into one volume; are what is referred to as Formation of the Old Testament canon. It must be emphasized that the process of gathering or collecting the books of the OT together into one volume was completed before the first coming of Christ. In fact, the last prophet to have penned down a book is Malachi who wrote about the coming of John Baptist and Jesus Christ (Mal. 4:5-6; Mat. 17:9-11). Malachi was written around 400 B.C. which means after that date, God had already determined what was canon and completed the formation of the OT canon.

❖ THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

The Old Testament canon or acceptable books are the Protestant translations of the Bible which contains thirty-nine books. These are divided into the five books of Law (also called the Pentateuch or Torah; Genesis through Deuteronomy), twelve books of History (Joshua through Esther), and five books of Poetry (Job through the Song of Solomon). The five Major Prophets (Isaiah through Daniel) and the twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea through Malachi). Our Old Testament canon comes from the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Some Old Testament books include certain apocryphal writing. However, these apocryphal writings were considered non-canonical by the Jews, and therefore were not included in the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrews divided their Scriptures, a total of twenty-four books, into three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (also called the *Hagiographa* or Holy Writings). The order and numbering of the Hebrew Bible is different from the Old Testament, which explains why they list twenty-four books, while we list thirty-nine. As mentioned earlier the Law consisted of the five books of the Torah which is exactly like our English Bible. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Jews called these books “Five-fifths of the Law,” and the Greeks called the first five books “the Pentateuch.”

After the Torah are the Nebhim (Prophets) which include Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (The former prophets); and Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (the Latter Prophets), and the twelve Minor Prophets which were counted as one book. These books contain the God-guided history of a God-selected people. They contain the history of the Jewish people as well as a divine commentary on the history of Israel through the end of the theocratic kingdom (586 BC). The Minor Prophets are called “Minor” not because they are any less

inspired than the other books, but because of their shortness in length of their writings. Likewise, the “Major” Prophets were called “Major” not because of their greater importance, but because of their greater length. They considered these eight books, but we divide Samuel into two parts, Kings into two parts, and the Twelve Prophets into their respective parts yielding a new number of twenty-one books out of the same set of the Prophets. The Kethubhim are the Writings which include Psalms, Proverbs, and Job; Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther; Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles. The Greeks called this section of Tanach the Hagiographa or “Holy Writings.”

THREE MAIN BLOCKS OF THIS PAPER

To be able to follow the formation of the Old Testament canon procedure, we shall look at three broad areas. These are first the writings of the inspired word, second the recognition of the writing word as canon and third the collection of the books into one volume.

I. WRITING AND COPYING OF THE INSPIRED WORD.

The subject of canonicity begins from the inspiration of the word. The writings of these inspired books come first before any discussions on canon. The prophets of God and the Hebrew people revered the scrolls as holy. They called them the books that defile hands. Meaning those scrolls were revered to be so Holy that touching them defiled their hands. The question then is who wrote these books? There are some internal evidence to prove that the authors knew what they were writing to be scripture. For example, in Exodus 24:3,4,7; Moses wrote in a book all the words and ordinances of God that the people were to obey. Deut. 31:9-13, 24-29 Moses wrote the law and placed it where the people could read it in the future and learn to fear God and to observe all the words of that law. In Jeremiah 36:1-4 God

commanded Jeremiah to write in a book all the words God gave him to teach Israel to repent. All the Old Testament writers indicate sometime in their books to show that their writings were inspired and hence canon. In 2 Peter 1:21, Peter the apostle said Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In a chart designed by Apologetic press, the authors of the Old Testament books are presented as follows:

Old Testament Authorship (Talmudic Tradition)	
Author	Composition(s)
Moses	Torah, Job, and Psalm 90
Joshua	Joshua 1-24:28 and Deuteronomy 34
Eleazar	Joshua 24:29-32
Phinehas	Joshua 29:33
Samuel	1 Samuel 1-24, Judges, and Ruth
Gad and Nathan	1 Samuel 25-31 and 2 Samuel
David, et al.	Psalms
Jeremiah	Jeremiah, 1 and 2 Kings, and Lamentations
Hezekiah, et al.	Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes
The Great Assembly	Ezekiel, the Twelve Prophets, Daniel, and Esther
Ezra	Ezra and 1 and 2 Chronicles
Nehemiah	Nehemiah

(Apologetic Press chart)

❖ FROM ORAL TO WRITTEN

In most cases, God’s revelation to these writers was initially conveyed orally. The messengers then told the people “This is what the Sovereign Lord says,” “hear the word of the Lord,” “thou saith the Lord,” eg. Isaiah 1:10, Ezekiel 5:5. These authoritative utterances were then passed to succeeding generations as the “word of the Lord” in the form of received

oral tradition (Gen. 48:1–7). Then at some point these divinely inspired words, sayings, and speeches were recorded and preserved for the Hebrew community in written form. On occasion the authoritative utterance and the writing or inscripturing of the pronouncement occurred almost simultaneously (such as the Book of the Law in Exodus 24:3, Joshua 1:8, and Jeremiah’s oracle to King Jehoiakim, Jeremiah 36). In other instances, the documentation of divine revelation took place sometime after the historical event or circumstance prompting the word of the Lord. Often times that event or circumstance is provided as part of the context for God’s communication to Israel such as in Exodus 15:1, Joshua 8:32, and Judges 5:1.

❖ WHAT KIND OF MATERIALS WERE USED TO WRITE AND TO COPY THE OT?

Now that we know that there were divine instructions to some of the prophets to write what they heard, the question to answer is how were these books written? The text of the Old Testament was originally recorded in two languages, classical Hebrew, and imperial Aramaic (Genesis 31:47; Jeremiah 10:11; Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26).

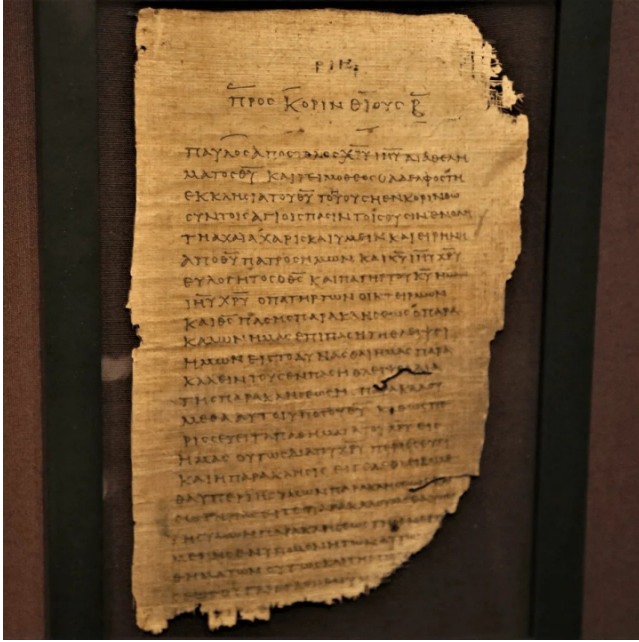
People in the ancient Near East used a variety of materials as writing surfaces. Monumental inscriptions were preserved on rock walls and stone slabs. The archaeological discoveries like the Rosetta Stone and the Moabite Stone are well-known examples of documents carved in solid rock. The Old Testament indicates that the Ten Commandments were carved in “tables of stone” (Exodus 32:15,16) and that later Joshua wrote a copy of the Law of Moses in stone (Joshua 8:32). Other ancient writing materials included clay and wooden tablets (eg. Isaiah 30:8, Habakkuk 2:2). They used of papyrus manuscripts and scrolls (eg. Job 8:11, Isaiah 18:2), and parchment made from treated animal skins. The scroll of Jeremiah burned by King Jehoiakim may have been papyrus or parchment (Jeremiah 36:2). It is a historical fact that the ancient Near East also used Ostraca (broken pieces of pottery) as an inexpensive

writing material, but they aren't mentioned in the Old Testament. Beaten metal scrolls were occasionally used for special purposes. A copper scroll was found among the writings left in caves along the Dead Sea by the Qumran community.

The Old Testament makes no mention of the ink used for writing on scrolls, but it does list some of the other materials the authors used: An iron stylus (Job 19:24; Jeremiah 17:1), a reed pen (Jeremiah 8:8), a penknife for sharpening the pens (Jeremiah 36:23), a writing case (Jeremiah 36:18). The challenge of hand-copying texts in the ancient world placed a premium on hearing, memorizing, and publicly reading documents hence the emphasis on "hearing" the word of the Lord in the Old Testament. Written works were often spread through servants, like message runners, heralds, and scribes (2 Samuel 18:19–23 and Daniel 3:4).

(Papyrus plant)





(Papyrus writing material and storage pots)



(Detailed writings on Moabite stones)

❖ TRANSMISSION AND PRESERVATION OF THE MESSAGES IN THE WRITINGS

In the ancient Near East, at the time when the biblical books were written and copied, scribes did the work of composing and preserving important documents. Scribes were special because they could read, write and do editing; literacy was not widespread at that time. A scribe might take several different scrolls with something in common and compile a single book out of them, or scribes living in different times and places might edit similar scrolls together in different ways. The biblical books had to be copied over again and again so that they could be preserved for other people to read them. The process of rewriting the books of the Bible was not always perfect, sometimes mistakes were introduced, or words were added or dropped. This whole process, including the accurate copies and the mistakes, the transmission of the text. Thus, the text is transmitted (and sometimes changed) by scribes who copied the ancient scrolls over and over again.

The accuracy and credibility of the scribes give evidence for a reliable the OT. The ancient manuscripts of the Bible that we have today are copies of the originals, but research and new discoveries have continued to demonstrate that these copies have accurately preserved the text of the various books of the Bible over the centuries. The English translations of the Old Testament that most people had in their Bibles were until recently based on the “Masoretic Text,” which is represented by very old Hebrew manuscripts that were preserved by dedicated followers of Judaism. However, the oldest of these Masoretic Text manuscripts were only from the 10th century AD, so the oldest copies of the Old Testament were from the Septuagint, or Greek translation of the Old Testament done in the 3rd century BC. But then, in 1946 when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in a cave near Qumran, the ancient manuscripts dating as far back as about 300 BC were equal to the Masoretic manuscripts. In fact, every book of the Old Testament except Esther has been

discovered so far among the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls, primarily written in Hebrew, are extremely significant because they contain copies of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament from over 1100 years before the Masoretic text, and yet are about 95% identical in most books. Most of the differences are due to spelling, word choice, misunderstanding of a number, or the omission of a word or phrase. Thankfully, we have enough ancient texts that we are able to determine what the original of each book of the Old Testament may look like. Overall, the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrate that the text of the Old Testament has been accurately copied and preserved over thousands of years.



(The Dead Sea scrolls)

II. RECOGNITION OF THE WRITTEN WORD AS CANON.

Once God gave a book in His authority, men of God assented to that authority by their recognition of it as a prophetic utterance. There is every reason to believe that this recognition followed immediately upon the publication of the message. There is no evidence that these particular books existed among the ancient Jews for many years before they were recognized as canonical. Indeed, if a book was actually revealed by God, is it conceivable that such a book would circulate for many years before anyone recognized its true nature?" The evidence, in fact, is to the contrary. Moses' writings were received in his days (Ex. 24:3; Jos.

1:8). Joshua's book was added to the canon immediately (Josh. 24:26). Daniel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, had received the Jeremiah's book along with "*the books*" (Dan. 9:2).

The canonical books were in existence long before the total books were brought together as the complete Old Testament of the Bible in Greek. Since the evidence indicate that the intertestamental books (Apocryphal books) that came up after the last prophet Malachi were not inspired, it can be conclude as observed earlier that the OT canon closed around 400 B.C. This means it took man over 120 years in my estimation to discover that the OT canon was completed. Thus, the period between Malachi and the beginning of the writing of the Septuagint (400 – 280 B.C.). The question is how did the Jews conclude on which book to add to the Hebrew? How did they discover the canon which is determined by God?

❖ HOW DID THE JEWS ACCEPT AND PROVED THOSE BOOKS AS INSPIRED?

To discover the canon, certain methods and principles were employed to make the discovery possible. The Standard Test (or canon process) applied by men as to each book's canonicity include the following.

1. The determination of Inspiration of God. Was the book inspired of God? Was its human author a known and recognized spokesman (prophet, or inspired writer) of God? Or was this book a product of men apart from Supernatural guidance? What did the carefully scrutinized evidence indicate?

2. The determination of genuineness: Was the evidence sufficient to substantiate it as being genuine? Could it be traced to the writer from whom it was supposed to have come? Did it have the "marks of identification" as a genuine book from God? Is it true and factual? Is it authentic?

3. The determination by recognition: How did the vast majority of mainstream believers view the book? Did they view it as being from God and accepting it? Was it read and studied in the synagogues?

4. The determination by close examination of the content: Were the contents deemed that which blended with the other books, free from contradictions, in harmony with known historical events and people, and beneficial?

One of the main arguments that has been made for the Old Testament Apocrypha to be part of the Old Testament Canon is that they were a part of the Septuagint (LXX) and, therefore, when Jesus and His apostles quoted from the Septuagint, they legitimized the Apocryphal books along with the 39 books which we recognize as canonical. The fact is that evidence is lacking that they were originally a part of the Septuagint. There are no evidence that the Apocrypha books meet the test of canonicity as discussed above.

❖ EVIDENCE FOR THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

One of the evidence to support the Old Testament canon is the Samaritan Pentateuch. Commenting of this evident, Keith Mosher wrote;

First there exists the Samaritan Pentateuch. This ancient text was preserved by a cult, started by the son-in-law of Sanblat the Horonite. According to Nehemiah 13:28 the son-in-law (Manasseh, according to Josephus) was driven from the returning Jews who had been in Babylonian exile. He started a sect or cult whose worship was on Mount Gerazim (John 4:20-24). Evidently, Manasseh (according to Josephus) took only the first five books of the Old Testament with him. (Probably because those books do not mention Jerusalem as the place to worship.) The "Samaritan Pentateuch" is the same

canonical literature as the five books of Moses and affirms that part of the canon (Mosher, 181)

In 280 B.C. seventy-two Jewish scholars were gathered to consider translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek. These men worked independently and later put their work together. The Greek translation of the OT which is known as the Septuagint or Pentateuch (LXX) was the product at the end of their work. They did not determine the rules (canon), but their task resulted in a complete collection of all the recognized Old Testament books and to put them into one volume. The Old Testament canon was therefore completed and recognized by those Jewish scholars, scribes, and leaders by 280-150 B.C.

In fact, it is extremely doubtful that any of the Apocrypha books could have been in the LXX because it is not possible that any of the Apocryphal books had been written by then. For an example, we know that the two Maccabees' books could not date earlier than 165 B.C. Most scholars date the Septuagint at 280 B.C., though some say it wasn't completely finished for a number of years after that (ten to twenty years or more). Even if that were the case, which is very doubtful, probably most of the Apocrypha were not even then in existence. Most scholars generally assign the period of time from 200 B.C. until the coming of Christ, and perhaps even as late as 100 A.D., as the time frame during which the Old Testament apocryphal books were written. But more importantly, Jewish scholars have always universally rejected the Apocrypha as part of the Old Testament Canon from ancient times until the present, and this is substantial proof they would not have added it to their translation of the Hebrew text into the Greek language (the LXX) when that work was done, even if the apocryphal books had been available to them. It must have been at a later time that they were added. Josephus confirmed that there were 22 books (24 by extension) which makes up our 39 books of the OT. We have enough evidence to believe the OT.

❖ SOME BOOKS WERE NOT ACCEPTED AS CANON

There are certain books that were mentioned in the OT yet not found among the Books of the Old Testament. It could be that those books were infused into the existing books, therefore it is possible that no prophetic book has been left out of the canon. There are reasonable explanations for the only known books that are seeming exceptions to this principle, as the following discussion indicates.

1. “The Letter...from Elijah” (2 Chron. 21:12- 15). This is a public prophetic exhortation. Hence, it had divine authority and thereby qualified for the canon. But as a matter of fact, the letter is in the canon. The letter is included as part of the text in 2 Chronicles 21:12-15. Because it is in the canon, it poses no difficulty.

2. “The records of Shemaiah the prophet” (2 Chron. 12:15). This book was definitely written by a prophet, and it seems certain that it is not identical to any of the existing books in the Old Testament. However, it is possible that the book, though written by a prophet, was not prophetic. It is called a “record.” Perhaps it was a mere genealogical enrollment without any implied or stated religious instruction or exhortation. In that respect it is different from the canonical books of Chronicles, in even which the genealogical sections contain religious instructions and redemptive material, such as the messianic lineage (see 1 Chron. 5:25; 9:1, 22).

3. “The Chronicles of Samuel... Nathan the prophet...and Gad the seer” (1 Chron. 29:29). These books correspond to 1 and 2 Samuel in their content and coverage. Hence, it is possible that if their contents were prophetic, they are contained within the confines of the canonical books of 1 and 2 Samuel. On the other hand, they may have been mere uninspired records

kept by these public servants and used later as a factual basis for the inspired books of Samuel.

4. “The vision of Isaiah the prophet” (2 Chron. 32:32). This is an inspired writing, but it is probably the same as the canonical book of Isaiah, which was collected within a larger corpus called “the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel” (2 Chron. 32:32; 2 Chron. 33:18)

III. COLLECTION INTO ONE VOLUME

After the discussion of the writing of the inspired books and the recognition of those books, the next thing is the collection of these books in one volume. From the scriptures, Moses’ books were collected and preserved beside the Ark (Deut. 31:26). Samuel told the people the ordinances of the kingdom and wrote them in the book and placed it before the Lord” (1 Sam. 10:25). Daniel had a collection of “the books,” and there is every indication throughout the Old Testament that prophetic writings were collected as soon as they were written. During Josiah’s day, the “law of Moses” was “found in the house of the Lord” (2 Kings 23:24-25), where it had been stored. Proverbs 25:1 notes that “these are the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, transcribed.” Ezra the priest had preserved a copy of “the law of Moses” that he brought with him out of Babylon after the captivity (Ezra 7:6). Therefore, inspiration produced the canonical books, man subsequently recognized them, and collection was done to preserve them for posterity.

❖ COLLECTING WRITTEN DOCUMENTS

A millennium of Hebrew history is recorded in the Old Testament, which indicates the canonization process likely took a long time. Numerous ancient sources cited in the Old

Testament remain unknown to modern scholarship (such as the Book of the Wars of the Lord, referenced in Numbers 21:14, and the Book of Jashar, referenced in Joshua 10:13).

Sorting written documents and fixing a canon

We don't know the details of how ancient Hebrews sorted through documents, but we can discern the basic criteria they applied to these documents for the purpose of "sorting" and delineating canon. Over the course of Israelite history, the Holy Spirit guided Hebrew religious leaders to make consent choices, which eventually resulted in a Hebrew canon of Scripture.

It seems that there were at least four key periods during Old Testament history when sorting documents and fixing a canon would've been crucial for the Hebrew religious community:

1. During the Sinai experience after the exodus
2. During the shift from theocracy to monarchy in Israel
3. At the time of the fall of Jerusalem and subsequent exile in Babylon
4. As part of the reforms of Ezra the scribe and Nehemiah the governor in postexilic Jerusalem.

❖ CANON SELECTION CRITERIA

Unlike the New Testament, which emphasized apostolic authorship as the basis for canonicity, there seems to have been several factors to determine the Old Testament canon.

The text had to be divinely inspired. In many cases, the leaders of the religious community recognized a text's authority through illumination by the Holy Spirit—such as the direct manifestation of the Spirit of God in the case of Moses and the seventy prophets in Numbers 11:16–30, and the fulfillment of the divine word, as in Jeremiah 28:9 and 44:28.

Authorship was also a key factor in evaluating books for canonicity. Most writers of the books in the Hebrew canon held divinely appointed offices such as lawgiver, judge, prophet, priest, and king. The content of the individual books was examined for internal consistency. The teaching, themes, and message of each text had to be consistent with the covenant recorded in the other books that were recognized as “word of the Lord.”

The documents the Hebrew religious community actually used influenced canon selection. The books that the Israelites read, studied, copied, and obeyed came to be recognized as canon. In the final analysis, we have to assume the same Holy Spirit who inspired the human authors to write the books also superintended the Hebrew leaders during the canon selection process. Hence God by His providential means, made it possible for His inspired word to be preserved.

CONCLUSION

The formation of the Old Testament canon comes as a result of God inspiring people to write His word. Then after that God’s people using a standard test to recognize which books are inspired after which the inspired books are collected into one volume as canon. This was what was done some years back resulting in the complete collection of what we have today as the 39 books of the Old Testament. These books have been reserved for our guidance and learning (Rom. 15:4). God determines canon and man discover them. Canon is therefore a standard by God and not man.

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