

---

# Introduction to the Old Testament

Jason S. DeRouchie\*

The Old Testament was Jesus's only Bible, and it now stands as the initial 75% of Christian Scripture. The early church fathers designated it a *Testament* (= Latin *testamentum*, "covenant") because they rightly viewed the whole as covenantal revelation. They believed all of it was the word of God (2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21), which he spoke in history to guide his elected relationship with his people. The Old Testament overviews five major covenants, which shape the narrative plotline: Adamic-Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic (old), Davidic, new. The church fathers called the whole the *Old* Testament because so much of its content concerns the Mosaic *old* covenant, which the *new* covenant in Christ supersedes (Jer 31:31–34; Luke 22:20; 2 Cor 3:6, 14).

## DATE AND DIVERSITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

By his Spirit and over a thousand-year period (ca. 1446–500 BC), the Lord guided many prophets, usually writing in Hebrew, to make himself and his will known to his people. Although these seers, sovereigns, sages, and singers used a variety of genres to communicate, the Old Testament proclaims a unified message and purpose that testify to the Supreme Author's guiding hand.

## THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Both historically and theologically, the covenant concept closely correlates with that of canon, the church's authoritative collection of holy books (Rom 1:2; 2 Tim 3:15; 2 Pet 3:16). The notion of canon is associated with a covenant lord's authoritative written word. Recipients recognized rather than decided the canonical status of the

---

\* Jason DeRouchie is research professor of Old Testament and biblical theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Scriptural texts in light of their source. Because the Bible is by nature God’s word, it is canonical (i.e., authoritative; Isa 8:20; 2 Tim 3:16), and its *authority* further implies that it is (1) *clear* enough to point us to God’s unstoppable and overarching kingdom purposes in Jesus (1 Cor 2:14; 2 Pet 3:16), (2) *necessary* for generating a relationship with God (Ps 119:50, 93; Matt 4:4; John 17:17; 1 Pet 1:23), and (3) *sufficient* to produce it (Ps 119:1; 2 Tim 3:15–17). The church did not apply the term “canon” to Scripture until the fourth century AD, but the concept existed at least as early as Moses (e.g., Exod 24:4, 7; Deut 4:2; 31:24–26). It carried on through Israel’s history (e.g., Josh 1:7–8; 2 Kgs 14:6; 22:8–11; Mal 4:4[3:22]) and into the time of the New Testament (Matt 5:17–19; 7:12; John 10:33–36).

In the intertestamental and New Testament periods, what we now tag the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, the Jews spoke of using titles like the “Scriptures” (Luke 24:45; 1 Cor 15:3; cf. Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.10), “the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 5:17; Luke 16:16; cf. Prologue to Sirach 1; 2 Macc 15:9; CD 7.15–17), or “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44; cf. Prologue to Sirach 8–10, 24–25; 4QMMT 10). All these apparently cite the identical canonical corpus. Some of these designations occur centuries before the New Testament (e.g., the Dead Sea Scroll 4QMMT in ca. 150 BC), and their presence reveals a high canon-consciousness that was tied in some way to structure. That is, the ancients associated the canon concept with both an authoritative, normative body of literature (“canon as rule”) and the boundaries and shaping of that material (“canon as list”).<sup>1</sup>

## THE ORDERING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Thirty-nine books shape the Protestant Old Testament, which is structured by chronology and genre into the Pentateuch, History, Poetry/Wisdom, and Prophecy. Historically, this order likely goes back to Jerome’s Latin Vulgate (late 4<sup>th</sup> century AD), which probably

---

<sup>1</sup> See esp. Ched Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible: Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon*, New Testament Monographs 34 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 8–45.

followed the presentation in some known bound books (i.e., codexes) of the Greek Old Testament (i.e., the Septuagint).

Pentateuch	History	Poetry/Wisdom	Prophecy
Genesis	Joshua	Job	Isaiah
Exodus	Judges	Psalms	Jeremiah
Leviticus	Ruth	Proverbs	Ezekiel
Numbers	1–2 Samuel	Ecclesiastes	Daniel
Deuteronomy	1–2 Kings	Song of Songs	Hosea
	1–2 Chronicles		Joel
	Ezra		Amos
	Nehemiah		Obadiah
	Esther		Jonah
			Micah
			Nahum
			Habakkuk
			Zephaniah
			Haggai
			Zechariah
			Malachi

**Figure 1. The Arrangement of the English Old Testament**

Jesus’s Jewish Bible was identical in content with our English Old Testament, but it consisted of twenty-four books that were divided and arranged differently. Specifically, Jesus and the apostles’ Hebrew Bible bore a three-part structure that included Psalms as the largest and first main book in the third division (with Ruth apparently serving as a preface). Jesus’s statement following his resurrection gives biblical support for this structure, for he appears to use “Psalms” as the title of the whole third division: “Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). Also, the biblical data suggest that the earliest church’s Bible began with Genesis and ended with Chronicles. When Jesus once confronted the Pharisees, he spoke of the martyrdom of the Old Testament prophets “from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah” (Luke 11:51; cf. Matt 23:35). Jesus seems to have been speaking canonically by mentioning the first and last martyr in his Bible’s literary structure. Just as Genesis records Abel’s murder (Gen 4:2–8), the end of Chronicles highlights a certain Zechariah who was killed in the temple court during the reign of Joash (2 Chr 24:20–21).

We know of two Jewish canon lists from around Jesus's day, the first from historian Josephus and dated between AD 94–117 (*Ag. Ap.* 8.37–43) and the second from an ancient rabbinic piece of oral law (i.e., a Baraita) from a group of Jewish scholars known as the Tannaim who lived during the initial two centuries AD and whose work was later included in the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 14b). The presence of both lists identifies that written prophecy had temporarily ceased after Malachi (see 1 Macc 9:27; cf. 4:45b–6; 14:41) and that long before the New Testament age, perhaps reaching as far back as Ezra, what we call the Old Testament was already a fixed canonical norm. Only the second of these lists aligns with the biblical evidence and testifies to the standardized canon preserved at the temple.

*Baba Bathra* 14b designates the three main divisions “the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.” Chronology, genre, theology, and literary artistry all appear to have influenced the arrangement. The Law, Former Prophets, and Latter Writings supply a “narrative history” of redemption and frame non-narrative “commentary” books. The latter include the Latter Prophets and Former Writings, and these explain, interpret, and guide our reading of the narrative.

A number of differences are apparent from the known English ordering. This Jewish list has the major prophets out of chronological order (i.e., not Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), makes Ruth a preface to Psalms (thus separating it from its temporal context after Judges), treats Daniel not among the prophets but as a narrative book at the head of the Latter Writings, and places Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah in reverse chronological order (thus highlighting Chronicles' hope in the messianic kingdom). The historical “narrative” progresses from Genesis to Kings, pauses from Jeremiah to Lamentations, and then resumes from Daniel to Ezra-Nehemiah. Chronicles then recalls the story from Adam to Cyrus's decree that Israel can return to the land and by this ignites hope in the coming messianic Servant-king, whom Isaiah said would reconcile peoples to God after Cyrus returned the Israelites to the land (Isa 49:6; 53:11; cf. 44:28–45:1). As for the “commentary,” the Latter Prophets structure the four books largest to smallest, and the Former Writings follow the same pattern, except Ruth prefaces Psalms and the longer Lamentations follows Song of Songs. The former shift places Ruth in the context of the Psalter's messianic Davidic hope, and the latter

switch allows Lamentations to reorient the reader to the exilic context where Kings left off and where the narrative in Daniel picks up. The prophets originally wrote the sacred text in Hebrew and Aramaic without vowels, but when translators rendered the whole into Greek and added vowels, books like Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles that originally fit on single scrolls now required two (thus, e.g., 1–2 Samuel). The Jews appear to have always viewed Ezra-Nehemiah as a single biblical book, and they also captured all twelve of the minor prophets into a single “book of the prophets” (Acts 7:42–43).

Law	Former Prophets	Latter Prophets	Former Writings	Latter Writings
Genesis	Joshua	Jeremiah	Ruth-Psalms	Daniel
Exodus	Judges	Ezekiel	Job	Esther
Leviticus	1–2 Samuel	Isaiah	Proverbs	Ezra-Nehemiah
Numbers	1–2 Kings	The Twelve	Ecclesiastes	1–2 Chronicles
Deuteronomy			Song of Songs	
			Lamentations	
<i>Narrative</i>	<i>Narrative</i>	<i>Commentary</i>	<i>Commentary</i>	<i>Narrative</i>

**Figure 2. The Arrangement of the Hebrew Bible in *Baba Bathra* 14b**

We will interpret Scripture more faithfully if we think of canon both as rule (i.e., authority, norm) and list (i.e., including tangible boundaries and shaping). Along with seeking to approach the Hebrew Scriptures in the arrangement that Jesus and his apostles did, the Bible requires first that we treat the five books of Moses as foundational for interpreting the rest of the Old Testament. Second, we must read in succession the story of salvation recounted in the narrative books, while allowing the messages of the non-narrative commentary books to inform our reading. Third, we must always see the Old Testament as supplying foundation for what Jesus fulfills (Matt 5:17–18; Luke 16:16) and Christ and the New Testament providing an accurate interpretation of Old Testament expectations (Rom 16:25–26; 2 Cor 3:14). Fourth, we must recognize that the location of a given book in any canonical structure informs our biblical theological interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For more on these concepts, see Jason S. DeRouchie, “The Hermeneutical Significance of the Shape of the Christian Canon,” in *The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings: Studies in Evangelical Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Andrew M. King, Joshua M. Philpot, and William R. Osborne (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2021),

## The Books of the Old Testament

This introduction will overview the Old Testament books in the order of Jesus’s Bible. In the Law, Yahweh *establishes* the Mosaic (old) covenant; in the Prophets he *enforces* it; and in the Writings the remnant *enjoys* his faithfulness and the hope of his messianic kingdom promises. Through the whole he progressively discloses his kingdom purposes that will climax in Christ and his global mission.

### *The Law*

The Law (or Pentateuch) is the Bible’s initial five books, which together narrate a narrowing history from creation under Adam and new creation under Noah through Abraham and the preservation of Jacob’s family in Egypt to God’s covenant with Israel under Moses. The Law details the nature, purpose, and future of the Mosaic covenant within the context of the whole world (see esp. Gen 12:3; Exod 19:4–6). Genesis introduces Yahweh’s universal kingdom program by highlighting both the world’s need for blessing due to the curse that Adam’s covenantal rebellion caused (Gen 3) and God’s covenantal promise to supply blessing and overcome the global curse through a male offspring of the woman in the line of Shem, Abraham, and Judah (3:15; 9:26–27; 22:17–18; 49:8–10). Exodus through Deuteronomy then detail how God saves Israel from Egyptian bondage (Exod 1–18), covenants with them and supplies his tabernacling presence at Sinai (Exod 19–40), instructs them on how to live holy lives in his presence (Leviticus), and punishes them with an additional 38 years in the wilderness before bringing them to the Promised Land’s border (Numbers–Deuteronomy). Here the Lord calls them to radical love (Deut 6:4–5) but also identifies their stubbornness and rebellion, which would continue and result in their exile from the land (4:25–28). Nevertheless, God would graciously triumph through a second exodus under a king in an age of restoration (Num 24:5–9, 17–19), during which a new covenant-

---

forthcoming; idem, “Is the Order of the Canon Significant for Doing Biblical Theology?” in *40 Questions about Biblical Theology*, by Jason S. DeRouchie, Oren R. Martin, and Andrew David Naselli, *40 Questions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2020), 159–72.

mediating prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15–19) will instruct a multi-ethnic remnant whose hearts God would change, thus enabling love, loyalty, and worship (30:1–14; 32:21, 43; 33:19).

### *The Prophets*

The next portion of Jesus' Bible overviews the outworking of the Mosaic (old) covenant in space and time as Israel settles into the Promised Land and journeys to destruction. The Former Prophets (Joshua–Kings) narrate this history by describing *what* led Israel to Babylonian exile. Then the Latter Prophets (Jeremiah–The Twelve) prophetically comment on *why* the story went the way it did, resulting in an initial restoration to the land without heart change.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, the Former Prophets overview God giving Israel the Promised Land and establishing a twelve-tribe confederacy (Joshua) and Yahweh cursing the nation as it acts without a king and spirals downward in cycles of apostasy (Judges). Out of the darkness, the Lord establishes the monarchy and, in time, covenantally promises King David a lasting throne (1 Sam 1–2 Sam 8). God would count him a “son” and through him David’s “throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:14, 16). While David’s life ended poorly (2 Sam 9–24), the king died hoping in this coming one, who would rule “justly over men,” bring in the new creation “like the morning light,” arm “himself with iron,” and consume the curse and his enemies with fire (23:3–7). Solomon’s own idolatry and the resulting division of the kingdom identified that he was not the one (1 Kgs 1–11). Indeed, no king in Israel or Judah during the Old Testament period fulfilled God’s promises. As Moses predicted, both Israel in the north and Judah in the south continued to rebel against the covenant (2 Kgs 17:14–15), so in just anger (17:18) Yahweh used Assyria to destroy and exile Israel and Babylon to do the same to Judah (1 Kgs 12–2 Kgs 25).

The narrative now pauses in order to give voice to some of the heavenly ambassadors God used to urge the people to return to him. The covenant enforcers in the Latter Prophets charged Israel and Judah with Mosaic covenant violation (indictment) (Jer 9:13–14; Ezek

---

<sup>3</sup> “Former” and “Latter” here refer not to time but to placement in the Old Testament; the “former” grouping comes first and the “latter” grouping second.

22:26; Isa 5:24), called them back to covenant faithfulness (instruction) (Amos 5:14–15; Mal 4:4[3:22]), warned them of the covenant curses (Jer 44:23; Mal 2:2), and promised the covenant restoration blessings for those who would learn from the divine discipline (Jer 31:31–34; Isa 19:24–25). Yahweh condemned Israel’s lack of covenant loyalty but promised a day when he would cause loyalty in a new covenant (Jeremiah). He noted how Judah’s evil forced his presence to depart from Jerusalem, but he foretold that he would one day place his Spirit on every individual covenant member, thus enabling obedience (Ezekiel). He emphasized how the people rejected his kingship and lacked spiritual senses, but he predicted a day when he would reign universally through a messianic servant-king in a new creation filled with peoples from all nations cherishing his glory (Isaiah). Finally, while he stressed Israel’s spiritual unfaithfulness, he assured them of his faithfulness and that he would one day judge and renew the world (The Twelve minor prophets). Yahweh would triumph over evil through a Davidic king (Jer 23:5–6; Ezek 37:24; Isa 9:6–7; Hos 3:5) who would, through his substitutionary death (Isa 53:5–6, 11–12; Zech 12:10; 13:1), lead a second exodus that would redeem people from every nation (Jer 23:7–8; Isa 11:10–12, 16; 49:6; Zech 10:10–12) and establish a new creation (Isa 11:9; 65:17–18, 25). Until then, Israel needed to “remember the law of my servant Moses” (Mal 4:4[3:22]).

### *The Writings*

Like the Prophets though in reverse order, the Writings include both commentary and narrative. The commentary heightens anticipation for God’s messianic kingdom by clarifying for the remnant how to live according to this hope (Former Writings), and then the narrative emphasizes God’s absolute sovereignty and commitment to his kingdom purposes begun with Adam (Latter Writings).

The movement from longest to shortest books in the Former Writings situates the messianic Psalter at the head. Nevertheless, the small story of Ruth prefaces the Psalms, which calls one to read the former in the context of Davidic messianic hope. Just as God delivered David’s ancestors from exile through a kinsman redeemer



from Bethlehem, he would do so again in a comparable pattern for David's descendants. With predictive force, the Psalter then supplies the prayers of the suffering and triumphant anointed king and the songs of those he saves. Job portrays Yahweh as completely sovereign and as worth fearing simply because of who he is and not because of the physical blessings he gives or removes. Proverbs portrays the wisdom that will embody the messianic king and that all hoping in him should pursue. Ecclesiastes calls all God's followers to fear him as the wise Shepherd and to keep his commands, even amid life's enigmas. Song of Songs celebrates marital love as a means for developing hope in being part of the bride of the coming anointed king. Then Lamentations recalls Judah and Jerusalem's destruction from Kings's conclusion and readies the reader to transition back into the narrative.

The Latter Writings continue the Old Testament's story. The narrative in Daniel opens in Babylonian exile, where Kings's narrative left off. It stresses that Yahweh is sovereign over the present and future and that his kingdom through the messianic Son of Man will overcome every other kingdom. Esther then highlights how God preserved his people through potential extermination, and Ezra-Nehemiah details how King Cyrus of Persia permitted an Israelite remnant to return to the land and rebuild Jerusalem's city and temple. Nevertheless, it also clarifies that the full restoration was far from accomplished, for covenant rebellion persisted, the messianic priest-king had yet to come, and the new creation had not dawned. Chronicles ends Jesus's Bible beginning with Adam and by focusing on the centrality of worship and Davidic kingdom hope. Its opening genealogies in 1 Chr 1–9 identify that what the Lord started with Adam he continues and that all history since Adam was preparing for the coming of David. The story then proceeds by recalling Israel's fate from David until Judah's exile and Cyrus's decree (1 Chr 10–2 Chr 36). Cyrus's decree ends the book (2 Chr 36:20–23), moving the reader to anticipate the coming Servant-king, whom Isaiah said would follow Cyrus (Isa 44:28–45:1) and bring full reconciliation with God (53:11–12; cf. Dan 9:24 with 9:1–2). The Old Testament closes, therefore, by demanding a sequel and anticipating Jesus's fulfillment.

## The Message and Function of the Old Testament in the Biblical Canon

The Old Testament is Christian Scripture, “written for our instruction” (Rom 15:4; cf. 1 Cor 10:11). From a distance, the prophets of old saw and savored the coming Messiah and his mission (Matt 13:17; Luke 10:24; John 1:45; 5:39, 46; 8:56; 1 Pet 1:10–11). To “understand the Scriptures” in Jesus’s Bible is to grasp a message focused on the Messiah’s tribulation, triumph, and global salvation (Luke 24:45–47; Acts 26:22–23; cf. 1:3, 8; 3:18, 24; 10:43).

Yahweh revealed to those very prophets “that they were serving not themselves but you” (1 Pet 1:12). That is, the saints who wrote the Old Testament recognized that their words would principally be (Deut 29:4[3] with 30:8; Jer 30:2–3 with 30:24; Isa 29:10–11 with 29:18 and 30:8) and, at times, exclusively be (Dan 12:7–10) for those living in the new covenant age of restoration (cf. Mark 4:11–13; Rom 16:25–26; 2 Cor 3:14). What they anticipated, Christ now realizes: “The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached” (Luke 16:16; cf. Matt 11:12–13; 1 Cor 10:11; Gal 4:4; Heb 1:1–2).

Everything the Law and Prophets foretold, God has fulfilled and will finalize, including all things concerning the Son (Luke 24:27, 44; cf. Matt 5:18–19). “All the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor 1:20). The very word we are to “preach” (2 Tim 4:2) and the very Scripture that is “breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (3:16) includes “the sacred writings” of the Old Testament, “which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:15).

May Christians today increasingly cherish “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), studying and celebrating God’s revealed purposes climaxing in Christ from creation to consummation and from Genesis to Revelation. All of Scripture is about the God who reigns, saves, and satisfies through covenant for his glory in Christ, and the Old Testament expresses this glorious message.

## Bibliography

### *The Texts of the Old Testament*

- Brotzman, Ellis R., and Eric J. Tully. *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.
- Gentry, Peter J. “The Text of the Old Testament.” *JETS* 52 (2009): 19–45.
- Wegner, Paul D. *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999.

### *The Canon of the Old Testament*

- Beckwith, Roger T. “The Canon of Scripture.” Pages 27–34 in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
- Beckwith, Roger T. *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.
- Dempster, Stephen G. “Canons on the Right and Canons on the Left: Finding a Resolution in the Canon Debate.” *JETS* 52 (2009): 47–77.
- House, Paul R. “Canon of the Old Testament.” Pages 134–55 in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation: A Complete Library of Tools and Resources*. Edited by David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Mathews, and Robert B. Sloan. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994.
- Spellman, Chad. *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible: Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon*. New Testament Monographs 34. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014.

### ***The Reliability of the Old Testament***

- Hoffmeier, James K., and Dennis R. Magary, eds. *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.
- Kitchen, K. A. *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.
- Long, V. Philips. *The Art of Biblical History*. Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 5. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.
- Millard, A. R., James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker, eds. *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994.

### ***The Message and Interpretation of the Old Testament***

- Dempster, Stephen G. *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*. NSBT 15. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- DeRouchie, Jason S. *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017.
- DeRouchie, Jason S., ed. *What the Old Testament Authors Really Cared About: A Survey of Jesus' Bible*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013.
- Gentry, Peter J., and Stephen J. Wellum. *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.
- Goldsworthy, Graeme. *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991.
- Roberts, Vaughan. *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002.
- Van Pelt, Miles V., ed. *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.