

# Do We Have the Complete Old Testament?

by Rod Reynolds

**Why do some Bibles have books in the “Old Testament” portion that are not found in other versions of the Old Testament? How can we be sure we are using the authentic and complete Old Testament?**

You may have noticed that some printed Bibles containing the “Old Testament” include books not commonly found in other versions. Most printed copies of the King James Version and a number of other translations typically used by Protestants contain 39 books in the Old Testament. The same writings are accepted by most Jews as Scripture, but arranged differently to total 24 books. By an earlier arrangement there were 22 books, corresponding to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Judges and Ruth considered one book, Jeremiah and Lamentations one book). For a discussion on the arrangement of the books of the Old Testament see: “The Old Testament Canon,” [evidenceunseen.com](http://evidenceunseen.com); “The Original Number of Old Testament Books,” [askelm.com](http://askelm.com)).

Those books omitted from many versions of the Old Testament but included in some versions, such as the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (RSV-CE), for example, are often collectively referred to as the “Apocrypha.” How do we know whether these or other books should or should not be included in the Old Testament Scriptures?

To the Jews, or the circumcision, in a larger sense, were committed the “oracles,” or word of God ([Romans 3:2](#); cf. [Deuteronomy 4:8](#); [6:6-9](#)). Specifically, among the tribes of Israel, God gave the Levites and priests the charge of preserving and transmitting the law ([Deuteronomy 17:18](#); [31:24-26](#); [Malachi 2:7](#)).

After Solomon’s reign the Kingdom of Israel was divided, and the northern tribes soon were steeped in apostasy, but the Temple had been built in Judah, and most all of the priests and Levites migrated there ([2 Chronicles 11:13-14](#)). So it was in the southern kingdom of Judah, among the Jews as they came to be called, that the word of God was preserved.

For the next several hundred years kings of the line of David ruled in Judah. Many of the kings were unfaithful, and the nation tended to follow them into idolatry. Occasionally a righteous king would arise to lead the people back to God. After the Babylonian exile (beginning about 605 B.C.) and the return of the Jews to Palestine (beginning 538 B.C.), Ezra, a priest and skilled scribe, led in establishing in Jerusalem a group of scholars to preserve and teach the Scriptures, according to tradition (cf. [Ezra 7:6, 11, 25](#); [Nehemiah 8:6-9](#)).

These scholars are called the Sopherim (from *sapar*, to count). The Sopherim, and later the Masoretes, who succeeded them in preserving and transmitting the Hebrew text, went to great lengths to preserve as faithfully as possible the text, recording in notes many details related to copying, including the number of times the several letters occur in various books of the Bible, the number of words, the middle word, etc. To help prevent errors, old copies that were too worn to be used reliably were destroyed (cf. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Eerdmans, Vol. 4, "Text and MSS of the OT"; *Companion Bible*, Appendix 30). The received text of the Old Testament is called the Masoretic Text, as "handed down" by the Masoretes (from a root meaning to hand down) and containing the textual notes, called the Masorah.

Jesus confirmed the authenticity and authority of the Hebrew Bible as it had been compiled and preserved by scribes and of which the official version was preserved in the Temple up to his day (cf., *Jewish Encyclopedia*, "Masorah"). "Then He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me'" ([Luke 24:44](#)). The three divisions of the Scripture Jesus referred to were those of the Hebrew Bible, commonly referred to by the Jews as "Tanak," which is an acronym constituted from the initial Hebrew letters of the three divisions (Law, *Torah*; Prophets, *N'viim*; and Writings, *K'tuvim*, Psalms being representative of the latter).

In speaking of some of the Jewish leaders of his day and like minded people who had preceded them, Jesus said, "...that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar" ([Matthew 23:35](#); cf. [Luke 11:51](#)). Jesus was not speaking chronologically, as others were martyred after Zechariah, including Urijah, who was murdered by Jehoiakim nearly 200 years later ([Jeremiah 26:20-23](#)). However, in the Hebrew Bible, according to the rabbinical order, the first book is Genesis, which records Abel's murder ([Genesis 4:8](#)). The last book is Chronicles (consisting of 1 and 2 Chronicles; *John Lightfoot Commentary on Luke 24:44*; *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Eerdmans, Vol. 1, "Bible," pp. 483-484, and "Canon of the OT," p. 592; *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, "Bible, Canon of the," pp. 58-59). The last mention of a prophet being martyred in the Hebrew Bible, therefore, is Zechariah ([2 Chronicles 24:20-22](#)). Thus Jesus affirmed the authority of the Hebrew Bible as constituted and near universally accepted among the Jews at the time of his ministry (cf. Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.8).

Jesus also confirmed the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures when he said, "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" ([Matthew 5:18](#)). "Jot" and "tittle" refer to minuscule features of Hebrew script. His remark implies that the text would be faithfully preserved as well (cf. [1 Peter 1:25](#)).

Archaeological discoveries, as well as the methodology employed in copying, attest to the remarkable fidelity by which the Hebrew Bible has been preserved. For example, the “Dead Sea scrolls,” belonging to a heretical Jewish sect believed to have begun burying them before the time of Christ, contain manuscripts or fragments of all the Old Testament books except Esther. Because of its heretical nature and the fact that its scribes were not officially recognized by the Jewish priesthood, it would not be remarkable if there were discrepancies between texts of Scripture the sect had copied and the Masoretic text. Yet, the virtually complete text of Isaiah, for example, that they had buried probably before 100 B.C., “...agrees in almost every respect with the standard version of our Bible derived from the Masoretic or traditional Hebrew text” (*Archaeology and the Bible*, G. Frederick Owen, p. 337). The differences are minor, and “in the main amount to little more than copyists’ errors and orthography [spelling and other nuances of language], [which] is itself strong testimony to the fact that the standard text was well established...” (*Archaeology and the Old Testament World*, John Gray, p. 227). In some other books, where there is more divergence, the traditional text is generally vindicated as being more likely to have preserved the original, and such variations as exist “do not materially affect the meaning of Scripture” (*ibid.*, p. 228). Other Hebrew manuscripts from the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt (135 A.D.), “...are nearly identical with the text preserved in the standard MT MSS” (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Eerdmans, Vol. 4, “Text and MSS of the OT,” p. 806).

The Hebrew Scriptures accepted as authentic and authoritative by Josephus and contemporaneous Jews are the same as the Old Testament Scriptures we have today, and were referred to as the “Old Testament” (or covenant) during the era of the New Testament Church ([2 Corinthians 3:14](#)). These Scriptures formed the basis of the teachings of Jesus and the apostles ([Ephesians 2:20](#); [2 Peter 1:19-21](#)).

The extant early Greek translation of the Old Testament (the *Septuagint*), of which only “Christianized” versions dating no earlier than the fourth century exist, does not have the books in the same order as the Hebrew Scriptures, and contains books that were not accepted as inspired Scripture by Jesus or the apostles, nor by most Jews either in ancient times or modern. None of the apocryphal books are quoted in the New Testament. They must also be rejected as containing palpable errors, obvious heresies and absurdities. Some of them, such as 1 and 2 Maccabees, are useful for historical information, but do not measure up as Scripture.

The quality of its content, its internal consistency and unity, despite having been written by many authors over a period of more than a thousand years, its established historical veracity despite many attacks, and fulfilled prophecy, all further attest to the authenticity and authority of the accepted Old Testament canon.

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