

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
Anchorage Grace Church
2014

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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Book Order

Preliminary Questions

- In what order should we read our Bibles?
- Does the order of Old Testament books matter?
- Is there an inspired order to the Old Testament?
- Is there a theological message that surfaces in the order of books?

Our Rabbis taught: ‘The order of the Prophets is: Joshua and Judges, Samuel, and Kings, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Isaiah and the Twelve Minor Prophets. Let us examine this . . . 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.

—Baba Bathra 14b. Cited in Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 34–35

Various Orders and Arrangements

- **Hebrew Bible:** The modern Hebrew Bibles follow the book order found in the Masoretic tradition, which divides the Old Testament canon into three portions: The Law (*Torah*), the Prophets (*Nebi'im*), and the Writings (*Ketubim*). It contains 39 books.
- **Greek Septuagint (LXX):** Completed several hundred years before Christ, the Greek version of the Old Testament essentially follows a topical arrangement. This was in large part the Bible of the early church. It contains 39 OT books and 14 apocryphal books.
- **Latin Vulgate:** The Latin Vulgate was the Bible of the Roman Catholic Church up until the time of the Protestant Reformation. It follows the LXX order except in the prophets and the apocryphal books. It contains 39 OT books and 7 apocryphal books.

- **Protestant Bibles:** The Protestant Bible sits on the edge between these three previous arrangements. In contents, the Protestant Bible follows the Hebrew Bible with its 39 OT books. In arrangement, however, it most closely follows the Vulgate.

HEBREW BIBLE	GREEK SEPTUAGINT	LATIN VULGATE	PROTESTANT BIBLE
<i>The Law</i>	<i>The Law</i>	<i>Historical Books</i>	
Genesis	Genesis	Genesis	Genesis
Exodus	Exodus	Exodus	Exodus
Leviticus	Leviticus	Leviticus	Leviticus
Numbers	Numbers	Numbers	Numbers
Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy
<i>The Prophets</i>	<i>The Histories</i>		
Joshua	Joshua	Joshua	Joshua
Judges	Judges	Judges	Judges
1&2 Samuel	Ruth	Ruth	Ruth
1&2 Kings	1&2 Kings = Samuel	1&2 Kings = Samuel	1&2 Samuel
Isaiah	3&4 Kings = Kings	3&4 Kings = Kings	1&2 Kings
Jeremiah	1&2 Chronicles	1&2 Chronicles	1&2 Chronicles
Ezekiel	1 Esdras = Ezra	1 Esdras = Ezra	Ezra
Hosea	2 Esdras = Nehemiah	2 Esdras = Nehemiah	Nehemiah
Joel	Esther	Tobit	Esther
Amos	Judith	Judith	
Obadiah	Tobit	Esther	
Jonah	1-4 Maccabees		
Micah			
Nahum			
Habakkuk			
Zephaniah			
Haggai			
Zechariah			
Malachi			
<i>The Writings</i>	<i>Poetical Books</i>	<i>Didactic Books</i>	
Psalms	Psalms	Job	Job
Proverbs	Odes	Psalms	Psalms
Job	Proverbs	Proverbs	Proverbs
Song of Solomon	Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes
Ruth	Song of Solomon	Song of Solomon	Song of Solomon
Lamentations	Job	Wisdom	
Ecclesiastes	Wisdom	Ecclesiasticus	
Esther	Ecclesiasticus		
Daniel	Psalms of Solomon		
Ezra			
Nehemiah			
1&2 Chronicles			

HEBREW BIBLE	GREEK SEPTUAGINT	LATIN VULGATE	PROTESTANT BIBLE
	<i>Prophetical Books</i>	<i>Prophetical Books</i>	
	Hosea	Isaiah	Isaiah
	Amos	Jeremiah	Jeremiah
	Micah	Lamentations	Lamentations
	Joel	Baruch	Ezekiel
	Obadiah	Ezekiel	Daniel
	Jonah	Daniel	Hosea
	Nahum	Hosea	Joel
	Habakkuk	Joel	Amos
	Zephaniah	Amos	Obadiah
	Haggai	Obadiah	Jonah
	Zechariah	Jonah	Micah
	Malachi	Micah	Nahum
	Isaiah	Nahum	Habakkuk
	Jeremiah	Habakkuk	Zephaniah
	Baruch	Zephaniah	Haggai
	Lamentations	Haggai	Zechariah
	Letter of Jeremiah	Zechariah	Malachi
	Ezekiel	Malachi	
	Sussana		
	Daniel		
	Bel & the Dragon		
		<i>Books of Recent History</i>	
		1&2 Maccabees	

In addition to these main arrangements, comments can be made concerning the number of divisions that have been observed in these arrangements.

- **2-part Division:** Roughly divided up into “the Law” and “the Prophets” and followed by several church fathers, including Augustine. This arrangement seems to be based on two NT passages:

Luke 16:29 “But Abraham said, “They have **Moses** and the **Prophets**; let them hear them.”

Luke 24:27 Then beginning with **Moses** and with all the **prophets**, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

- **3-part Division:** Divides the OT into three sections, “the Law,” “the Prophets,” and “the Writings.” This is the arrangement of the Hebrew *Tanakh* and was nearly universally used up through the time of Christ. In fact, this 3-part arrangement was formally adopted by the Jews in the 2nd century B.C. at the completion of the LXX. Strangely enough, however, even the oldest copies of the LXX do not use the 3-part arrangement, and for this reason neither did the early church.

Luke 24:44 Now He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the **Law of Moses** and the **Prophets** and the **Psalms** must be fulfilled.”

Why “the Psalms” rather than “the Writings”? Most likely it is because it comprised the largest portion of the writings and because it often appeared first in the section.

Even within this 3-part division, the order of the books is not consistent. In fact, the order listed in the table above represents a later division that developed in Jewish circles in order to facilitate discussion with Christian apologists who appealed to the OT to argue against Judaism. Instead, the earlier division consisted of the 39 OT books, but Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles were considered three rather than six books, the Minor Prophets were counted as one book, and Ezra and Nehemiah were coupled together as one book. In addition, the Jewish historian Josephus in the 1st century A.D. writes of 22 books, apparently including Ruth with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah.¹

LATE DIVISION	EARLY DIVISION	JOSEPHUS' DIVISION
<i>The Law</i>	<i>The Law</i>	<i>The Law</i>
Genesis – Deuteronomy	Genesis – Deuteronomy	Genesis – Deuteronomy
<i>The Prophets</i>	<i>The Prophets</i>	<i>The Prophets</i>
Joshua	Joshua	Joshua
Judges	Judges	Judges/Ruth
1&2 Samuel	Samuel	Samuel
1&2 Kings	Kings	Kings
Isaiah	Isaiah	Ezra/Nehemiah
Jeremiah	Jeremiah	Esther
Ezekiel	Ezekiel	Chronicles
Hosea	The Twelve	Isaiah
Joel		Jeremiah/Lamentations
Amos		Ezekiel
Obadiah		Daniel
Jonah		The Twelve
Micah		
Nahum		
Habakkuk		
Zephaniah		
Haggai		
Zechariah		
Malachi		
<i>The Writings</i>	<i>The Writings</i>	<i>The Writings</i>
Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
Proverbs	Job	Job
Job	Proverbs	Proverbs
Song of Solomon	Ruth	Song of Solomon?
Ruth	Song of Solomon	Ecclesiastes?
Lamentations	Ecclesiastes	
Ecclesiastes	Lamentations	
Esther	Esther	
Daniel	Daniel	
Ezra	Ezra/Nehemiah	
Nehemiah	Chronicles	
1&2 Chronicles		

It is apparent that throughout its history, the order of books particularly in the Writings was not rigid. In fact, Josephus specifies only four books in the Writings, given that he

¹ Gleason Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 76.

describes them as “hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.” In fact, all we know for sure is that the Psalms were included (Luke 24:44). Other than that, it is clear that the books included in the Writings were perhaps much smaller at the time of the NT than they appear in the modern Hebrew Bible.

Yet even here, it is interesting to note that at the very least, a case can be made for the first continuity of the first and last books of the OT:

Luke 11:49-51 “For this reason also the wisdom of God said, ‘I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecute, so that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, **from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah**, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.’”

What is revealing about Jesus’ words is that he identifies the murder of two prophets as historical bookends to the history of bloodshed against Israel’s prophets. These two prophets are Abel, who was the victim of the first murder in Genesis 4, and Zechariah, who was the last prophet to be killed in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22. This would indicate that at Jesus’ time, Chronicles may have been the final book in the Hebrew canon.

- **4-part Division:** The LXX preserved a 4-part division of the OT which we find in our modern English Bibles as well: Pentateuch, Historical Writings, Poetic (Wisdom) Literature, Prophets. The Vulgate follows this same arrangement, except that the Pentateuch is considered essentially as part of the historical writings rather than a separate division.

Possible Reasons for Variations in Arrangements

- **Scroll Storage & Preservation Methods:** The OT was written at a time before the invention and use of codices (bound volumes or books). Rather, the OT texts were written on scrolls made of animal skins and kept in boxes known as *cistae* or *capsae*. These boxes were arranged vertically or horizontally, and served both to preserve the scrolls as well as the organize them into sets. The very nature of this storage method made preserving any kind of definitive or authoritative order especially problematic. Scrolls that were stored horizontally might be pulled from the bottom of the stack simply be returned to the top, disrupting the previous order. “The *cistae* might serve to keep a group together, but it offered no means of fixing the relative order of its contents. In the codex, on the other hand, when it contained more than one writing, the order was necessarily fixed, and the scribe unconsciously created a tradition which was followed by later copyists.”²



² John C. Whitcomb, Jr. *Esther: The Triumph of God’s Sovereignty*, EBC (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 225.

- **Liturgical Calendar:** A number of OT books were read in connection with Israel's liturgical calendar. In fact, the Megilloth ("five scrolls") is the name designated for Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther because of their importance in Israel's feasts:

MONTH	LITURGICAL EVENT	BOOK
1 st	Passover	Song of Solomon
3 rd	Pentecost	Ruth
5 th	Ninth of Ab	Lamentations
7 th	Feast of Tabernacles	Ecclesiastes
12 th	Feast of Purim	Esther

It could very well be that the reason why Ruth was separated from Judges and Lamentations from Jeremiah was because of their rolls in the Jewish liturgy. The order of the liturgy is, in fact, the order in which Megilloth occurs in the Masoretic Text, although the other orders are common.

Conclusion

- There appears to be *no unified division or arrangement* to the OT canon
- This makes it extremely doubtful that any inspired or divinely intended order exists
- Beckwith lists 52 different arrangements that have appeared throughout history
- Although there appears to be a 3-part division of the canon during the time of Jesus, there is no evidence of a set order to this division
- We establish a theology of the OT from the *contents* of the books themselves, not based on the order in which they are read
- The various orders of the OT books and the rationale for their acceptance betrays an arbitrary logic that does not demand adoption
- Practical application: Read the Bible how you *want* to read the Bible, not how you think it is *supposed* to be read. Just make sure you understand the genre and intent of the book you're reading!
- Different book orders may be *instructive*. It may be helpful to rearrange the book order in order to draw out relationships. But what is instructive is not necessarily *authoritative*.