

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have an opportunity to learn to know the Bible. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme.

Today's teaching is: THE ORIGIN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT – PART 2.

First, we will learn how copies of the original documents were made and transmitted until the time of the printing press. Second, we will learn about the earliest translations of the Hebrew Old Testament. Third, we will learn about the "canon of the Old Testament", that is, the list of sacred books of the Old Testament, which were accepted as genuinely inspired and authoritative.

POINT 6. THE TRANSMISSION OF THE COPIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS.

First. The hand-written Old Testament Hebrew manuscripts.

How could the original revelation from God be passed on from one generation to the next generation?

Almost all the original books of the Old Testament were written in the Hebrew language. A hand-written document in the Hebrew language is called "a Hebrew manuscript". The Hebrew text we possess today is called "the Masoretic text" and has been transmitted to us by making hand-written copies over a period of more than 2000 years.

Last week we learned that the earliest book of the Old Testament was written about 1900 years B.C. and the latest book before 400 years B.C. In those days there were no printing presses and every book was written by hand. After many years of use, these hand-written documents would begin to tear and become too old for use. So people carefully made hand-written copies of these original documents. After many more years of use also these hand-written copies became too old for use. So again new hand-written copies were made of these old copies, etc.

We no longer possess the infallible original documents of the various books of the Old Testament. The earliest Hebrew manuscripts that have been preserved to us are in some instances no closer than a thousand years to the time of original composition.

Second. The Old Testament manuscripts before the Christian era.

The most important Old Testament manuscripts we possess before the Christian era were part of the "Dead Sea Scrolls". In 1947 thousands of fragments of Hebrew manuscripts were discovered hidden in caves in a dry desert near Qumran in Palestine. About 40 000 fragments were carefully pieced together to form about 500 scrolls. The two most important scrolls were both Hebrew manuscripts of the book of Isaiah. The first so-called "Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah" was a complete copy of the book of Isaiah and was dated 125 B.C. The second so-called "Hebrew University Scroll of Isaiah" consisted of large parts of Isaiah chapters 41-66 and was dated 50 B.C.

When we compare the Hebrew text we possess today with the Hebrew texts of these two old scrolls of Isaiah, we must conclude that the Old Testament manuscripts were transmitted very accurately throughout the centuries. The Hebrew text of the Old Testament we possess today is very accurate!

Third. The faithful copying of the Old Testament manuscripts.

What was done to ensure the faithful copying and transmission of the original Bible books, so that we can have confidence in God's Word today?

Three groups of people contributed to the faithful transmission of the Hebrew text through many centuries. They were "the Sopherim", "the Talmudists" and "the Masorettes".

One. The Sopherim were an order of *scribes* and *teachers of the law* that had its beginning under Ezra, the scribe, from about 457 B.C. to about 200 A.D. In Ezra 7:6,10 we read, "Ezra was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses". "Ezra had devoted himself to the study and the observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel". And in Nehemiah 8:13 we read how the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. For more than 600 years they were the official "Bible Publication Society" of that time. Their great achievement was to standardise a pure text of the Hebrew Bible. They made sure that every hand-written copy of an Old Testament book would conform to the standard text. From about 100 B.C. they counted all the verses, all the words and all the letters (consonants) of each book of the Old Testament and wrote these figures at the end of each book concerned! In this way, anyone could check if he had a perfect copy of the Old Testament text before him or one with a mistake.

Two. The Talmudists were *the transmitters of the interpretations* of the Old Testament books. They existed between 100 B.C. and 500 A.D. For 600 years they memorised the oral tradition and transmitted the written tradition concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament books. These *traditions* included interpretations of the Old Testament books,

together with folklore embellishments, anecdotes and homilies of various sorts. Much of the material was practical and legal questions or intricate details of ritual matters. This mass of traditions has been preserved in three collections, called “the Midrash”, “the Talmud” and “the Tosefta”. They are important, because they contain many quotations from the Old Testament books. These quotations help us to see that the Hebrew text we possess today is very accurate. The many years of transmission by hand did not change the Hebrew text!

Three. The Masoretes were *the scholars* who gave the final form to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament books. They functioned between 500 and 950 A.D. As we said above, almost all the original books of the Old Testament were written in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew script originally had only 22 letters and all of them were consonants. The vowels were added mentally when the Hebrew text was read. Only after 500 A.D. “points” were added to represent the vowels. The Masoretes received the Hebrew text from the Sopherim written only in these 22 consonants and they inserted the vowels in the form of “points”. This gave each Hebrew word its exact pronunciation and grammatical form. They committed themselves to the accurate preservation of the Hebrew Old Testament books. They were more diligent and devoted to the accurate preservation of the Hebrew Old Testament books than any other endeavour to preserve ancient secular or religious literature in the history of human civilisation! They were so conscientious in their task that they did not even venture to make the most obvious corrections in the consonant text, but handed the ancient Hebrew consonant text down to us exactly as it came to them!

Conclusion: The faithful copying and transmission of the original Bible books was ensured by maintaining the standard text, by counting verses, words and letters and by never making any changes in the text.

Fourth. The Old Testament manuscripts after the Christian era.

The most important Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts we possess today are the following. One. A manuscript dated 850 A.D. and containing the five books of the Law (“the British Museum Oriental Codex”). Two. A manuscript dated 895 A.D. and containing the historical books and the prophetic books (“the Codex Cairensis”). Three. A manuscript dated 1010 A.D. and containing the entire Old Testament (“the Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus”). This last manuscript forms the basis for the Hebrew Old Testament text we use today (in “Kittel’s Hebrew Bible”). All translations of the Bible in other languages in the world are based on this manuscript!

Conclusion. Because of the faithfulness of the people, who transmitted the copies of the Hebrew Old Testament books throughout the centuries to us, we have today the most accurate possible Hebrew Old Testament!

POINT 7. THE EARLIEST TRANSLATIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS.

Why are the earliest translations of the Old Testament books important?

First. The Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.

During the exile of the Jews to Babylonia between 586 and 516 B.C., the Old Testament was translated into Aramaic, the language of the Babylonian empire. These translations are important, because they were made more than 500 years before Christ. They help us to see that the original Hebrew text, on which these translations were based, was very accurate.

Second. The Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.

Between 250 and 150 years B.C.. the Old Testament was translated into the Greek language in Alexandria in Egypt. This was done for the convenience of the Greek speaking Jews who lived in Egypt and knew no Hebrew. The five books of the Law, the Historical books and the Psalms were translated very accurately. However, the prophetic books and the other poetical books were translated more freely. Although different words were often used, the meaning of the text did not change! During the time of Jesus and the apostles, Greek was the most important language in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. Jesus and the apostles quoted from both the Hebrew as well as the Greek Old Testament in the books of the New Testament.

Third. Other translations of the Hebrew Old Testament.

The Old Testament was also translated in other languages, like Latin, the language of the Western Roman Empire, Syrian, an important language in the Eastern Roman Empire and Coptic, the language of Egypt.

POINT 8. THE CANON OR LIST OF THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS.

First. The Law and Prophets end with the first coming of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ says that the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament period prophesied until John the Baptist (Mt 11:13). He says that he himself had come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets (Mt 5:17). And he explained to his disciples what was said in all the Old Testament Scriptures concerning himself (Lk 24:27). Also the apostles clearly taught that Jesus Christ was the Last, Final and Great Prophet (Act 3:22-26; Heb 1:1-2). Thus, after the first coming of Jesus Christ there would be no more divine lawyers like Moses or divine prophets like the Old Testament prophets. After the first

coming of Jesus Christ, everyone who calls himself “a prophet” is not a prophet sent by the Living God, because he is not the inspired mouthpiece of the Living God. The Law and the Prophets end with the first coming of Jesus Christ.

Second. The books that truly belong to the Old Testament.

Why does the Old Testament have these 39 books?

The Old Testament has these 39 books, because these books claim divine inspiration and authority. The books of the Old Testament say very clearly that they were inspired by God. It was God himself who spoke the words and who commanded the writers to record his words in books. The writers of the Bible books also acknowledge that the Author of the Old Testament books is God himself, because they again and again use the words, “Thus says the Lord”. And “the historical books” in the Bible show that the Old Testament books received immediate recognition and acceptance by the faithful believers as soon as they were made aware of these books.

The books that are regarded as truly belonging to the Old Testament are called “canonical”. The word “canon” means *a straight reed or a ruler used as a measuring stick*. Applied to literature, the word canon means *the list of books that conform to the standard of divine inspiration and authority*.

The Jews throughout the centuries, the Christian Church founded by the apostles, and the Christian Church after the Reformation all considered these same 39 books of the Old Testament as canonical, that is, as divinely inspired and authoritative for what every human being should believe and how he should live.

Third. The division of the Old Testament books.

How are these 39 books divided in the Old Testament?

The modern Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts: “the Law”, “the Prophets” and “the Writings”. Already about 130 B.C. a Hebrew document (“Ecclesiasticus”) spoke of the three main divisions of the Old Testament books, namely “the Law”, “the Prophets” and “the books by others who have followed in the steps of the prophets”.

In about 30 A.D. Jesus says in Luke 24:44, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms”. Thus also Jesus knew that the Old Testament was divided into three parts. Besides the Psalms, the other books belonging to “the Writings” are also used in the New Testament as the Word of God. Daniel is used in Matthew 24:30, Proverbs is used in Hebrews 12:5-6 and Lamentations is alluded to in Matthew 5:35.

In about 90 A.D. a famous Jewish writer, called Flavius Josephus, wrote about the *canon or fixed list of the Old Testament books, which were regarded as inspired and authoritative*. He says, “We do not have tens of thousands of books, which disagree and conflict with each other, but only 22 books containing the record of all time, which people rightly believe to be divine.” He mentions that the Law consists of the 5 books of Moses, the Prophets consists of 13 books and the remaining 4 books consists of hymns and practical wisdom for people how to conduct their lives. He says that the succession of the prophets ceased during the time of king Arthaxerxes, who died in 424 B.C. Finally he says that since that time “no one has dared to add anything to them, or to take anything from them, or to alter anything in them”!

Together with the Jews of his time, Flavius Josephus combined Judges and Ruth, the two books of Samuel, the two books of Kings, the two books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, Jeremiah and Lamentations and finally the twelve Minor Prophets to form one book. Thus, Flavius Josephus says three important things.

One. The canonical books are the same 39 books we have today!

Two. No more canonical books were written after the time of the prophet Malachi in 435 B.C.

Three. No additional material was ever included in these existing canonical books at all.

There is therefore not a single doubt that more than 400 years B.C. the list of 39 Old Testament books in our Bible were firmly fixed as the only inspired and authoritative books in the Old Testament!

Fourth. The books that do not belong to the Old Testament.

The 14 so-called “Apocryphal books”, which are included in the modern Roman Catholic Bibles, do NOT belong to the original Bible! Jesus and the apostles quote from almost every one of the 39 Old Testament books, but not once from the Apocryphal books.

As late as 1546 A.D., the Apocryphal books were accepted officially by the Roman Catholic Church as part of their canon. But even then many Roman Catholic scholars argued against their inclusion! We must therefore conclude that the Apocryphal books in the Roman Catholic Bible do NOT belong to the original Bible! They are not divinely inspired and they are not authoritative!

Fifth. The only true test whether a book belongs to the Old Testament or not.

How did Christians know which books belonged to the list of Old Testament books?

In 2 Peter 1:20-21 we read, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” In 2 Timothy 3:16 we read, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching,

rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” The Bible clearly says that it is God the Holy Spirit who inspired the books in the Bible. Therefore it is clear that *only the inspiration of the Holy Spirit makes a book a part of the canon* or lists of books that are divinely inspired and authoritative for doctrine and life. The Holy Spirit caused the many original writers to write God’s words in the Old Testament from the creation to the first coming of Jesus Christ without any of them contradicting one another! The Holy Spirit causes the books in the Bible to be read, believed and obeyed by believers in Jesus Christ all over the world. The Holy Spirit uses the books in the Bible to regenerate and transform people to look more and more like the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit causes them to have a deep conviction that the Bible is God’s revelation of what people should believe and of how they should live.

No human individual and no human council can ever decide whether a particular book is divinely inspired and authoritative for doctrine and life or not. The only thing a human council can do is to recognise the quality already inherent by God’s act in the books so inspired! When a child recognises his own parent from a multitude of other adults, he does not impart any new “quality of parenthood” to his parent by such an act. He simply recognises a relationship that already exists. The same is true of the canon or list of authoritative Bible books that were drawn up by the early Christian councils. The Christian councils did not impart *divine inspiration and authority* to a single page of the Bible! They simply recognised and acknowledged the divine inspiration and authority of these religious documents, which *were inherently divinely inspired and authoritative from the time they were written*. In the same way, the early Christian councils rejected other books for which divine inspiration and authority had been falsely claimed!

ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. Make a commitment to read through the whole Old Testament. During the next week, read Genesis chapters 26-50. Next week we will introduce the book of Genesis.

Second. See the workbooks “Go and build Christ’s Church” and Internet on www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to “Discipleship training on the air”.