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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 2: BACKGROUND

THE BIBLE, HEBREW BIBLE, AND OLD TESTAMENT

As we begin this course it is important that a few basic terms are clarified as confusion sometimes occurs with even the well-known names: Bible, Hebrew Bible, and Old Testament.

The English word “**Bible**” comes from the Greek *ta biblia* which means “the books,” because, although we tend to think of it as a single book, the Bible is obviously a collection – a small library – composed of 66 individual books that were written over a long period of time (about 1,500 years). Confusion only occurs here when the term “Bible” is used by different faith groups with reference to the particular Bible they use – for example, the Jewish use of the term “the Bible” for what Christians call the Old Testament and view as the “first part” of “the Bible.”

Of course, the Christian terms “**Old Testament**” and “New Testament” refer to the two collections of books composed by Jewish and Christian writers respectively. Those books that were inspired and written during the Old Testament era – books such as Genesis, Psalms, and Isaiah – were composed between approximately 1400 and 400 BC. Eventually, between about AD 50 to 100, the early Christian Church added new books – such as the Four Gospels and the letters of Paul – to create the collection that Christians refer to as the New Testament.

Often the Old Testament is called the “**Hebrew Bible**,” both because it was produced by Hebrew/Jewish authors and was mainly written in the Hebrew language (with a few sections being written in Aramaic, the language commonly used by the Jewish people in the later stages of the Hebrew Bible’s development).

In a similar way, the New Testament books are sometimes called the “Christian Bible,” which can be confusing because Christians also accept and use the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament – and may refer to the combined collections as the Christian Bible because that is the Bible accepted by the Christian faith.

Simply speaking, the terms Hebrew Bible and Old Testament refer to the same works, though there are some differences. Some branches of Christianity, such as the Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox churches include in their Old Testaments a number of additional later books – often called the **Apocrypha** or **Deuterocanonical** books – that are not accepted by the Jewish faith or by most Protestant Christian churches. This course follows the latter approach in not considering those extra books canonical and so they are not discussed in the following lesson units, although that is not an issue as this course focuses on the major events of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible – all of which are recorded outside the Apocrypha.

ORDER AND ARRANGEMENT OF THE BOOKS:

Although they contain the same books, there is also another difference between the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament – the order of the books within the respective collections.

Hebrew Bible: In the final form of the Hebrew Bible as it was accepted by the Jewish people, there are three divisions: Law (Hebrew *Torah*) – Prophets (Hebrew *Nevi'im*) – Writings (Hebrew *Ketubim*).

This arrangement gives the acronym *TaNak* (made from the first letters of each Hebrew word) – another name for the Hebrew Bible.

Old Testament: In the Christian Old Testament the same books are arranged in roughly chronological order in four divisions: Law – History – Poetry & Wisdom Writings – Prophecy.

This different arrangement between the books of the Hebrew Bible and the (same) books in the Old Testament gives a different stress to the collections. The order of the Hebrew Bible means that its last book is 2 Chronicles which ends with King Cyrus of Persia declaring that the exiled Jews who were captive in Babylon could return to Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:23). On the other hand, the Old Testament arrangement ends with the prophetic book of Malachi which predicts the return of “Elijah” before the messianic age “day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5-6). The one arrangement stresses the past history of the Jewish people, while the other stresses prophecies that Christians see as being relative to the future Messiah who would be portrayed in the New Testament. Finally, several books of the Hebrew Bible (Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra–Nehemiah, and the Twelve Minor Prophets) are split into separate books (1 Samuel, 2 Samuel; etc.) in Christian Bibles.

Apart from these differences, the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament represent the same material, which is why the terms are often used interchangeably – as they are in this course.

HOW THE BIBLE CAME TO US: TRANSMISSION AND PRESERVATION

The important term **transmission** refers to the repeated copying and passing down of the text of the Bible through time, while the term **preservation** is used of very ancient copies that have survived until now. As far as transmission is concerned, although we do not know exactly when many of the books of the Hebrew Bible were first written down, we do know that the original manuscripts were painstakingly copied and recopied over hundreds of years by skilled scholars. These were the “scribes” frequently mentioned in the New Testament (Mark 12:38-40 ESV; etc.) who not only copied the Hebrew Scriptures but also studied them and taught them to people.

In the period A.D. 500-1000 they were followed by the group of scribes called **Masoretes** (from the Hebrew word *masorah*, meaning “tradition”). The Masoretic scribes used a very meticulous system of copying the text in which each letter of every word was copied – and checked – individually. The Masoretes were so meticulous that they counted all the paragraphs, words and even letters in the text they were copying, so they could know by counting if their copy was accurate. They even knew the middle letter of each book so they could count forward and back to see if the copy they had made was perfect. This intense dedication to accuracy meant that although we do not have the earliest manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, the Masoretic texts on which our modern Bibles are largely based are extremely trustworthy.

The earliest biblical books were written on scrolls that had to be rolled and unrolled to read but were eventually copied, as time went by, onto individual sheets of paper (made from plants) or parchment (made from animal skins) and bound into modern style books called *codices* (singular, *codex*). This situation led to the fact that the older scrolls were frequently destroyed as they became worn out over time and only the newer copies were kept. Ironically, this means the oldest complete copy of the Hebrew Bible that survives today is not as old as the oldest copy of the New Testament, although many older individual books and fragments of the Hebrew Bible have survived.

The best known and most significant of the partial biblical books that have been preserved are the famous **Dead Sea Scrolls**, discovered in 1947 in caves on the western side of the Dead Sea. These scrolls consist of sections of a great many ancient Hebrew documents, including a complete scroll of the book of Isaiah and fragments of some 190 other scrolls dating from as early as the third century BC to around the time of Jesus. Almost every book in the Old Testament was represented, and this biblical material has proven to be of immense value to our understanding of the transmission of the biblical text. While some of the scroll texts are clearly paraphrases rather than true translations (somewhat like the modern “Living Bible,” for example), in most cases the Dead Sea Scroll texts exhibit minimal differences between their wording and that of the Hebrew Masoretic Text produced a thousand years later and used as the basis of our Old Testament today.



Section of the Dead Sea Scrolls' Isaiah Scroll. Image: Imj.org

In addition to the very old biblical fragments that have survived, we also have ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible such as the Greek **Septuagint** (from the Latin for “seventy” and often abbreviated LXX), which was made in Egypt between 250-150 BC. Because ancient Israel had been absorbed into the Greek empire of Alexander the Great, the Greek language replaced Hebrew for many Jews, and this popular translation was used and quoted by a number of New Testament writers. Once again, although this and other ancient translations exhibit small differences from the Masoretic text, overall they confirm the reliability of the text of the Hebrew Bible as we have it today.

DOCUMENTARY THEORY

Finally, in this introduction we must briefly discuss the so-called “**documentary hypothesis.**” Secular scholars have long examined works of ancient literature from the perspective that they may not have been written by the people whose names are attached to them. For example, the great Greek epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have traditionally been credited to the poet Homer. But beginning in the early nineteenth century, classical scholars began to think that differences between the two works suggested they were composed by two – or more – people. This kind of analysis was eventually applied to the Hebrew Bible, and in its developed form the documentary hypothesis suggested that many biblical books were actually made up of numerous earlier “source documents” that had been woven together at an often much later date than traditionally believed and not by the biblical people associated with the books named after them.

Evidence for this theory was believed to be found, for example, in the different names for God that the Hebrew Bible uses at different points. For example, the creation account of the first chapter of Genesis uses the name “Elohim” for God while the second chapter uses the word “Yahweh.” This was said to show that the two chapters represented two accounts of creation that were brought together fairly late in history in the form in which we have them now. We will show why this idea does not explain the biblical evidence in the next unit.

Meanwhile, we can say that although this hypothesis had a considerable effect on biblical scholarship for a good many years, scholars today are often less convinced of the idea. The Bible itself is clear that many of its authors utilized different sources in compiling the biblical books. At various points in the Hebrew Bible other books are mentioned that existed in the past and that also described events and people mentioned in the Bible but are not part of the Bible as we have it today. For example, *The Book of the Wars of the Lord* (mentioned in Numbers 21:14-15) and *The Book of Jasher* (mentioned in Joshua 10:13) are not part of the Bible but were clearly regarded as authoritative by the biblical writers. There are more books of this type than many people realize, and the Old Testament books of First and Second Chronicles alone contain dozens of mentions of such texts.

But the fact that the biblical writers utilized many of these ancient sources in compiling their writings does not mean that the biblical books themselves were written by different people. For example, some documentary scholars posit that Moses did not write the first five books of the Bible – the **Pentateuch** – that the New Testament affirms were written by him (Luke 2:22; etc.). The Pentateuch mentions some of the sources used in its construction (Genesis 5:1; etc.), but that does not mean that there was no historical Moses who put the sources together.

That is why many scholars now feel that while the documentary hypothesis made us more aware of the ancient sources used by some of the biblical writers it does not prove a later date of writing for those biblical books and this is the position followed in this course.

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Terms:

Make a list of the key terms in this lesson (they are bolded in the text for your convenience), along with a short single sentence definition of each term.

Basics:

In what ways are the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible the same and in what ways are they different?

What are the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible and the four divisions of the Old Testament?

Why do the facts of “transmission” and “preservation” assure us of the accuracy of the text in our Bibles?

Beneath the Surface:

Why are archaeological discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls important to our understanding of the Bible?

Everyday Applications:

Do the facts regarding the transmission of the Old Testament give you increased confidence in the trustworthiness of the biblical text and its message?

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