

# UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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## Abstract

The Old Testament is a collection of ancient texts that impacted the development of Western civilization and the Christian faith. Its origins, however, remain shrouded in mystery and has been a subject of debate between the scholars. This article explores the history and evolution of the Old Testament, examining the evidence that suggests that the texts were written by multiple authors over a period of many centuries, and that they reflect the beliefs, practices, and historical experiences of the ancient Israelites. The article also discusses the canonization of the Old Testament, a lengthy and complex process that involved debates and disagreements between the Jewish and Christian scholars. Finally, the article explores the challenges of interpreting and translating the Old Testament. Overall, the Old Testament remains a collection of texts that helps us in understanding Jewish and Christian communities, their history and culture.

*Keywords* – Old Testament, Bible, Christianity, Holy Scriptures, Religious History

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## Introduction

The Bible is religious book of Christianity which is divided into two main sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is composed of 39 books, which were written before the birth of Jesus Christ, while the New Testament consists of 27 books, which were written after his death.

The Old Testament contains books like (i) Genesis, (ii) Exodus, (iii) Leviticus, (iv) Numbers, (v) Deuteronomy, etc., which are relate to the history of the Jewish people and their relationship with their God. The New Testament includes books like four Gospels (i) Matthew, (ii) Mark, (iii) Luke, and (iv) John, and other books such as (v) Acts of the Apostles, (vi) Epistles, and (vii) Revelation.

The Old Testament, the first section of the Christian Bible, is a collection of books that is fundamental to their faith and practice throughout the world. These books contain ancient history, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, and their law. The question is, where did these books come from, and how did they come to be considered sacred scripture?

The origins of the Old Testament are shrouded in mystery and controversy. Scholars have long debated questions such as who wrote the books, when they were written, and why they were included in the canon. Some believe that the books were divinely inspired, while others argue that they were written by human authors with specific agendas and biases.

To understand the origins of the Old Testament, we must delve into the history of the Jewish people, who originally wrote and preserved these books. We must examine the cultural, political, and religious contexts in which the books were written, and the ways in which they were transmitted and interpreted over time. We must also consider the role of ancient Jewish scribes, who copied and transmitted the books.

In this paper, we will explore the complex origins of the Old Testament, tracing its history from the earliest days of Judaism to its present-day status as a sacred text. Through careful analysis of primary sources and secondary literature, we will seek to shed new light on this ancient and influential text, and deepen our understanding of the diverse traditions of the Jewish people.

## An overview of the structure of the Old Testament

The Old Testament is divided into four main sections: the Pentateuch, the Historical Books, the Wisdom Books, and the Prophets. Here is a breakdown of the books in each section:

### 1. Pentateuch:

- *Genesis*: The book of origins, which tells the story of creation, the first human beings, and the early history of humanity.
- *Exodus*: The book of liberation, which tells the story of Musa (عليه السلام) leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.
- *Leviticus*: The book which contains laws and rules of their worship and sacrifice.
- *Numbers*: The book of wandering, which tells the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.
- *Deuteronomy*: The book of repetition, which contains a restatement of the law and instructions for living in the promised land.

### 2. Historical Books:

- *Joshua*: The book of conquest, which tells the story of Joshua leading the Israelites into the promised land.
- *Judges*: The book of cycles, which tells the story of a series of judges who helped the Israelites in times of trouble.
- *Ruth*: The book of loyalty, which tells the story of a Moabite woman who becomes part of the Israelite community.
- *1 and 2 Samuel*: The books of kingship, which tell the story of the rise of the monarchy in Israel, including the reigns of Saul (King Talut), David (Dawood - عليه السلام), and Solomon (Sulaiman - عليه السلام).
- *1 and 2 Kings*: The books of division, which tell the story of the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah, including

the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile.

- *1 and 2 Chronicles*: The books of restoration, which retell the history of Israel from a priestly perspective, emphasizing the importance of the temple and the Davidic line.
- ### 3. Wisdom Books:
- *Job*: A book of wisdom literature that deals with the problem of suffering.
  - *Psalms*: A collection of hymns and prayers, many attributed to King David (Dawood - عليه السلام).
  - *Proverbs*: A collection of sayings and teachings on wisdom and morality.
  - *Ecclesiastes*: A book of wisdom literature that explores the meaning of life and the limits of human knowledge.
  - *Song of Solomon*: A love poem that celebrates the beauty of romantic love.
- ### 4. Prophets:
- *Isaiah*: A prophetic book that warns of judgment and offers hope for restoration.
  - *Jeremiah*: A prophetic book that laments the destruction of Jerusalem and offers hope for the future.
  - *Lamentations*: A collection of lament poems mourning the fall of Jerusalem.
  - *Ezekiel*: A prophetic book that uses vivid imagery to warn of judgment and promise restoration.
  - *Daniel*: A book of apocalyptic literature that tells the story of Daniel's life and prophecies about the future.
  - *The twelve minor prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)*: A collection of shorter prophetic books that warn of judgment and offer hope for restoration.

## A brief history of the Jews

The history of the Jewish people stretches back thousands of years and is central to the origins of the Old Testament. According to Jewish tradition, the first Hebrew, Abraham (Ibrahim - عليه السلام), was called by God to leave his homeland of Mesopotamia and settle in the land of Canaan, which would later become the land of Israel. Abraham's (Ibrahim - عليه السلام) descendants, including Isaac (Ishaq - عليه السلام), Jacob (Yaqoob - عليه السلام), and Joseph (Yusuf - عليه السلام), continued to live in Canaan, and eventually became known as the twelve tribes of Israel.

In the following centuries, the Israelites experienced both triumph and tragedy. They were enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years, until God delivered them from bondage through the leadership of Moses (Musa - عليه السلام). The Israelites then wandered in the wilderness for forty years before entering the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua.

In the period of the judges, the Israelites were ruled by a series of charismatic leaders who were chosen by God to deliver them from their enemies. Later, during the reigns of King Saul (King Talut), King David (Dawood - عليه السلام), and King Solomon (Sulaiman - عليه السلام) Israelites enjoyed a period of political and cultural prosperity, with Jerusalem as centre of their religious and national life.

However, after the death of Solomon (Sulaiman - عليه السلام), the kingdom of Israel split in two, with the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Both kingdoms fell to foreign invaders, with the northern kingdom falling to the Assyrians in 722 BCE, and the southern kingdom falling to the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Many Jews were taken into exile in Babylon, and it was during this period of exile that the books of the Old Testament were written and compiled.

After the exile, the Jews returned to their homeland and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. However, they continued to face challenges and hardships, including domination by foreign powers such as the Persians, Greeks, and

Romans. Despite these challenges, the Jewish people maintained their culture and religious identity, and the Old Testament continued to be revered as a source of wisdom and inspiration. Today, there are millions of Jews in the world who continue to revere the Old Testament as part of their religious tradition.

## The writing of the Old Testament

The process by which the books of the Old Testament were written is complex and multifaceted. Many of the texts that make up the Old Testament were originally transmitted orally and were only written down much later. Moreover, different books of the Old Testament were written at different times and by different authors and were often edited and redacted over the centuries. The broad features of the books of Old Testament are as follows.

1. *Oral Tradition:* Many of the stories and teachings in the Old Testament were reported to be first transmitted orally, through the medium of storytelling. This means that they were passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, rather than being written down. This oral tradition was an important part of ancient Jewish culture.
2. *Multiple Authors:* The books of the Old Testament were not written by a single author, but rather by multiple authors over a period of several centuries. For example, the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) is traditionally attributed to Moses (Musa - عليه السلام), but modern scholarship suggests that it was written by multiple authors over a period of several hundred years. Other books, such as the Psalms, were written by multiple authors over an even longer period.
3. *Different Sources:* The books of the Old Testament were also composed of different sources, including historical records, legal codes, and prophetic writings. For example, the book of

Deuteronomy is a collection of sermons and speeches attributed to Moses (Musa - عليه السلام), while the book of Psalms contains a wide variety of poems and hymns. These different sources were often woven together by editors or redactors to create a cohesive narrative.

4. *Editing and Redaction:* The books of the Old Testament were often edited and redacted over the centuries, as different editors or scribes added or deleted material to reflect changing historical and theological contexts. For example, the book of Isaiah is traditionally attributed to the prophet Isaiah, but scholars now believe that it was written by multiple authors over a period of several centuries and was edited and redacted over time to reflect changing political and religious realities.
5. *Canonical Status:* The books of the Old Testament were not immediately recognized as scripture, but rather were gradually accepted as part of the Jewish canon over a period of several centuries. The canonization process was not uniform or consistent, and different Jewish communities had different canons. However, by the time of the Second Temple period (around 500 BCE), there was general agreement about the core texts that were considered authoritative.

### Multiple Authors across several centuries

There is a variety of evidence that supports the idea that the books of the Old Testament were written by multiple authors spanning across several centuries.

1. *Literary Style:* According to Longman and Dillard, different books of the Old Testament exhibit different literary styles, suggesting that they were written by different authors (Longman and Dillard, 2006).

2. *Linguistic Analysis:* Coogan notes that scholars have used linguistic analysis to identify variations in language and grammar that suggest multiple authors in the Old Testament (Coogan, 2014).
3. *Historical Context:* Biblical scholar Michael D. Coogan also discusses how the books of the Old Testament reflect different historical contexts and events, suggesting that they were written by different authors living in different times (Coogan, 2008).
4. *Theological Perspective:* Sharp's edited volume contains essays on the different theological perspectives found in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, supporting the idea that these books were written by authors with different beliefs and priorities (Sharp, 2016).
5. *Editorial Insertions:* Berlin and Brettler's "Jewish Study Bible" contains footnotes and commentary that discuss editorial insertions in the various books of the Old Testament, providing evidence for the involvement of multiple authors and editors in the creation of these texts (Berlin and Brettler, 2004).
6. *Different Names for God:* The use of different names for God in different parts of the Old Testament suggests different authorship. For example, the use of "Yahweh" in some parts and "Elohim" in others indicates different authorship (Levenson, 2012).
7. *Differing Theological Perspectives:* The differing theological perspectives found in the Old Testament, such as the emphasis on covenant in Deuteronomy versus the emphasis on wisdom in Proverbs, suggest different authorship (McDermott, 2012).
8. *Historical Accuracy:* The accuracy of historical details in the Old Testament varies across different books, indicating

different levels of knowledge and sources for the authors (Rogerson, 2003).

9. *Different Writing Styles*: The use of different writing styles, such as poetry, narrative, and prophecy, across the Old Testament suggests different authorship (Collins, 2014).
10. *Changes in Language*: Changes in language over time, such as the shift from Hebrew to Aramaic in some books, also suggest multiple authors (Alter and Kermode, 2011).

## The Canonization of the Old Testament

The process of determining which books were included in the Old Testament canon (official list of books considered authoritative for religious purposes) took place over several centuries and was a complex and controversial process.

The Hebrew Bible (also known as the Tanakh) was the original collection of Jewish scriptures, consisting of three parts: the Torah (Law), the Nevi'im (Prophets), and the Ketuvim (Writings). The books of the Hebrew Bible were written in Hebrew and Aramaic and were recognized as authoritative by Jews before the time of Jesus (عليه السلام - Isa).

The Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, was widely used in the Hellenistic Jewish community and by early Christians. The Septuagint included additional books not found in the Hebrew Bible, known as the Deuterocanonical or Apocryphal books. These books were not considered authoritative by Jews but were accepted as such by some early Christian communities.

The process of canonization began in the 2nd century BCE with the recognition of the Torah as authoritative by Jews. The books of the Prophets were recognized as authoritative by the end of the 2nd century BCE, and the Writings by the end of the 1st century CE.

The criteria used to determine which books were included in the canon included the book's authorship, its content (did it conform to established religious teachings), and its reception (was it widely accepted and used in religious communities).

There was significant debate and disagreement among Jews and Christians over which books should be included in the canon. For example, some Jewish communities accepted the Deuterocanonical books, while others did not. Similarly, some early Christian communities accepted additional books beyond the Hebrew Bible and the Deuterocanonical books, such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas, but these were later rejected.

The process of canonization was largely complete by the 4th century CE, when the Councils of Hippo (393 CE) and Carthage (397 CE) formally recognized the canon of the Old Testament that is still used by most Christians today.

## The role of the councils of Hippo and Carthage in the Canonization of the Old Testament

The Council of Hippo in 393 CE and the Council of Carthage in 397 CE were two church councils that played an important role in the formal recognition of the Old Testament canon. These councils were convened by the Christian Church to address several theological issues, including the canon of scripture.

At the Council of Hippo, a list of canonical books was drawn up that included all the books of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament books that are recognized today. This list was later confirmed by the Council of Carthage.

The canon of the Old Testament recognized by these councils is the same as the one used by most Christians today. It includes the books of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, for a total of 39 books in the Protestant canon and 46 books in the Catholic and Orthodox canons.

It's worth noting that while these councils played a significant role in the formal recognition of the Old Testament canon, they did not create or establish the canon. Rather, they recognized and affirmed the canon that had already been widely accepted and used by the Christian Church.

The process of canonization was not without controversy, and there were still debates and disagreements over the canon even after the councils of Hippo and Carthage. For example, some Christian communities in Ethiopia and Syria recognized additional books as part of the Old Testament canon.

Overall, the process of canonization was a complex and lengthy one that involved several factors, including authorship, content, and reception. The Old Testament canon that is recognized by most Christians today represents the culmination of this process and is accepted as authoritative for religious purposes.

## The interpretations and translations of the Old Testament

The interpretation of the Old Testament has been a topic of debate and discussion for centuries. The text is written in ancient Hebrew, and many of the cultural and historical references may be unfamiliar to modern readers. As a result, there are many different approaches to interpreting the Old Testament, including historical-critical, literary, and theological approaches.

The historical-critical approach to interpretation involves analysing the historical context of the text, including its authorship, date, and cultural background. This approach seeks to understand the original meaning of the text and how it would have been understood by its original audience.

The literary approach focuses on the structure and style of the text, including its use of language, imagery, and symbolism. This approach seeks to understand the artistry of the text and how its literary features contribute to its meaning.

The theological approach to interpretation emphasizes the religious and spiritual significance of the text, including its teachings on

God, humanity, and salvation. This approach seeks to understand the theological themes and messages of the Old Testament and how they relate to the Christian faith.

The translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into other languages has also been an important factor in its interpretation. There are many different translations of the Old Testament available, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Some translations seek to preserve the literal meaning of the Hebrew text, while others prioritize readability and clarity.

Some notable translations of the Old Testament include the King James Version (KJV), the New International Version (NIV), and the Revised Standard Version (RSV). Each of these translations has had a significant impact on the interpretation and understanding of the Old Testament.

In addition to translation, the process of interpretation is also influenced by factors such as cultural context, religious tradition, and personal beliefs. Different readers may approach the text with different assumptions and biases, leading to a wide range of interpretations.

## Conclusion

The Old Testament is a complex collection of ancient texts that has had a profound impact on the development of Western civilization and the Christian faith. While the origins of the Old Testament are shrouded in mystery and debated by scholars, there is evidence to suggest that the texts were written over a period of many centuries by multiple authors, and that they reflect the beliefs, practices, and historical experiences of the ancient Israelites.

The canonization of the Old Testament was a lengthy and complex process that took place over several centuries, and involved debates and disagreements about which books should be included and which should be excluded.

The interpretation and translation of the Old Testament continue to be important topics of discussion and debate, with scholars using a

variety of approaches to understand the meaning and significance of these ancient texts.

Overall, the Old Testament remains an influential collection of texts as we are reminded of the legacy of the ancient Israelites and their cultural heritage.

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## About the Author



Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian, and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history, and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.