

AN OVERVIEW OF THE (PROTESTANT) OLD TESTAMENT CANON

Excerpts from Mayfield, Tyler. *A Guide to Bible Basics*. Westminster John Knox, 2018.
(with additions by Julia O'Brien)

PENTATEUCH

The Greek word Pentateuch translates into English as "five scrolls" and is standard Christian designation for the first five books in the Old Testament Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Jews often refer to these same books as Torah, a Hebrew word meaning "instruction." These books are also referred to in both Judaism and Christianity as the Five Books of Moses in deference to the ancient tradition of Moses as the author.

CONTENT OUTLINE

The beginnings of humanity (Gen 1-11) **(narratives)**
Abraham's story (Gen 12-25) **(narratives)**
Jacob's story (Gen 26-36) **(narratives)**
Joseph's story (Gen 37-50) **(narratives)**
Israelites in Egypt (Exod 1-12) **(narratives)**
Israelites delivered from Egypt (Exod 12-15) **(narratives)**
Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 15-18) **(narratives)**
Israelites at Sinai (Exod 19-40; Leviticus; Num 1-10) **(some narratives; mostly legal materials)**
Wilderness wanderings (Num 11-21) **(mostly narratives; some legal materials)**
Encampment on the Plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho
(Num 22-36: **mostly narratives**) (Deuteronomy: **mostly legal materials**)

HISTORICAL BOOKS

The Historical Books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther) continue the story of the Pentateuch by telling of the Israelites' conquest of the land of Canaan, their intermittent alliances under the judges, the United Monarchy, the Divided Monarchy, the fall of the northern kingdom to the Assyrians, the fall of the southern kingdom to the Babylonians, and life back in Israel after the exilic period. They narrate then a major portion of the history of Israel and Judah, a history that occurs over more than seven hundred years.

In the Jewish canon, the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings constitute a section known as the Former Prophets. **These books are called by scholars the Deuteronomistic History.** The books of Ruth, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are grouped in the Writings section of the Jewish Bible.

POETIC BOOKS

The Poetic Books--Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, are grouped together not because they tell a coherent story but because of their abundant use of poetry. These five books stand outside of the basic chronological framework of Genesis to Esther, that is, the story that originates with the beginning of the world and ends during the Persian period. Furthermore, they are not prophetic books. The category is based on genre: it is difficult to find a common literary or theological theme shared by all five other than their use of poetry.

PROPHETS

Each of the Prophetic Books-- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi—is connected to a prophetic figure, and all but one share their book name with that prophet. These books contain both stories about prophets and the words of prophets.

In the Christian canon, the books are grouped into the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets based on their length. The **Major Prophets** are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The **Minor Prophets** are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. ***In the Jewish tradition, these are sometimes considered a single Book of the Twelve.*** In the Hebrew canon, the books of Lamentations and Daniel are not found in the Prophets, but in the Writings.

These prophets can be sorted into rough time periods:

Eighth Century BCE

Amos

Hosea

Isaiah

Micah

Seventh Century BCE

Zephaniah

Nahum

Habakkuk

Sixth Century BCE

Jeremiah

Ezekiel

Obadiah

Haggai

Zechariah

Fifth Century BCE or Later

Joel

Malachi

Jonah