

The Canonization of the Tanakh (OT):

[A short overview based primarily on the work of the great historian Prof. Paul Johnson – see 'A History of the Jews' – especially pages 87-97]

The period of 400-200 BCE was a time in the life of Israel that saw no great calamities but yet was the time during which the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) emerged 'more or less as we know it' today.

It appears the events surrounding Nehemiah and Ezra and the rebuilding of Jerusalem precipitated the establishment of a new covenant, effectively the establishment of the religion of Judaism, which was now no longer based on revelation or preaching but on a recognized text (see Nehemiah 8).

To make this authorized, official version meant considerable sorting and selecting of the vast Jewish collection of literature that already existed. The Jews had been a very literate people from very early in their history. To illustrate this, consider that when Gideon was in Succoth (Judges 8:14) he questioned a young lad about the place and this young man was able to write down many names – apparently most of the farmers back then could read and write at least a little (see SW Baron, 'Social and Religious History of the Jews' p 323).

The Jews wrote a lot – the text of the Tanakh was only a very small portion of their efforts. But they wrote with a purpose and their best efforts were for communal benefit and thus subject to social control. The community decided if a text should be accepted as part of the canon (Sumerian word for 'reed', meaning straight or upright). Part of their criteria was that the writer was a recognized prophet. The compilation of the books that make up the Torah (or Pentateuch – the five books of Moses) come from this time (in its most primitive form probably from the time of Samuel – i.e. canonized by 622 BCE).

The internal evidence of the Tanakh demonstrates that those who first compiled all these books into this canon after the Nehemiah/Ezra return from exile believed that these texts were divinely inspired and the scribes who continued to copy them also treated them with great veneration and care, even to the point of continuing to accurately copy some texts that they clearly did not understand!

The community saw this effort as so important that there developed even whole families of scribes (i.e. this 'profession' was passed from father to son – see 1 Chr 2:55).

With this 'new' covenant and religion effectively re-started by Nehemiah and Ezra, there were established public readings of these texts, and more texts were added to create the Torah, the Nevi'im (the Prophets) and the Ketuvim (the Writings), the TaNaK being essentially completed by around 300 BCE.

Inclusion in this canon, the TaNaK (Tanakh) was the only way a text was preserved. Unless a manuscript was constantly recopied it would disappear without a trace in a generation or two. So these families of scribal scholars (or

Masorettes), produced the official Jewish version known as the Masoretic text. With the Dead Sea Scrolls discoveries of the last few decades a copy of a complete Isaiah Scroll was found that was dated to around 100 BCE, and found to be almost identical to the previously oldest known version of around 700 CE¹.

Because the Jews believed that God was the sole ultimate cause of everything, they believed that to record all historical events was to record God's interaction with man and thus provide a key to understanding of this relationship and of God. Thus the Jews were above all historians and the Tanakh 'is essentially a historical work from start to finish.' (Johnson p 92).

As Johnson sums it up: *'The transformation of Judaism into the first 'religion of the Book' took two centuries. Before 400 BCE there is no hint of a canon. By 200 BCE, it was there.'* (Johnson, p 95)

The Jewish historian of the first century, Josephus would write that the Tanakh contained 22 books² (Contra Apionem, 1:37).

The final canonization of the Tanakh took place at the Council of Yavneh (Jamnia/Jabneh) around 80 CE.

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April 2013

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¹ When scholars studied this Hebrew 'Great Isaiah Scroll', they found it to be virtually identical to the next oldest in existence, the Masoretic Hebrew Isaiah scroll from around 700 - 1000 CE.

² *"For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing and contradicting one another, but only 22 books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine"* (Against Apion, Book I, Section VIII).