The Canon of the Old Testament

Assignment 1-1 for BI5533 Old Testament History

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The Canon of the Old Testament is an authoritative collection of scriptural writings.[[1]](#footnote-1) The canon consists of all the books that are divinely inspired by God and carefully recorded by important religious leaders such as scribes. We can trust the books of the canon are reliable because we run them through a filter of Gods activity which E.J. Young points out, “That which determines the canonicity of a book, therefore, is the fact that the book is inspired of God. Hence a distinction is properly made between the authority which the OT books possess as divinely inspired, and the recognition of that authority on the part of Israel.”[[2]](#footnote-2) God chose to speak through direct revelation using the prophets and people of the OT to carry out his work.

The Old Testament has gone through much criticism over the years about how we can rely on its text especially because it was written over so many years by different authors as well as being revised and updated. One of the more important pieces of evidence we have against those claims are witnesses to the old testament such as old texts that offer historical evidence of its credibility. One of those texts that offer this credibility is the dead sea scrolls which pre dated any other historical evidence we have had and included many fragments of the old testament except for Esther. The finding of the Dead Sea scrolls meant we now have further evidence to back our claim the bible was divinely inspired and carefully copied.

Another claim that we can make is that even though the texts were copied many time we know the copies were safe guarded by those of high ranking in the Israelite community. Michael Grisanti says it best when he give 5 propositions defending the old testament text, propositions such as every word in the old testament is God inspired. We can then follow into his next claim that since every word is God inspired it is also backed by God, and the original autographs were carefully copied without any divinely endorsed content changes. The close of the canon marks the end of divinely inspired text but leaves room for textual criticism, which is his fourth point. In his last and final point Michael says that only those of high status and reputation could make updates to the text.

One might pose the question that if the bible is so divinely inspired then why do we have a need for the updating. That is a great question and one that comes with many answers but one of the best answers is that culture is constantly changing. Not only is culture changing but many times so did languages which offered some trouble when translating because sometimes things did not want to translate well into another language. God’s word especially the OT was translated so many times that sometimes words were left out unintentionally or duplicated which is why we left a lot of the recording to scribes and prophets that could decipher what the original intent was of the passage even though human error may of presented itself.

Many other forms of criticism still exist like believing in biases or other wise referred to as tendenz. Tendenz is when your point of view or bias interfere with and influence a piece of literary work. Tendenz is problematic and many would say that of course the biblical writer wrote it that way because they had some type of bias, but this point generally only helps justify the OT especially when thinking about every piece of history ever written was examined from one point of view or another. God’s spirit directed the writers of the OT and they chose for themselves what points they wanted to keep in or out helping keep that message as clear as possible.

Hermeneutics helps us look at the OT canon closely as well and understand the reliability of it. D.A. Carson put it best that “No two languages are exactly alike. As we will learn in our chapter on word studies, words mean different things in different languages. Even words that are similar in meaning differ in someway.”[[3]](#footnote-3)I bring us back to the point on languages and translations because this is where a lot of criticism hits home and I believe it is rather unfair when we see that is hard to accurately portray what the original author meant because they are from a different time period and or different language. There is a balancing act that needs to take place between the original writing and the translations or copying of the text so we can still accurately understand the meaning of the text which is why the updating in the OT after the close of the canon was so necessary.

In summary the Old Testament canon is under a lot of debate from critics all over but I believe this criticism only helps fuel the ability of scholars to more accurately prove its reliability. We also cannot forget that we did not come up with the OT this was ultimately Gods design all along we are only the vessels that God chose to work through, and so mainly what we are tasked do is try to make sure we surround ourselves with as much reliable evidence and proof of Gods word as possible. The main point for proving the canon is because if it is God breathed and designed then what else could be more important in the world than trying to understand what the creator is trying to say to us. It is stated best in The World and the Word page 106 “if the OT is God’s Word in the fullest sense, the question of the canon logically and theologically follows as a matter of the most urgent and serious concern“. Understanding the canon cannot be more important especially when looked at through that lens.

1. Douglas Mangum, The Lexham Glossary of Theology (Washington: Lexham Press, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eugene H. Merrill, Mark E Rooker and Michael A. Grisanti (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Inclusive Debate (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 48-51 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)