

FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

The Major Divisions of the Old Testament

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Question: What are the major divisions of the 39 books of the Old Testament?

Answer: The Pentateuch, History, Poetry or Writings, Major Prophets, Minor Prophets

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The Old Testament was composed over roughly a thousand year period and is divided by the grouping of the various books:

The Pentateuch is the term commonly applied to the first five books of the Bible; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy . The Pentateuch was the first collection of literature acknowledged as Scripture by the Hebrew community. The writing of these books has been ascribed to Moses. It holds supreme rank in the Old Testament canon in respect and holiness.

This Greek expression means "five scrolls" and was popularized by the Alexandria Jews in the first century A.D. who had come under the influence of Greek culture. The Hebrew-speaking Jewish community referred to these five books as "The Law," "Torah," or "The Law of Moses."

The Historical books include Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, 1st and 2nd Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. These books share a prophetic view of history describing how the obedience or disobedience of God's people is directly tied to the blessings and curses of the covenant. In the Hebrew arrangement, Joshua, Judges, and the books of Samuel and Kings form a group of books called "the Former Prophets" due to the prophetic view from which they are written.

The Poetic and Wisdom writings include Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Unlike classical and modern poetry, ancient Hebrew poetry has no distinctive scheme of accentuation, meter, or rhythm to differentiate it from prose. It is noted for its parallelism, or the counterbalancing of ideas in phrases. To the Hebrews, wisdom included skill in living and the powers of observation. It also included the capacity of human intellect and the application of knowledge and experience to daily life. All of this came from a viewpoint that was firmly rooted in "the fear of the Lord," which is the beginning of wisdom.

The Major Prophets include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel. These books were declared "major" because of the amount of text, and not because they were considered more important than the "minor" prophetic books. The Old Testament prophet tended to be revealed during times of crisis. God used the prophets to provide direction and wisdom during times of crisis. They were also used by God to remind the people of their covenantal promises.

The relevance of biblical prophecy is not only the information revealed to the audience about the circumstances being faced in their time or in a time to come, but also what the message reveals about the nature of God. Prophecy in the Bible is part of God's self-revelation, by which we come to know God through what he has done in the past and what He plans to do in the future.

The Minor Prophets include Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The books of the major and minor prophets were considered to be part of the "classical prophecy" era of the Old Testament. The classical prophecy era began in the eighth century during the reign of Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos and Hosea were the earliest examples in the north, while Micah and Isaiah were the first known classical prophets in the southern kingdom of Judah. These prophets addressed both the king and the people and became social-spiritual commentators for the Jewish people.

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