

Here at last I can summarize what modern scholars say about the formation of the canon of the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament). It's a fascinating topic, of relevance, of course, to Jews, Christians, and anyone else who thinks the history of our civilization matters! This summary is taken from my book [The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction](#) (If the terms I use here don't make sense: read the preceding two posts!)

Contemporary Views of the Formation of the Canon

Today scholars tend to present a somewhat fuzzier picture of when and why the canon came to be formed, although there do seem to be some fixed points. It is widely held that the five books of the Torah were accepted by nearly all Jews as a set canon by the fifth century b.c.e., in the early postexilic period. One piece of evidence comes from the Bible itself, in a post-exilic book, Ezra. The scribe Ezra himself is described as being "skilled in the Torah of Moses that the LORD the God of Israel had given" (Ezra 7:6). This suggests that it was widely known that there *was* a "Torah of Moses" and that the educated elite were sometimes being trained in understanding and interpreting it. The Torah is and always has been the same five books, and they have always been given in the same sequence (Genesis-Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers-Deuteronomy), since they trace a chronological tale. And so by the fifth century b.c.e., most Jews probably accepted the Torah as an authoritative group of texts connected principally with Moses.

The next sub-collection to be finalized was the ...

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