

Old Testament Overview

The Old Testament is the first portion of the Christian Bible. The very term “Old Testament” is perhaps unfair to use from a perfectly academic position, as it assumes the presence of a “New (or *Current*) Testament” - which is an exclusively Christian position. The books which comprise the Old Testament are ones which Christianity “inherited” from Judaism and all of them were used (to a certain extent) by various groups of Jews before and during the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Christian Old Testament has – for the majority of its history as a Christian collection of works and for the majority of Christians (even today) – consisted of 46 books. There are a small number of Christians who maintain a smaller canon, which in fact corresponds to the current Masoretic canon of the Jews. For more information on this subject, see the discussion on the Septuagint and the Masoretic texts.

The Old Testament is so-called by Christians because it is primarily concerned with the early covenants between God and His people Israel, which Christians view as being the “old covenant” between God and Man (contrasted to the “new and everlasting covenant” which Jesus Christ speaks of at the Last Supper).

Modern Jews often use the term Tanakh to refer to what non-Catholic Christians call the Old Testament – and divide it up into sections in a radically different manner to the Christians. Conversely, the Christian Old Testament (as used by the majority of Christians) not only contains additional books, but also places them in a different order. These two different ways of ordering the books (Tanakh and Old Testament) emphasize different aspects of the works, and are based on – and lead to – different conclusions about the identity of God and His relationship with His people. Additionally, certain aspects of modern Israeli nationalism and Zionism can arguably be traced to the ordering of books in the Tanakh.

However, despite (or, perhaps because of) the fact that Christians view the Jewish covenant as being the “old covenant”, the Old Testament is still very important and vital to Christians. The Jewish Scriptures of the Old Testament have always found a place in the Christian Scriptures and liturgy. An early heresy of the Church was Marcionism, named after Marcion of Synope who was active in the second century AD. This heresy maintained that the Old Testament should be abandoned and that only the New Testament should be used. He also produced his own canon of works (remember, this was over two centuries before the formal declaration and fixing of the New Testament canon) which consisted of a heavily-edited version of the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's epistles. All other works were rejected – most of them for being “too Jewish” in thought. His editing of Luke was to remove this Jewish influence, which he saw as incompatible with Christianity.

Marcion taught other heretical notions (including a sort of dualism which was similar to that later preached by the Bogomils and Cathars) but it is this opposition to the Jewish origins of Christianity which most interests us. His heresy was soundly condemned by the Church in the year 144 AD when he was excommunicated and a large donation he had made to the Church was returned.

The episode with Marcion illustrates a very important point about the relationship between the Old Testament and the New, and between the Jewish covenant and the new and everlasting covenant; the new is based and built on the old, and that this understanding is the at the center of authentic Christian thought. This notion is often expressed by the phrase *the New Testament lies hidden in the Old Testament and the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament*. The events, images, typologies and other connections between the two Testaments are only fully understood when we have both of them – even though the New Testament will often quote from (and thus contain verbatim) passages from the Old Testament, it is essential to have the *whole* Old Testament as a foundation for the New Testament.

Without the old Jewish covenant (shown to us in the Old Testament), there would be no framework to understand the new and everlasting covenant of Jesus Christ, as presented in the New Testament.