

Chapter Three

The Canonization of the Old Testament

*As the Scriptures themselves reveal, the Old Testament is essentially a **Levitical** document—canonized under the authority of the Aaronic priesthood.*

Canonization—as it is called from the Greek *kanon*, meaning “rule or measuring rod”—is a process by which a collection of writings come to be considered authoritative, definitive and fixed by a particular religious authority. A canonical book, therefore, is one that *conforms* to the “canon”—that is, passes the test of authenticity.

Because the sacred books of Israel were inspired by God—or, as the apostle Paul says, were “God-breathed”—it was imperative that the texts remain distinctly separate from secular or pagan writings. Numerous texts were known historically to exist alongside the Scriptures—and many were purported to be sacred. Thus, the texts which make up the Old Testament were canonized in order to assure their singular position as the inspired Word of God. Contrary to what many of today’s “scholars” teach, this all-important task of canonization was not left in the hands of the so-called “fathers” of Judaism—but was carried out under the authority of the Aaronic/Levitical priesthood. As we will see, the book that we call the Old Testament is a thoroughly Aaronic/Levitical document.

Background: What Led to the Canonization of the Old Testament?

In *The Jewish Canon and the Christian Canon*, Dr. Kip L. Wheeler points out that idea of a *finalized* Hebrew canon first began to emerge shortly after the Babylonian exile. He notes that it was the Jews’ fear of religious “contamination” that motivated them to create an “official version of the various Scriptures and gather them into one organic collection” (web.cn.edu/kwheeler/canon1.html). Indeed, the primary reason for the final compilation of the sacred Aaronic writings into an authentic, authoritative canon of Scripture was to combat an insidious counterfeit system of worship arising out of Samaria during the post-exilic period.

Historically, a counterfeit form of Judaic worship emerged from Samaria, north of Jerusalem, in the fifth century BC led by the apostate high priest Manassah. (Recall that Samaria and the area previously occupied by the northern tribes of Israel had long been repopulated by Gentiles following Israel’s exile—II Kings 17.) After marrying the daughter of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, Manassah was confronted by Ezra the priest, who demanded that Manassah and his fellow priests put away their foreign wives. Manassah refused, and he and his rebel priests defected to Samaria where Sanballat had built a Jerusalem-like temple for Manassah and his apostate priests. Astonishingly, Manassah’s new apostate religion incorporated all of the rituals described in the Law, the only portion of the Hebrew texts accepted by the rogue priests.

Ezra and the Great Assembly of 120 priests—as well as the Jews of Jerusalem and Judea—found themselves confronted with a counterfeit form of temple worship that professed to uphold the laws of Moses. Its counterfeit temple stood on Mount Gerizim, the Mount of Blessing, near Jacob’s Well. Ezra perceived that this false religion was a real threat to the pure worship of the true God which he and others had worked to restore to the post-exilic Jews. Something drastic had to be done to protect the true worship of God from being corrupted by this new Samaritan-Jewish apostasy.

To accomplish this, Ezra and the Great Assembly began to exercise firm authority over every aspect of worship at the temple of God in Jerusalem and in the numerous Jewish synagogues scattered throughout the Persian empire. The Great Assembly supervised and regulated the temple rites and sacrifices, priestly laws, synagogue rituals and everything associated with the worship of God under the Old Covenant. Every act of worship had to be thoroughly and completely scriptural, centered at the temple in Jerusalem—and approved by Ezra and the Great Assembly.

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In order to preserve the true worship of God, it was essential to differentiate between the sacred Hebrew texts of the Jerusalem Jews and the Hebrew writings utilized by the apostate Samaritan Jews. The key step was to organize the sacred Levitical documents into a *final*, closed canon of Scripture. Then, accurate copies of the entire canonized text were made and distributed to Jewish synagogues throughout the Persian empire. Once canonized, the Scriptures could be preserved without fear of corruption.

Ezra's work—a monumental step in the development and preservation of the Hebrew Bible for Jews and the Old Testament for Christians—is summarized in these five areas: “According to Jewish tradition, five great works are ascribed to him [Ezra]: (1) the foundation of the ‘Great Synagogue’ [the Great Assembly], (2) **the settlement of the canon of Scripture, with the threefold division into Law, Prophets, and Hagiographa** [the Psalms and other Writings], (3) the substitution of the square Chaldee characters for the old Hebrew and Samaritan [script], (4) the compilation of Chronicles, possibly of Esther, with the addition of Nehemiah's history to his own, and (5) the establishment of synagogues” (Angus, *The Bible Handbook*, p. 542, emphasis added).

Canonization Under the Authority of the Levitical Priesthood

It is evident that the canonicity of the Scriptures was accomplished in several preliminary stages over many centuries, culminating in the work of Ezra the scribe and priest. Canonization efforts prior to Ezra's time were, at best, *preparatory* to his final canon. While numerous biblical figures—such as prophets, scribes and kings—were involved, canonization was always carried out under the leadership and authority of the Levitical priesthood. Indeed, the Law of God—the foundation of the Old Covenant—was from the very beginning delivered into the care of the “**priests, the sons of Levi**” (Deut. 31:9).

Moses—obviously involved in the finalization of the Law—was a Levite, and Aaron's brother, though he was not actually a priest. Moses, however, was so much *greater* than a priest! God talked face-to-face with Moses as with a friend (Ex. 33:11)—and Moses was the one who ordained Aaron and his sons into the priesthood (Lev. 8). In fact, as the one God used to give His laws and commandments, Moses was the *forerunner* of Jesus Christ—the “living” Word of God, the one Who gave the spirit of the Law (John 1:17; Matt. 5-7).

Samuel—because he was prophet, judge *and* priest—was also a type of Christ, and apparently wrote the books of Joshua and Judges in addition to most of I Samuel. David and Solomon, as we will see, were directly involved in adding to the early canon of Scripture—but only under the authority of the priesthood (Abiathar and Zadok). David, in particular, worked with Asaph, an Aaronic priest given charge of the Ark of the Covenant while it was at David's house (I Chron. 16:7, 37). Also as the priest in charge of sacred worship music, Asaph wrote a number of the Psalms himself (Psa. 50:1; etc.).

Hezekiah, a righteous king of Judah, was inspired as well to add to the growing canon of Scripture. Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah worked under the authority of the priest Uriah (see Isa. 8:1-2). Later, Jeremiah—both a prophet and of the priestly line of Aaron—was used of God in early canonization work. Apparently, Jeremiah rescued the Sacred Texts from the temple just prior to its destruction, sending them—with his own prophetic writings—safely into Babylon by the hand of the Levitical scribe Seraiah (Jer. 51:61), the brother of Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe. (Levitical scribes were always of the Aaronic line.) The prophet Ezekiel, also in exile, was of the Aaronic priesthood as well (Ezek. 1:3). The Sacred Texts were later brought back to Jerusalem by Ezra the scribe, who was an Aaronic priest (Ezra 7:14).

God's Word is perfect—purified seven times over (Psa. 12:6). Could the critical task of canonizing of the very Word of God really be entrusted to self-proclaimed Jewish “sages” or apostate Catholic “fathers”? Indeed, the *pattern* revealed throughout Scripture is clear: God committed the canonization of the Old Testament only to those He had already given the highest level of authority, the Aaronic priesthood. To paraphrase the prophet Malachi, “For the priest's lips should **keep [true] knowledge**, and the *people* should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.” (Mal. 2:7).

As will be covered later, this same pattern carries over into the canonization of the New Testament, starting with John the Baptist—also of priestly lineage—and his call for repentance. Ultimately, the entire Word of God—from Genesis to Revelation—is a *priestly* document.

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The Five Stages of the Canonization of the Old Testament

Before his death in January 2002, Dr. Ernest L. Martin was recognized as one of the leading scholars and authorities on the canonization of the Bible. In his books *The Original Bible Restored*, second edition, 1991, and *Restoring the Original Bible*, third edition, 1994, Martin gives considerable insight into how, when and by whom the Old and New Testament Scriptures were canonized. While some of his biblical interpretations and historical conjectures are somewhat unique, his books are highly esteemed in the field of biblical canonization.

While scholars today generally look to *outside* sources for information concerning the canonization of the Scriptures, Martin considered the *internal* biblical evidence to be the most compelling. Martin writes: “There were five periods in the history of Israel in which the canonization of sacred scriptures took place. **The final collection was established in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and, of course, this latter canonization must be reckoned the most important**” (*Restoring the Original Bible*, ch. 12, online version, emphasis added; www.askelm.com/restoring/res013.htm). Using Scripture as evidence, Martin notes that five periods are relevant to the canonization of the Old Testament: 1) Moses’ time, 2) the reigns of David and Solomon, 3) the revival period under Hezekiah, 4) the time just prior to and during the exile (beginning with the reforms of Josiah), and 5) the post-exilic period under Ezra and Nehemiah.

The first period of canonization was under Moses, who, shortly before his death, authorized the first five books of the Old Testament—also called the “Torah” or the “Pentateuch”—as the divine Law of Israel (1486-1446 BC). After making minor updates relating to geographical names, etc., Moses delivered the Law into the custody of the *priesthood* for safekeeping. “And Moses wrote this law, and **delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi**, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel” (Deut. 31:9, 24-26). According to Martin and other scholars the prophet Samuel (also of the Aaronic line) later contributed to the canon by writing the books of Joshua and Judges and most of I Samuel. Much of his material was based primarily on the historical records of the priests Phinehas (son of Eleazar) and Eli. Thus, again we see the direct participation of the Aaronic priesthood in the ongoing development of the Old Testament canon.

With the bedrock foundation of the Scriptures established, canonization continued under King David’s rule—where new writings were added for use in temple worship. Unlike the temporary tabernacle, the new temple in Jerusalem would allow for a more elaborate form of worship—one that would appropriately include the singing of hymns to God. As the well-known psalmist, David penned many songs under God’s inspiration, which were sung by the Levites at temple services. As various psalms were incorporated into worship services, they were thus canonized—set aside officially for temple worship (1050-1011 BC). As mentioned, David was assisted by the Aaronic priest Asaph, who in turn would have worked with the priests Abiathar and Zadok. Undoubtedly, the prophets Nathan and Gad were involved as well in the furthering of the Old Testament writings.

The Aaronic canon was evidently expanded under the reign of Solomon as well. Ecclesiastes 12:9 tells us that Solomon “**sought out and set in order** many proverbs.” While Solomon did not originate all of the proverbs of the Scriptures, he apparently was inspired of God to assemble a number of such writings as an addition to the canon (see Prov. 1:6; 24:23). Ultimately it was the responsibility of Ezra and the Great Assembly to determine what documents would be included in the final canon. Clearly, however, a type of canonization took place during the early temple years under David and Solomon, which would largely pave the way for Ezra’s final work.

Canonization Continues with King Hezekiah, Under the Authority of Azariah the Priest and Isaiah the Prophet

As one of the most righteous kings of Judah (II Kings 18:5), Hezekiah set about to restore the proper worship of God (II Chron. 29-31) following a time when the Jews had strayed far from God’s way. Hezekiah began by restoring the Aaronic priesthood so that they might oversee the cleansing and repair of the temple (II Chron. 29:4-19). Numerous priests were sanctified anew—such as Mahath (verse 12) and the “sons of Asaph” (verse 13). The “sons of Aaron” resumed their duty of sacrificing on the altar of God (verse 21), as priests and Levites were assigned for temple music (verses 25-30). King Hezekiah thus re-established the “courses of the priests and the Levites” (II Chron. 31:2), paving the way for a fully restored form of temple worship—all under the leadership of Azariah, the chief priest of the house of Zadok (verses 9-10).

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It was only after this vast restoration that Hezekiah began to see the need to add to the Jews' library of authoritative literature. His canonical contribution (723–695 BC) is partly hinted at in Proverbs 25:1: “These *are* also proverbs of Solomon which **the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out.**” Working closely with Azariah the priest and Isaiah the prophet, Hezekiah apparently ordained that certain proverbs of Solomon—previously excluded from the canon—be counted among the Sacred Texts. Clearly, Proverbs 25 to 29 represent an addition to the Old Testament canon. According to Martin, the Talmud attributes the canonization of Isaiah, some of the Minor Prophets, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes to Hezekiah (*Restoring The Original Bible*, ch. 12). Still, such preliminary canonization efforts were carried out under the authority of the Aaronic priesthood.

The prophet Isaiah indicates that Hezekiah also wrote completely *new* psalms that were included in temple services. “The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness” (Isaiah 38:9). Verses 10-21 compose the full psalm. Some scholars believe that Hezekiah composed the enigmatic “Degree Psalms” which today comprise Psalms 120–134 (*The Companion Bible*, by Dr. E. W. Bullinger, appendix 67). Isaiah and Hezekiah apparently contributed to the growing Old Testament canon under the authority of Uriah the priest as well (Isa. 8:2).

In stark contrast to the reigns of David and Solomon, King Hezekiah's time was one of great distress—an Assyrian invasion threatened the existence of the Jewish nation. No doubt Hezekiah was concerned about the preservation of the Sacred Texts. This may have prompted him—again, under the Aaronic leadership—to place a special *seal of authority* on those documents already established as canonical, perhaps to reaffirm their place in the growing Hebrew canon and protect them from corruption.

Apparently, Hezekiah placed a type of seal or signature—consisting of the three Hebrew letters *he*, *zain* and *koph*—at the end of each canonical book. The seal appears in the Hebrew manuscripts of all the Old Testament books except the *Megillot*—the five festival scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther). Oddly, however, the signature has never been translated in any English version of the Bible. Martin explains that the seal was omitted from the five festival scrolls because they were regularly read by the priests in the temple. They were canonized by the fact that Ezra associated each book with a particular festival (from Passover to Purim), thus securing their sacredness without the application of the seal (*Restoring the Original Bible*, ch. 12).

Interestingly, the three Hebrew letters spell the root form of Hezekiah's name. What's more, they also carry the meaning “to be confirmed” or “to be bound.” Thus, the seal “HZK” constituted the *confirmation* and *binding* of the canonical texts under the authority of King Hezekiah. This action of itself contributed to the canonization of the sacred Old Testament Scriptures.

This seal of canonization continued to be used in a slightly different manner after the time of Hezekiah. Bullinger explains: “The use of this tri-grammaton [seal] is uniform and continuous at the end of each book, until we come to the death of Hezekiah. Not until after that, at the end of the Book of Kings, do we meet with any departure from the addition of these three letters. There, for the first time, we find a different formula. Instead of the simple sign (HZK), we find two words, making a sentence—instead of forming the initials.

“At the end of Kings, we have ‘Be bound, and we will bind.’ This looks as though the subsequent editors, whether Josiah, Ezra, or others, understood the tri-grammaton as a solemn injunction transmitted to them, and they took up the work and carried it out in the same spirit in which it had come down...” (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, ch. 12; quoted from Bullinger's “Songs of Degrees” in *Things to Come*, XIII, p. 112).

This same two-word seal of canonicity is likewise used at the end of Ezekiel, the Minor Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (as one book) and Chronicles. As part of the final canonization, Ezra undoubtedly placed the seal on all the texts which he and the Great Assembly recognized as canonical.

Canonization Contributions During Exile

Like Hezekiah, King Josiah found himself up against a formidable foe—this time the Babylonians—while attempting to revive the proper worship of God (II Kings 22-23; II Chron. 34-35). Despite his reforms, Josiah died in battle at age 39—and God carried out His promised punishment on Judah via the Babylonian captivity.

It was during this time that the book of Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah and designated to be sung each year on Ab 9-10, the anniversary of the burning of the Temple by King

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Nebuchadnezzar. The high priest Hilkiyah (II Kings 22:4) undoubtedly authorized additions to the canon during this time (625-584 BC).

Martin writes that the canonization efforts that began in the time of King Josiah continued “in Babylon after the Jews had been taken captive. Jeremiah had first gone to Egypt, but he [may have] returned to be with the Jews in Babylon.... Jeremiah was then able to hand over to Daniel, the Jewish prince in Babylon, any remaining prophecies which he had written (or other documents which he may have rescued from the Temple)” (*Restoring the Original Bible*, ch. 12). Thus, Daniel was familiar with the writings of “Jeremiah the prophet,” other prophetic “books” and “the law of Moses” (Dan. 9:2, 11).

Interestingly, it was those of the priestly line in Babylon who were careful to *preserve* the Sacred Texts while in exile—thus making them available for Ezra the priest as he set out to restore the proper worship of God in post-exilic Jerusalem.

Ezra’s Editing and Final Canonization of the Scriptures

In *Getting Acquainted with the Bible*, Martin Hegland writes: “There is much evidence to indicate that the canon of the Old Testament was fixed by about the year 400 BC largely as a result of the work of Ezra and Nehemiah and a council of Jews known as the Great Synagogue... Long before that time, however, many of the books we now have in the Old Testament had been agreed upon as inspired” (anabaptists.org/history/howwegot.html).

Indeed, Ezra—a priest of the Aaronic line—returned to Jerusalem from Babylon in 458 BC with “the Law of God” in his hands (Ezra 7:14), and boldly proclaimed the Law before the post-exilic congregation of Judah (Neh. 8-9). Ezra undoubtedly had in his possession numerous additional texts regarded as canonical—such as writings by the prophets, as well as those that make up the “Writings” of the Old Testament.

While the preceding periods of canonization are significant, scholars generally consider them to be primarily of historical interest. Martin, for example, writes that the canonization efforts prior to Ezra “do not involve what books [ultimately] belong in the Old Testament canon for us today. The question of exactly which books represent the complete Old Testament for us can only be answered by understanding the canonization of Ezra and those one hundred and twenty priests who comprised the Great Assembly. It is Ezra’s final work which is most important to us and to later Judaism... [It] was Ezra (the ‘Second Moses’) who gave to the Jewish world the official (and final) Old Testament to be read in the Temple and synagogues. This makes the canonization by Ezra the most important of all” (*Restoring the Original Bible*, ch. 12).

In conjunction with his final canonization, Ezra—following precedents set by Moses and Samuel—made numerous minor edits to several of the Old Testament books (mostly the earlier portions of the Law). “The Pentateuch or Torah [the Law] was accepted ... since the time of Moses [in the 1440s BC] ... [but] did not **take final form until around 400 BC**. Most traditionalist scholars say the whole Law dates to Moses, but agree that **Ezra did some editing or clarification of minor discrepancies** that had arisen...” (Ed Zotti, *Who Wrote The Bible?*; straightdope.com/mailbag/mbible 5.html; emphasis added).

Like Moses, Ezra’s edits consisted largely of updating ancient geographical names with newer names. Where older names were retained, explanatory phrases were sometimes added to identify them. Other edits provide additional information. Genesis 36:31–39, for example, records the names of Edomite kings down to the time of King Saul. Moses could not have written this section because he would hardly have known the names of Edomite kings living three hundred years after his death. Another example which could not have been penned by Moses occurs in Deuteronomy 34:5-6: “And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab ... [but] no man knows of his grave to this day.” Again, Moses could hardly have written: “And there has not arisen a prophet like Moses since *then* in Israel, whom the LORD knew face-to-face” (verse 10). Other edits provide the reader with an updated timeline—such as in Judges 18:30, which records events occurring hundreds of years after the Judges ruled.

Edits made by Ezra as a part of the final canonization were obviously designed to update the text and make it more understandable to the people of his day. Ezra must have felt that the texts needed editing in order to provide the Jews with the complete revelation of God in the Hebrew language. As Martin notes, Ezra’s additions were “**not vast changes in the text of the Old Testament**” (*Restoring the Original Bible*, ch. 12, emphasis added). Numerous edits made by various Levitical scribes deal mainly with chronological updates—and often employ the phrase “unto this day.”

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Concerning the legitimacy of Ezra's edits, Ernst Würthwein—one of the best-known experts on the Old Testament—writes: “In evaluating these alterations, we must avoid thinking of them as ‘corruptions.’ They were made in good faith, with no intention of introducing a foreign element into the text, but rather with the aim of restoring the true text and (from the copyist's view) preventing misunderstandings.

“It is quite natural that a text which was ... intended to be read constantly by the whole of the Jewish community would [need to] be **adapted to the linguistic needs of the community...**” (*The Text of The Old Testament*, p. 108, emphasis added).

Although a few alterations—such as genealogical updates—were made to the text by the Great Assembly after its canonization, there is no question that Ezra was the one who compiled, edited and canonized the books. Another important task Ezra undertook was to change all the Hebrew letters in the Scriptures from the ancient cursive script to the square, block-style Chaldee script. The block-style lettering was commonly used in the sixth century BC in Babylon and elsewhere in the Persian Empire. Martin explained that the use of the block style script was not done “simply to facilitate the reading of the Bible but, more importantly, Ezra was able to establish at one fell swoop an official canon of the Scriptures which was now (by the use of the new letter configurations) able to be distinguished from heretical Samaritan manuscripts which were written in the old Hebrew script” (*The Original Bible Restored*, p. 63).

Shortly after Ezra's time, the book of Malachi was added to the official canon under the authority of the Great Assembly of priests—set up by Ezra for that purpose. Though not the final book in the *order* of the Old Testament, Malachi was the *final* text to be added to the canon—and for good reason. As we will see, Malachi's prophecies deal not only with the coming of the Messiah, but also with the messenger who would announce His first coming to establish the New Covenant. That messenger was John the Baptist, whose ministry formed a kind of “bridge” between the Old and New Covenants. John also served as a “sign” of what was to come—a completely *new* way of worshiping and relating to God the Father through the work of Jesus Christ.

It is interesting to note that Ezra, as an Aaronic priest, and Nehemiah, as governor of Judah, worked in close harmony—much like the team formed by Joshua and Zerubbabel of the early post-exilic period. In fact, the priest-ruler pairings in both cases picture the coming reign of Jesus Christ—Who will perfectly combine the roles of both King and Priest into one (see Heb. 7:1).

An Authentic Old Testament Canon Pivotal

The canonization of the Old Testament is a powerful witness to the guiding hand of God, for it was God Himself Who gave deliberate authority to His servants through the Aaronic priesthood to accomplish the task according to His design (see Isaiah 46:10 and 55:11 for the principle). Considering the literally *hundreds* of times Christ and the apostles quoted from or referred to the Scriptures, it should be quite obvious that a complete, *legitimate*—and widely recognized—canon was absolutely essential to the work of the early Church. (Key references to the “Scriptures” include Luke 4:21; John 7:42; Acts 8:35; Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:8; James 2:8; II Pet. 1:20-21; etc.)

The apostle Paul's classic instruction to Timothy sums up the incalculable value the early Church placed on an *authentic* canon: “But *as for* you, continue in the things that you did learn and were assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*; and that **from a child you have known the Holy [Old Testament] Writings, which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith, which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture [the Old and New Testaments] is God-breathed and is profitable for doctrine, for conviction, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work**” (II Tim. 3:14-17).

Just as Ezra and the Great Assembly were moved by God to canonize the Old Testament Scriptures in the face of a developing apostasy, so the apostles Peter, John, James and Paul were moved to canonize the New Testament while confronting a rapidly developing false Christianity and a multitude of false teachers. As we will see in later chapters, this all-important task was not left—as many have presumed—for so-called Orthodox “church fathers” to complete hundreds of years after the death of the apostles.

John the Baptist as “Bridge” Between Old and New Covenants

One of the keys to understanding the canonization of the both the Old and New Testaments is to recognize God's plan to utilize His ordained priesthood to accomplish the task. Remember, the key role

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of a priest was to *represent* God to the people—and under the Old Covenant access to God was generally only possible through the Aaronic priesthood. This was about to change, however, under the New Covenant, which would include an entirely *new* kind of Priest to mediate between man and God—Jesus Christ. In fact, under the New Covenant, almost everything would be different—and it all began with the work of John the Baptist.

Of key importance is that John was of the Aaronic line—his father Zacharias was a serving priest, and his mother was of the “daughters of Aaron” (Luke 1:5). John could have become a “practicing” priest as well—but God had other plans for this “greatest” of the prophets (Matt. 11:11). There is no evidence that John ever trained as a priest. Rather, he remained “in *the* wilderness until the day of his appearing” to the Jewish community (Luke 1:80).

When John did appear—not as a priest, but as a prophet—he took the Jewish leadership somewhat by surprise. John had captivated the interest of the people—with a message and manner that was, to say the least, different. The Jewish leadership knew full well that John was of the Aaronic line—and they were more than curious. Investigating, they asked John if he was the expected Messiah—or, perhaps, Elijah or “the Prophet” to come. John denied that he was any of them, claiming simply to be “a voice crying in the wilderness”—per Isaiah 40:3—preparing the way for the Messiah’s coming (John 1:19-23). Indeed, the prophet Malachi had announced as well that God would send a special *messenger* to “prepare the way” for Christ’s first coming (Mal. 3:1).

In a manner of speaking, John the Baptist was a “signal” to the Jews of coming change—monumental change—in which true worshipers shall “...worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23). His message of genuine repentance for the remission of sin was unique; he baptized in the running water of the Jordan—in contrast to the ritual baths of the Temple. John boldly pointed to Christ as the “Lamb of God” destined to “take away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Essentially, John was preparing the way for the soon-coming shift *away from* physical, ritual sacrifices; away from the physical temple in Jerusalem; away from the Aaronic priesthood; and, most importantly, away from the mere physical letter of the Law. The *spiritual* would fully supersede the physical—for under the New Covenant Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice as the “Lamb of God” would negate all the physical temple rituals (Heb. 8-9); the temple would be replaced by a spiritual body of believers in which Christ would dwell (II Cor. 6:16); Jesus would fully replace the Aaronic priesthood as the sole Mediator between man and God (I Tim. 2:5) through His eternal priesthood after the order of Melchisedec (Heb. 5:1-10; 6:20); and, Christ Himself, as the “living Word of God,” would “magnify the Law and make *it* glorious” (Isa. 42:21) by revealing its true, spiritual intent (Matt. 5).

Jesus’ Priestly Role Key to New Testament Canonization

It is quite significant that John the Baptist was of the line of Aaron. But with the obsolescence of the Levitical priesthood, who would carry on the task of canonizing—let alone *writing*—the much-needed New Testament Scriptures? Of all the men who wrote the books of the New Testament, only the apostle John had any genealogical link to the Aaronic line. Indeed, as will be covered in a later chapter, John—like Ezra—was used to finalize the New Testament canon. But while John’s Aaronic ancestry was an important element in establishing his authority to produce the final New Testament canon, the real key to the authenticity of the New Testament canon was the new Melchisedec-styled priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Under the New Covenant, Christ is the sole High Priest and Mediator between God and man. He fully replaced the Aaronic priesthood (Heb. 8-9). And, as God spoke in times past through the prophets, He has now—since Christ’s first coming—spoken through His Son, the living Word of God (Heb. 1:2; John 1). Thus, the authority to canonize Scripture would no longer fall to those of the temple priesthood, but would rest squarely on the shoulders of our great High Priest. It would be through **Jesus Christ’s leadership, inspiration and divine authority** that various men of God would write, edit and canonize the New Testament Scriptures.

Still, in concert with the way God used the priest Ezra to finalize the Old Testament, the apostle John—with his Aaronic ancestry—would likewise be used to finalize the New Testament canon.