

The Old Testament Canon

Who has the right canon?

The canon of the Old Testament is the list of books that make up the Old Testament. Protestants and Catholics have different ideas about which books belong to the canon of the Old Testament, and the Eastern Orthodox have yet another opinion -- so one naturally is lead to ask the question, "which is right?"

In this discussion I intend to focus on the Protestant/Catholic side of the debate rather than the Eastern Orthodox aspect. It is not that this isn't worth discussion, merely that so far the Protestant/Catholic aspect has proved difficult enough. The books in question are: Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, Tobit, Judith, and I and II Maccabees. I will call these either "the disputed books" or the "deuterocanonical books" (a term which originated in the 16th century and which means "second canon").

Modern Name for Book	Ancient Name
Ecclesiastes	Song of Songs
Sirach	Ecclesiasticus
1 and 2 Chronicles	1 and 2 Parlipomen
Ezra	1 Esdras
Nehemiah	2 Esdras
1 and 2 Samuel	1 and 2 Kings
1 and 2 Kings	3 and 4 Kings

Sometimes in ancient documents the books of the Bible have different names than the modern ones that we are used to. This table is here to help sort out the names

1. The Jewish Canon of the Old Testament

One way to attempt to settle the issue is to appeal to the Jewish people. They, after all, were on the scene longer than Christians, and the Old Testament scriptures were given to the world through the Jews.

If the Jews recognized a canon and understood it to be closed (i.e. that no more books could be added to it) in the time before Christ, then it should remain fixed in the form they established.

This logically follows if you believe the Bible is inspired. It seems unthinkable that the text should be inspired, but that the canon should not also be God-given in whatever final form it comes to us. If this ability to discern the canon is God-given then Christians should regard a Jewish canon arising from the pre-Christian era as binding upon them, and should be no more able to change it than they are able to change the contents of the individual books.

On the other hand, if the Jews had not discerned or closed their canon before the time of Christ (i.e. determined that no more books could be added to it), if they only came to

believe that the canon was closed only at a later date, then Christians should not be overly concerned with their conclusions -- for it would be logical to conclude that the Holy Spirit's inspiration now belonged to the Christians.

So the first question we must ask before determining what the proper canon should be is now this: Did the Jews of the pre-Christian era have a definite and closed canon?

2. Assessing the Evidence for a Closed Jewish Canon

First, let us start by acknowledging that a canon of sorts existed long before the time of Christ. The first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy were established as Scripture probably long before any other book and were at one time the canon. As time went by, more books gained recognition until the collection contained nearly all the books of the Protestant canon. Yet there is a vast difference between saying these books belonged to the Bible and that no other book could.

2.1 Josephus

One of the most important pieces of evidence in favor of the forming and closing of the canon at a time prior to Christ may be found in the writings of Josephus, the Jewish historian. He writes (at about 100 AD) "It is true our history has been written since Artaxerxes very particularly but has not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there has not been an exact succession of the prophets since that time."

One can deduce from this that a canon was established in a previous time (normally this is taken to be the time of Ezra). Likewise, he presents an argument why it might be considered closed -- that there was an exact

Useful Links	Description
The Content and Extent of the Old Testament Canon	A very well written argument from the Protestant Perspective.
The History of the Jewish and Christian Canons	A very useful and readable source filled with lots of interesting background info. You learn here that the TANK has a canon :-)
Catholic Encyclopedia: CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT	Very useful and scholarly, many facts about the ancient rabbis. A bit dry.
Deuterocanonical References in the New Testament.	This link is an attempt to catalogue all the references (not quotes) of the Deuterocanonical books in the NT.
The Old Testament Canon	Quotations from the fathers -- the early Christian writers.
Defending the Deuterocanonicals	Has some discussion of the deuterocanonical books. Has the reference to the

succession of prophets that was not maintained after that time. But when he says "not of like authority" is he expressing a universal view by all rabbis of the time that the other books have no authority, or does this mean that various rabbis in various parts of the world ascribe varying degrees of authority to the books? If the latter, then his statement would be more consistent with the idea of a recently closed canon, a canon closed after Christians had appeared on the scene. It is probably best not to interpret Josephus' statement too strongly in any event because his canon does not include Ecclesiastes -- a book that everyone, Jewish and Christian, now accepts.

Ethiopian Jews that use the LXX.

I am looking for more links, especially Protestant ones relating to this issue. If you know of a good one, please [send me email](#).

2.2 The Council of Jamnia

The next major piece of evidence to be noted is the Council of Jamnia, which seems to have taken place around 90 AD. This council established and closed the canon authoritatively for nearly all Jews. It has been their canon ever since. Yet it should be noted that the council did not speak for all Jews, there were Jews living in Ethiopia who either did not hear of it or did not accept the decision of Jamnia. To this day they use a different canon than their Palestinian brethren [Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol 6, p 1147].

2.3 The Septuagint

What Bible does the New Testament quote? Not the Hebrew Bible, since the majority of the New Testament was composed in Greek. The Bible used for most Scripture quotations in the New Testament is the same Bible used by the Ethiopian Jews mentioned above and the same Bible used by Christians in the earliest centuries of the Church -- it is named the Septuagint (or LXX). The LXX is a translation of the Old Testament into Greek that was completed no later than 180 BC.

One of the reasons that the LXX is of value is that expresses the opinions of the Jewish people in the times prior to Christ, during an age where later opinions of him could not have biased their writings or thoughts with respect to Christian issues. In some cases also, it may well reflect an earlier text than the present Hebrew.

Isaiah 7:14 became a controversial verse for Jews and Christians practically from the start -- but it reflects a pre-Christian Jewish interpretation of the admittedly more vague Hebrew text. The LXX used the word *virgin* in its translation, and after Christians came on the scene and used this word as prophetic of the type of birth Christ it became an embarrassment to the Jews.

What this verse said about the virgin birth of the Messiah, together with the fact that the LXX was the version quoted by the authors of the New Testament, combined with its widespread use before and after the time of Christ caused many to think that the LXX itself was inspired. Another strong reason that many believed in the LXX's inspiration was that a legend sprang up about its composition -- that the books were translated independently by 72 scholars and that they arrived at, word for word, the identical translation.

Unfortunately, the oldest copies of the LXX currently in our possession date from the 4th century, and must have been copied by Christian hands. The antiquity of the translations can be established, however, from other considerations. The canon of the LXX is larger than the present canon used by the Jews, and includes the books disputed between Catholics and Protestants (as well as the additions to Daniel and Esther).

The LXX was not generally available in the form of a modern Bible (although there are some copies, called codices, which were bound in a form like a modern book), but as a collection of scrolls, and thus its table of contents was less fixed. Furthermore, even in the ancient codices there is some variation in the contents. One finds books there that both Catholics and Protestants consider to be non-canonical. In all cases the disputed books are present in the codices, the only exception is that Maccabees is absent from one copy of the LXX named Codex Vaticanus.

In any event, one must recognize that at the time the New Testament was written the LXX was in wide use and was widely respected by the authors of the New Testament and the Jewish people living at that time -- otherwise the New Testament writers would not have made use of it. Rapidly, however, it became more a Christian than a Jewish book. In fact, I think one can say with little exaggeration that it became *the* Christian Old Testament.

2.4 Philo

Of some interest are the writings of Philo, a prolific Alexandrian Jew who lived in roughly the time of Christ. Though he gives us no canon, it is worthy of note that he does not use the books under dispute between Protestants and Catholics. While it is true, on the other hand, that there are many books accepted by both that he does not quote -- the fact that he does not quote Wisdom seems to require explanation since its contents appear consonant with his thought. It may be that he simply wanted to convince the widest audience possible with his writings and therefore chose to stick with the universally accepted portion of the canon for his support. Unfortunately, we can only speculate about why he did not quote the disputed books.

Finally, consider that Philo (while prolific) is not the only rabbi of the period to leave us writings. The Catholic Encyclopedia notes that a few Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis quoted the deuterocanonical books, apparently as Scripture.

2.5 The Writers of the New Testament

If the canon of the Bible had been fixed before the time of the apostles, then why does 2 Pet 3:16 speak of Paul's writing as Scriptures? Surely this would be an unnatural term for a Jew who had believed in a closed canon of the Bible. It may even have been that Jews were expecting new Scripture to be written when the Messiah came. The important point here is that the concept of a "New Testament" as distinct from an "Old Testament" is not found until the second century -- before that there is only "Scripture."

Conclusion

In light of these considerations, it seems reasonable to say that the Jews did not definitively define and close their canon prior to the Christian era. We now turn to the next consideration.

3. The Christian Canon of the Old Testament

If the Jews did not settle on a canon, then when did the Christians? To some extent we have considered this when we looked at the significance of the LXX, but it does not really fix the canon -- although it does support a larger collection than the Jewish/Protestant one. Here we consider the writings of the early Christians. How did they regard the disputed books?

3.1 Did the New Testament define an Old Testament Canon?

Certainly the New Testament writers constitute the earliest group of early Christian writers. It has been suggested by some that the New Testament, upon which all Christian sects agree for its canon, defines an Old Testament implicitly by the books it quotes. Unfortunately, this would mean that we must regard the book of Enoch as part of the Old Testament since it is quoted in Jude, and only a very few groups of Christians regard Enoch as canonical. This, however, is not the only case where the New Testament makes use of what is widely regarded as Apocryphal sources (i.e. "non-canonical" sources). On the other hand, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Canticles are not quoted -- so if the New Testament *defines* a canon then these omissions must be explained.

3.2 Jerome

One of the primary witnesses, not in order of time but certainly in stature against canonicity of the disputed books comes from a late period, the 4th century -- St. Jerome. Jerome produced the standard Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, and he felt that it was important for this purpose that he learn Hebrew. He discovered the opinion of the Jews in the matter of the canon, the falsity of the legend of the translation of the LXX, and as a result made many disparaging remarks about the disputed books, "calling them *apocrypha*" [this seems to have occurred about 390 AD, see "The Cambridge History of the Bible" Volume 2, 92]. Moreover, he seems to attach a certain importance to the idea that there should be 22 books in the Old Testament -- to accord with the number of Hebrew letters. This seems to have also been a motivating factor in his rejection of the deuterocanonical books. In line with the Protestant view, he also disparages the additions to Daniel and Esther, in the prefaces to those books. These remarks were to color the

opinion of Christians in the West from that time forward and most explicit lists of the books given by the writers after him follow his thinking.

Yet the evidence from Jerome is not altogether against the books. He sometimes refers to them as "ecclesiastical" rather than "canonical" or "apocryphal" -- they are read in the church, but not to be cited for proof texts of doctrine. [See Jerome, "Against Rufinus"]

He also comments [Again, see "Against Rufinus"] that he accepts the additions to Daniel and Esther, and his disparaging remarks against them in the preface of his translation (so he says at a later time) are merely samples of how others argue against the books. Indeed, in the preface he places most of the remarks in the mouth of a "certain Jewish teacher." Yet the fact that he does not respond to this Jewish teacher, and puts the disputed portion of the book at the end of his translation as an appendix might easily lead one to believe that he shared the opinion.

Though he never repudiated his statements that Sirach, Judith, Tobit Maccabees, and Baruch were apocrypha, we do find that he was not entirely consistent in his terminology. At a later time he says, for example, that Judith is the name given to a 'sacred volume', Wisdom is called 'Scripture', Sirach is called 'holy Scripture,' etc. [See "The Cambridge History of the Bible", Volume 2, p93]

3.3 Origen

Origen did much study on the Bible. He learned Hebrew and labored carefully to produce the best texts. He notices many differences between the Hebrew passages used by the Jews and the passages in use by Christians. Not just in the disputed books, but in Job, Exodus, etc. He makes this remark, however, that is in line with the arguments we have made above: "And, forsooth, when we notice such things, we are forthwith to reject as spurious the copies in use in our Churches, and enjoin the brotherhood to put away the sacred books current among them, and to coax the Jews, and persuade them to give us copies which shall be untampered with, and free from forgery! Are we to suppose that that Providence which in the sacred Scriptures has ministered to the edification of all the Churches of Christ, had no thought for those bought with a price, for whom Christ died; whom, although His Son, God who is love spared not, but gave Him up for us all, that with Him He might freely give us all things?" [A letter from Origen to Africanus, Volume 4 of the Early Church Fathers CD Rom]

3.3.1 Tobias and Judith

Also from "A letter from Origen to Africanus" [Early Church Fathers CD Rom, Vol 4] we get the following quote: "... Where you get your 'lost and won at play, and thrown out unburied on the streets,' I know not, unless it is from Tobias; and Tobias (as also Judith), we ought to notice, the Jews do not use. They are not even found in the Hebrew Apocrypha, as I learned from the Jews themselves. However, since the Churches use Tobias,..." demonstrating that the Church uses Tobias and Judith despite the fact that the Hebrews refuse to recognize it. Moreover, the letter to Africanus, which I've already quoted twice, is essentially a defense of the story of Susannah as being rightfully part of

Scripture, and Origen's use of it in discussion with a certain Bassus. He seems, however, to regard the LXX as superior to the Hebrew text in every way -- too extreme a position as I think all will agree.

Nevertheless, Origen's letter to Africanus is quite interesting reading on the whole, and I encourage any Christian interested in the canon to read this and other early fathers.

3.4 Augustine

Augustine was a clear exponent of the deuterocanonical books, explicitly listing them as being on the canon in "City of God." He derives this from the fact of its wide use in all Christian churches, and in the legend of its composition by the seventy.

3.5 St. Cyprian

Quotes Tobit (in Testimonies) along with the other books of Scripture without distinction.

3.6 St. Hippolytus

Says this about Maccabees: "Since, then, the angel Gabriel also recounted these things to the prophet, as they have been understood by us, as they have also taken place, and as they have been all clearly described in the books of the Maccabees."

3.7 Councils

Several local councils of the Church were to endorse the books later to be endorsed by Trent. These were, the Council of Rome (AD 382), Hippo (AD 393), and Carthage (AD 397 and 419). The Council of Nicea II (AD 797) approved everything said by Carthage (AD 419).

The Book of Wisdom

The book of Wisdom is one of the deuterocanonical books that has the interesting distinction of being the only book to ever be found on ancient lists of both the Old and *New Testaments*. In fact, the earliest canon of the New Testament, the Muratorian canon, contains the book of Wisdom.

It is difficult to know why this book should have been on the New Testament canon, and it should be remembered that the Muratorian canon is believed to be a private listing of Scripture, not a public or official one. One may guess that the author of this canon felt strongly that Wisdom was Scripture, but was aware that the Jews of the time did not, and thought -- given that the New Testament church saw Christ as the personification of Wisdom -- that perhaps the best way of reconciling these facts was to consider Wisdom a New Testament book.

Whatever conclusions one may draw from this list, it is clear that its author regarded the book of Wisdom as Scripture.

Conclusion

We have arrived at an awkward position. The Jewish canon seems not to have been closed, and Christians relied on the decidedly larger but somewhat uncertain canon of the LXX -- until the time of Jerome when at which time many felt that the Jewish canon was more worthy of attention. One is left with a canon that remained uncertain until a very late period consisting of two parts. A list of books which all were certain about and a list of several more that had an uncertain status. Some regarded the deuterocanonicals as being merely apocryphal or non-canonical (following Jerome's preface), but others regarded as Scripture (following Augustine or Origen) or perhaps as quasi-Scripture. For this reason I find the claim that Protestants removed books from Scripture to be roughly as exaggerated as the claim that Catholics added the books at the Council of Trent. The truth, it seems, was that an ambiguity truly existed which was very difficult to resolve.

This ambiguity persisted until the time of the Reformation at which time Trent was called upon to make a pronouncement with regard to their status. Trent did not attempt a careful examination of history or archeology, but based it first on the fact that the books were read alongside other sacred books in worship and had been since the beginning, and second the pronouncements of previous councils. In other words, it trusted that the Holy Spirit would be most efficacious in working through the universal practice of reading the books in the Churches, or in authoritative pronouncements accepted by many Churches rather than the individual opinions of Jerome, those following him, or the beliefs of the Hebrews.

Should you accept the Deuterocanonical books as Scripture? Hopefully this essay will be of some use to you in deciding.