

**The Canon of the Old
Testament:**

Rome's Authoritarian Claims

vs.

The Facts of History

Plan of attack:

1) What was the canon of the Jewish people prior to the coming of Christ? Given that there are no arguments recorded in the New Testament regarding the canon, the viewpoint of the Jews at the time of Christ would be highly relevant. Even the dispute between the Sadducees and Pharisees points this direction, as the Lord told the Sadducees that they erred, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God.

- 2) What is the NT view of the Apocrypha?**
- 3) What was the early Church's view of the Apocrypha?**
- 4) What other evidence can we glean from the years up to the Council of Trent?**

First: The Jewish Canon

"The rabbans taught: The order of the Prophets is Joshua and Judges, Samuel (and) Kings, Jeremiah (and) Ezekiel, Isaiah (and) the Twelve....(The rabbans taught) the order of the Hagiographa is Ruth and (the Book of) Psalms and Job (and) Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (and) the Song of Songs and Lamentations, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther, Ezra and Chronicles" (Baba Bathra)

This is a "baraita," an ancient tradition. It lists 19 books, exclusive of the Pentateuch, = 24.

--Beckwith, p. 122.

"As Ludwig Blau points out, the absence of disputes about the Apocrypha...in the rabbinical literature is an eloquent fact....[Assuming the Jews removed the Apocrypha]...Yet not a trace of such events has been left in all the voluminous records of rabbinical tradition, and it is hard to resist the inference that no such events can possibly have occurred."

--Beckwith, p. 381

"As to the Semitic originals of any of the Apocrypha being included in the canon of the Palestinian Pharisees, it must be borne in mind that some of the Apocrypha (notably 2-4 Maccabees and much, if not all, of Wisdom) did not have Semitic originals, probably, but were composed in Greek....However, even among those books of the Apocrypha which were composed in Hebrew or Aramaic, the only ones which there is slightest evidence to suggest were reckoned canonical by any of the Palestinian Pharisees are Ecclesiasticus and Baruch."

--Beckwith, p. 342

**Josephus refers to the practice of "laying up" Scriptures in the Temple in the following places:
Antiquities 3.1.7, 4.8.44, and 5.1.17.**

"If, as the tannaitic literature maintains, not just the Law and the Prophets but also the Hagiographa belonged to the Temple collection, and by the end of the Temple period had belonged to it for such a long time that it was no longer permitted even to bring in fresh copies of the books, let alone copies of fresh books, how can this be reconciled with the current belief that the Hagiographa were not formally recognized as canonical...until the synod of Jamnia, held after the Temple had been destroyed?"

--Beckwith, p. 86

Josephus in Against Apion 1:7f, gives the number of books as 22. He specifically rejects those books written after Malachi, that is, the Apocryphal books. There is no reason to believe that Josephus' canon is recent; that is, as most believe today, he is referring to a canon that had been in place for 300 years.

Were there two canons, as we so often read, one the Palestinian canon, and the other the Alexandrian, the first rejecting the Apocrypha, and the second embracing it? Such is a very common claim, one I was taught in seminary and even repeated in the years after my graduation. However, modern research contradicts this common assertion.

Philo was an influential Jewish writer and philosopher who lived in Alexandria around the time of Christ. "H.E. Ryle, who lists the resemblances in Philo to passages of the Apocrypha, remarks that 'there is no appearance, in any of them, of definite quotation'; and C.F. Hernemann, who also makes such a list, speaks of 'the profound silence of Philo about all the apocryphal books', and points out that he quotes far more distinctly from the Greek philosophers than from any of the Apocrypha.'"

"But any hypothesis about Alexandrian Jewry to which the writings of Philo lend absolutely no support can hardly be regarded as tenable."

--Beckwith, pp. 385-386

Many assert that Hellenistic Judaism, that Judaism that existed outside of Palestine, had a wider canon. Yet:

1) Hellenistic Judaism was NOT independent of Palestine.

2) Hellenistic Jews shared the idea that all the biblical books were prophetic, hence, why would they accept 1 Maccabees, when it asserts that prophecy had already ceased when it was written? (1 Macc. 4.46, 9.27, 14.41).

3) The prologue of Ecclesiasticus makes no less than three references to the three divisions of the Jewish canon!

Was there a "Council of Jamnia"?
Not really.

1) The term "synod" or "council" is inappropriate. The academy at Jamnia, established by Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai shortly before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, was both a college and a legislative body, and the occasion in question was a session of the elders there.

2) The date of the session may have been as early as AD 75 or as late as AD 117.

3) As regards the disputed books, the discussion was confined to the question of whether Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs (or possibly Ecclesiasties alone) make the hands unclean, i.e., are divinely inspired.

4) The decision reached was not regarded as authoritative, since contrary opinions continued to be expressed throughout the second century.

"The role of councils, therefore, was not so much to decide the canon as to confirm the decisions about the canon already reached in other ways."

--Beckwith, pp. 276-277

One of the key things to know about this issue is the fact that the Jews themselves recognized that they had not received Scripture since the days of Malachi. They believed prophecy had ceased in Israel.

"Our Rabbis taught: Since the death of the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Holy Spirit [of prophet inspiration] departed from Israel; yet they were still able to avail themselves of the Bath-kol."

--Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, Order Nezikim (3:46).

"Until then [the coming of Alexander and the end of the empire of the Persians] the prophets prophesied through the Holy Spirit. From then on, 'incline thine ear and hear the words of the wise.'" --Seder Olam Rabbah 30, quoting Prov. 22:17

"Rab Samuel bar Inia said, in the name of Rab Aha, 'The Second Temple lacked five things which the First Temple possessed, namely, the fire, the ark, the Urim and Thummim, the oil of anointing and the Holy Spirit [of prophecy]'" (Jer Taanith 2.1; Jer Makkoth 2.4-8, Bab. Yoma 21b.

--Beckwith p. 370ff.

Second: The New Testament

Matt 23:35 so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

"But the undeniable truth is that the New Testament, by contrast with the early Fathers, and by contrast with its own practice in relation to the books of the Hebrew Bible, never actually quotes from, or ascribes authority to, any of the Apocrypha."

--Beckwith, p. 387

The common arguments of Roman apologists regarding the utter lack of foundation in the NT for belief in the inspiration of the Apocrypha break down quickly upon examination. They are generally based either upon very shallow logic or the hope that the Protestant does not know much about the New Testament itself. There are two basic arguments: first, they will argue that the NT does not have to call the Apocryphal books "Scripture" for them to be Scripture, since the NT does not call the book of Esther, or the Song of Solomon, Scripture.

But this misses the point, for those books are included in the Jewish canon, were laid up in the Temple, noted by Josephus and other Jewish sources, and hence can be assumed in such passages as Matthew 23:35. Such is not the case with the Apocryphal books. They are *excluded* from these lists, in some cases deny that they themselves are inspired, and hence must have some testimony from the NT if we are to take the claim of their inspiration seriously.

The second argument proffered is based upon the hope that the Protestant thinks that the NT authors did not ever read or even know about the existence of the Apocryphal books. That is, the RC apologist will appeal to the fact that one can create an entire list of "allusions" to the Apocryphal books from the NT writings. But this again is no meaningful argument: no one denies the NT writers fully knew of the *existence* of the Apocryphal books.

It is quite probable that men like Paul were *thoroughly* familiar with the content of these writings. Nor is there any weight in pointing out that they may well have borrowed language, metaphors, examples, from these works. The issue is, of course, did the NT writers view them as SCRIPTURE? The clear answer is an unambiguous "NO." They never used the key phrases, "it is written," "the Lord says," "Scripture says," etc., with reference to the Apocryphal books.

In point of fact, this argument backfires if the Protestant is prepared and thinking clearly: for in reality, the fact that one can prove that the Apocryphal books were known to the Apostles, and even referred to by them, and *yet they never appealed to them as Scripture when there were many opportunities to do so*, is strong evidence **against their canonicity.**

Third: The Early Church

"A uniquely ample, and one imagines almost complete, collection of the parallels between the Apocrypha and the writings of the early Fathers has now been produced in the successive volumes of Biblia Patristica...but the great majority of them show simply a familiarity of thought, which may or may not indicate dependence...."

But the mere adoption of the language of a book, without the use of one of those standard formulas for quoting Scripture which the Fathers inherited from the New Testament, should not be taken as implying that the book was canonical."

--Beckwith, p. 387

"When one examines the passages in the early Fathers which are supposed to establish the canonicity of the Apocrypha, one finds that some of them are taken from the alternative Greek text of Ezra (1 Esdras) or from additions or appendices to Daniel, Jeremiah or some other canonical book, which are not really relevant; that others of them are not quotations from the Apocrypha at all; and that, of those which are, many do not give any indication that the book quoted is regarded as Scripture."

--Beckwith, p. 387

Melito of Sardis inquired of the church in Palestine concerning the OT canon around AD 175.

He discovered that the canon did not include the Apocryphal books. How can it be that he would inquire in Palestine if, in fact, the canon of the OT, including the Apocrypha, was a matter of "apostolic tradition" as Trent claimed?

Second Century Survey:

1) There are a number of writers in this period (even some whose writings are extensive and contain many quotations from the Old Testament, such as Justin Martyr and Theophilus of Antioch), who never refer to any of the books of the Apocrypha at all.

2) There are two books of the Greek Apocrypha, 3 and 4 Maccabees, which are never referred to by any writer.

3) Three of the books, Judith and the first two books of Maccabees, are little used, and only as historical sources, without any suggestion that they are Scripture. Even in the early third century, the learned Hippolytus never refers to Judith, though he uses both 1 and 2 Maccabees as historical sources.

4) Two of the books, Tobit and Ecclesiasticus, are used only in the East....The first western writer to refer to Tobit is Hippolytus, though he never refers to Ecclesiasticus.

5) Origen twice refers to doubts about the most popular book, Wisdom (De Principiis 4.33, Commentary on John 28.13).

"Until the final years of the second century, there is only one isolated example of any of the [Apocryphal] books being treated as Scripture, which is Polycarp's use of Tobit....In the earliest Christian LXX manuscripts which are extant, the papyri, up until the peace of the church in AD 313 the only books of the Apocrypha to occur are...Tobit, Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom."

--Beckwith, pp. 388-389

Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, Vol. II, parts III and IV, Book XIX.34, in *A Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church*, p. 424.

“With reference to which particular we are not acting irregularly, if from the books, though not Canonical, yet brought out for the edification of the Church, we bring forward testimony. Thus Eleazar in the battle smote and brought down an elephant, but fell under the very beast that he killed (1 Macc. 6.46).”

***The New Catholic Encyclopedia* confirms that Pope Gregory did not accept a canonical status for the Apocrypha (II:390).**

William Webster also notes that "John Cosin, in his book *A Scholastic History of the Canon*, documents some fifty-two major ecclesiastical writers and theologians from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries who held to the view of Jerome."

Cardinal Cajetan in his commentary on the Old Testament wrote:

“Here we close our commentaries on the historical books of the Old Testament. For the rest (that is, Judith, Tobit, and the books of Maccabees) are counted by St. Jerome out of the canonical books, and are placed among the Apocrypha, along with Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus, as is plain from the Prologus Galeatus. Nor be thou disturbed, like a raw scholar, if thou shouldst find anywhere, either in the sacred councils or the sacred doctors, these books reckoned canonical.

For the words as well as of councils and of doctors are to be reduced to the correction of Jerome. Now, according to his judgment, in the epistle to the bishops Chromatius and Heliodorus, these books (and any other like books in the canon of the Bible) are not canonical, that is, not in the nature of a rule for confirming matters of faith. Yet, they may be called canonical, that is, in the nature of a rule for the edification of the faithful, as being received and authorized in the canon of the Bible for that purpose.

**By the help of this distinction
thou mayest see thy way clear
through that which Augustine
says, and what is written in the
provincial council of Carthage.”
(*Commentary on All the Authentic
Historical Books of the Old
Testament*; cited in William
Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy
Scripture* [Cambridge: University
Press, 1849, 48.])**

The New Catholic Encyclopedia
affirms that Jerome rejected
the Apocrypha as being
canonical and that the councils
of Carthage and Hippo did not
establish the Old Testament
canon. This was not
authoritatively done until the
Council of Trent:

St. Jerome distinguished between canonical books and ecclesiastical books (the apocrypha). The latter he judged were circulated by the Church as good spiritual reading but were not recognized as authoritative Scripture. . . . The situation remained unclear in the ensuing centuries. . . . According to Catholic doctrine, the proximate criterion of the biblical canon is the infallible decision of the Church.

This decision was not given until rather late in the history of the Church at the Council of Trent. . . . The Council of Trent definitively settled the matter of the Old Testament Canon. That this had not been done previously is apparent from the uncertainty that persisted up to the time of Trent." (New Catholic Encyclopedia, II:390, III:29).

Augustine is actually a witness for the Protestant side: though he accepted the Apocryphal books, he did so because he thought they were part of the Hebrew canon! He argued that Jesus verified the Hebrew canon, and assuming the Apocryphal books were included therein, he ended up contradicting himself.

--Beckwith, pp. 2, 14

Theodotian's version of the OT does not, in any extant manuscript, contain the Apocryphal books. Given that he was at home with the Greek Bible, this absence is very significant.

--Beckwith, p. 386

Origen, in De Principiis 4.33, refers to the Book of Wisdom as "a book which is certainly not esteemed authoritative by all." Regarding Tobit he says, "since they of the circumcision speak against the book of Tobit as canonical." This resulted in Origen's rejection of the Apocryphal books.

"That this is how Origen was understood by the scholars who succeeded him in the 4th century can scarcely be doubted. Cyril of Jerusalem...Athanasius...and uncertainty that persisted up to the time of Trent." (New Catholic Encyclopedia, II:390, III:29). Keen students of Origen in other parts of the world, Hilary of Poitiers, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Rufinus, all have a 22-book Old Testament like the one Origen had attributed to the Jews."

--Beckwith, p. 395