

The Content and Extent of the Old Testament Canon

Wayne Stiles, Th.M., D.Min.

www.waynestiles.com

Introduction

The Apostle Paul wrote, regarding the Old Testament, “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). The use of the Old Testament Scriptures by the church of Christ has been the subject of some debate from the early church fathers up to the present day. The debate is primarily concerned with the question of what writings are truly in the canon of the Old Testament Scriptures. The word “canon” is from a Greek word that means a “rule” or “standard”; in the second century Christian church it came to be understood as “revealed truth.”¹ Yet for some Christians the “revealed truth” represented more than for others. Augustine is a fine example of this, as he “. . . regarded the church to be the custodian of Scripture and thus may easily have concluded that on matters of the extent of the canon the church had the authority to decide. . . Augustine seemed to consider church reception to be sufficient warrant for canonical authority; this he gave as the reason for accepting the Maccabean books as canonical.”² Initially, it was not as if the canon itself was debated as much as it was looked at differently. Some held that the canon was extensive enough to encompass all the books read in the church for edification, which would include the Apocrypha and sometimes the Pseudipigrapha (anonymous apocalyptic writings). Others held that the canon was simply that of the Jewish Bible, representing also the Protestant Bibles of today.³ It was not until the age of the Reformation that the debate began to rage. In 1546 when the Council of Trent made a formal statement that all not accepting the selected Apocryphal writings should be damned, the Protestants retorted with an equally resolute voice.

The question of canonicity is completely valid. If there are disputes about what is Scripture, the validity of faith itself is greatly at stake. For as Beckwith puts it so well, “. . . with no canon there is no Bible.”⁴ This paper will briefly discuss the major issues of the Old Testament canon attempting to show the contents and extent of the canon.

The Concept of the Old Testament Canon

How ironic it is that evangelicals today base their beliefs solely on Scripture, and yet their canon was recognized by tradition. The way that canon was regarded in history past plays an integral role in the recognition of the canon. The tradition and authority of the people of God throughout history have attested that there was a group of writings, divinely inspired, which were recognizable as such. The internal evidence within the Old Testament itself affirms that it is Scripture. Deuteronomy 31:24-26 says, “And it came about, when Moses finished writing the words of this law in a book until they were complete, that Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying, ‘Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you.’” Deuteronomy itself, “. . . also reaffirms in Israel the idea of a ‘canon,’ a collection of written materials by which the life of the nation would be administered.”⁵

The inter-testament saints held that there was a known corpus of Scripture, for in their writings they would often refer to it with the authoritative phrase, “as it is written,” or “according to Scripture,” or “it is written.” In fact,

¹ Bauer, Walter, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Fredrick W. Danker (BAGD), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago: Univ. Of Chicago, 1979, “kanwn,” 403

² Schultz, Samuel J. “Augustine and the Old Testament Canon,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 112 #447 -- July, 1955, 230, 232

³ Beckwith, Roger. *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, 2

⁴ Beckwith, 5

⁵ Dillard, Raymond B. and Tremper Longman III. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 103

references to almost all of the books of the Old Testament are considered to be Scripture by the writers of the inter-testament and the New Testament period. Beckwith says of this period that

. . . with the exception of the three short books of Ruth, Song of Songs and Esther, the canonicity of every book of the Hebrew Bible is attested, most of them several times over. . . it is very striking that, over a period ranging from the second century BC (at latest) to the first century AD, so many writers, of so many classes (Semitic, Hellenistic, Pharisaic, Essene, Christian), show such agreement about the canon. . .⁶

In addition, there are at least 28 documented separate titles for the Old Testament canon proving that the individual books had become a collection sufficient enough to warrant various titles to the group (i.e. canon) as a whole.⁷

Church history took very heavily into consideration what Jesus and the New Testament writers thought about the Old Testament in determining canonicity. The number of references to the Old Testament by New Testament writers is abundant, and it attests to the fact that there was an established canon at the time of their writing.

Probably the fullest evidence (in secular writings) on the concept of there being a canon is in the work of Josephus. In *Against Apion* 1.7f., or 1.37–43, Josephus gives his understanding that, not only was there a canon, but he also lists what he believes that canon is. This list is identical to the Jewish and Christian canon with one exception, that of omitting either the Song of Songs or Ecclesiastes.⁸ Josephus mentions that there were copies of Scripture in the Temple itself, and before its destruction in AD 70 it contained a collection of books. This collection was considered by the Jewish community to be canon, for “the main test of the canonical reception of a book must have been whether or not it was one of those laid up in the Temple.”⁹

This evidence reveals not what the books of the canon are, but the fact that the concept of a canon did indeed already exist before the beginning of the Christian era.

The Construct of the Old Testament Canon

Not only does the literature testify to the concept of there being a canon, but also to the construction of that canon as being in three parts: the Law, the Prophets and the Hagiographa. This is a method of arranging the various books evidenced from many sources outside the canon itself. The earliest evidence is from the prologue to the book Ecclesiasticus which specifically mentions three times the three parts of the canon. The author says, “. . . many great things have been communicated to us through the Law and the prophets, and the others who followed after. . . my grandfather Jeshua, after devoting himself for a long time to the reading of the Law and the prophets and the other books of our forefathers. . .”. Here the author, writing about 180 BC, clearly delineates the construction as being in three recognized parts, and these parts, having titles and sections, show that by the writer’s time the canon was considered closed.

Jesus Himself, the most authoritative witness for the Christian, states in Luke 24:44 the three sections of the Old Testament as “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and Psalms . . .” “Psalms” undoubtedly means the whole Hagiographa, for Christ often referred to Daniel, which was a part of that third section, as well as the book of Psalms itself, after which the section was named. Philo and the tenth century Arabian writer al-Masudi both refer to the Hagiographa as the “Psalms.”¹⁰

Since the Jews traditionally placed the book of Chronicles in the Hagiographa, another statement of Jesus alludes to the three sections of the completed canon. He said in Luke 11:50-51 (also in Matthew 23:35), “. . . in order that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the house {of God;} yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.” The Zechariah referred to is certainly the one in 2 Chronicles 24:21, and this is significant because His statement is, in a sense, referring to the first part of the three sections (Genesis) and to the last (Chronicles), implying the inclusion of the second section as well. Christ’s point also is in His men-

⁶ Beckwith, 71, 76

⁷ Beckwith, 105-107

⁸ Beckwith, 80

⁹ Beckwith, 86

¹⁰ Beckwith, 111-112

tioning the prophets, for “. . . prophecy, as the Jews knew well, had virtually ended with the composition of the latest book of Holy Scripture. . .,” which was the book of 2 Chronicles, written about 400 BC.

Judas Maccabaeus and his associates, in 164 BC, compiled a list of the Prophets and Hagiographa at least 250 years prior to the generally assumed date of the closing of the canon (AD 90, at the Synod of Jamnia). The historical book of 2 Maccabees 2:14f describes it this way: “And in like manner Judas (Maccabaeus) also gathered together for us all those writings that had been scattered by reason of the war that befell, and they are still with us. If therefore ye have need thereof, send some to fetch them unto you.” Beckwith says,

Judas knew that the prophetic gift had ceased a long time before (1 Macc. 9:27; cp. Also 4.46; 14:41), so what is more likely than that, in gathering together the scattered scriptures, he and his companions the Hasidim classified the now complete collection in the way which from that time became traditional. . . The manner in which Judas Maccabaeus did his work was presumably by compiling a list, not by combining books in large scrolls. . . If Judas gave such structure to the canon, he must have had a definite collection of writings to work on.¹¹

The Old Testament books, as grouped in the canon, also had an established order. The relevancy that there was an established order--even though that order was different for different people--implies that the books in that order, however arranged, were recognized as canonical and that the canon was closed at the time of its ordering.

The number of the books is also a relevant issue, and the evidence shows that the number of the canonical books was always assumed to be 22 or 24. The books themselves were the same in both renderings; they would simply be grouped differently. “In earlier days they combined Ruth with Judges, and Lamentations with Jeremiah and thus made twenty-two books equivalent to the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet.”¹² It is “. . . difficult to conceive of those books being counted, and the number being generally accepted and well known, if the canon remained open and the identity of its books uncertain. . . agreement about their number implies agreement about their identity.”¹³

The Contents of the Old Testament Canon

The Canonical Books

It would be logical that upon completion of an Old Testament book the book was canonical. Theoretically, this must be true, but actually, a book of Scripture was *considered* to be such by virtue of the authority of the human author. So while the Pentateuch was completed with the death of Moses, and the Prophets and the Hagiographa with their authors, the recognition of their canonicity may have been centuries after their actual completion. Consequently, as recognitions differ, there was some dispute about mainly five books of the Old Testament, sometimes called the “antilegomena” or the “books spoken against.” These were: Ezekiel, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Esther. The secular motifs in these books were the leading cause of concern to some scholars as well as was the apparent contradictions with other canonical books which were not disputed. The disputes themselves imply that the books in question were considered canonical, because contradictions in un-inspired texts would have been assumed, and therefore, non-existent. It is usually assumed that the presence of the dispute proves that the canon was still open and up for grabs and that it was not settled until the Council of Jamnia in AD 90. The motivation behind such an assertion is the desire to canonize some Apocryphal and books of the Pseudepigrapha as well. Beckwith makes a good argument¹⁴ that Ezekiel was not debated, it being part of the already closed Prophets, and not the Hagiographa, which was the subject of debate at Jamnia. In particular only the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes were debated, or according to the Rabbi Akiba, only Ecclesiastes. Green quotes Rabbi Akiba from the Talmud regarding the Jewish opinion of the inspiration of the Song of Solomon. ““Silence and Peace! No one in Israel has ever doubted that the Song of Solomon defiles the hands [i.e. is Scripture]. For no day in the history of the world is worth the day when the Song of Solomon was given to Israel. For all the Hagiographa are holy, but the Song of Solomon is a holy of holies. If there has been any dispute, it referred only to Ecclesiastes. . . So they disputed and they decided.”¹⁵ And

¹¹ Beckwith, 152, 165

¹² Harris, R. Laird. “Canon of the Old Testament,” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Regency, 1976, 189

¹³ Beckwith, 262

¹⁴ Beckwith, 274-275

¹⁵ Green, William H., *General Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon*, London: Murray, 1899, 139

what did they decide? “The wise men desired to withdraw (ganaz) the Book of Ecclesiastes because its language was often self-contradictory and contradicted the utterances of David. Why did they not withdraw it? Because the beginning and the end of it consist of words of the law.’ Sabbath 30b.”¹⁶ The book of 2 Esdras shows that Ezra republished the 24 books of the inspired law. “How could such an assertion be made if five of the 24 books were known to have been added to the canon about AD 90, only ten years or so earlier?”¹⁷ In the end the Hagiographa triumphed. For two factors helped, says Pfeiffer: “The first was mere survival. In ancient times, when books had to be copied laboriously by hand on papyrus or parchment, no literary work could survive for a few centuries unless it had attained considerable circulation. . . We may wonder, for instance, why Esther should have survived among the Jews, while Judith perished, since the appeal of both was mainly patriotic.”¹⁸

The Non-Canonical Books

The non-canonical books which were excluded from the canon had a foot in the canonical door mainly by virtue of the disputed books’ arguments. The thought was, “If we can dispute about these five canonical books, can we not also dispute about these other books as being canonical too?” For the most part, the books in question from the Pseudepigrapha (anonymous authors) and Apocrypha could not be included in the canon, for one reason, because their date is much later than the previously attested date of the closing of the canon recognized by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 BC. The confusion comes in that many of the books in question are impeccable historical sources, and are true in what they say, but truth does not necessarily equate with canonicity. The books such as 1 Maccabees, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, and Ecclesiasticus, just to name a few, contain great value in and of themselves. But value is not enough to warrant canonicity. Even within the book of such value as Ecclesiasticus are personal biases that Holy Scripture would not commend. The author, Jesus the son of Sira, reveals a great deal of his personal character as he “not only expresses his views quite frankly on a variety of subjects, making no secret, for instance, of his intense dislike for the fair ‘weaker’ sex (9:8; 23:22-27. . .).”¹⁹

Augustine believed that some of the Apocrypha was inspired. Nevertheless, in the heat of the argument, Augustine limits his Old Testament to the Jewish canon when he writes in his tract on ‘Faith of Things not Seen’ appealing to the Scriptures as follows: ‘Unless haply unbelieving men judge those things to have been written by Christians, in order that those things which they already believed might have greater weight of authority if they should be thought to have been promised before they came. If they suspect this let them examine carefully the codices of our enemies the Jews. There let them read those things of which we have made mention. . . .’²⁰

“Philo, the Egyptian Jew of the first century AD, evidently accepted the twenty-two Hebrew books, for he quotes from many of them and from them only, as authoritative.”²¹ Jerome as well as Rufinus

. . . were crystal clear on the matter [of not considering them canonical] but their reaction to the pressure exerted on them indicates that many leaders thought the additional books ought to be recognized as inspired. . . Jerome yielded to the popular request in furnishing a translation to the church at large but never permitted his scholarly convictions to yield to the point of recognizing these books as canonical.²²

The Essene canon contained some of the Pseudepigrapha which they claimed to be divine. Most of these writings were midrash on canonized books and logically therefore would not be Scripture. For if the Pseudepigrapha contained a copy of a canonical book as well as commentary on it, why would it not negate the original canonical book, because the Pseudepigrapha with its inspired commentary would be much more valuable? In addition, “If they were conscious of being inspired, why did they not have the confidence to use their own names?”²³ Even the quote in Jude 14 of 1 Enoch 1:9 does not require that 1 Enoch is Scripture. To quote what is true in Scripture is dif-

¹⁶ Green, 138

¹⁷ Beckwith, 275

¹⁸ Pfeiffer, Robert H. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. New York: Harper & Row, 1948, 62

¹⁹ Pfeiffer, Robert H. *History of New Testament Times with an Introduction to the Apocrypha*. New York: Harper & Row, 1949, 366

²⁰ Schultz, 228

²¹ Harris, 189

²² Schultz, 231

²³ Beckwith, 359

ferent than saying that what is quoted *is* Scripture. Even Paul quoted a pagan poet in Acts 17:28, yet he certainly did not regard it as Scripture but as simply true. The Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes also all recognized a closed canon and generally saw that prophecy had ceased before the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha were even written. None of the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha were in the canon of the Jews and it was to this canon that Jesus Himself and the Apostles appealed.

Implications and Conclusions

The implications of such a study are two-fold. For those who have held that the writings other than the Jewish and Protestant Old Testament are inspired, there needs to be serious reconsideration. Jesus Himself implied that the last prophet was Zechariah in the book of Chronicles. The previous section alone is sufficient to warrant solemn attention. The value of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha is not the question but only whether they were even candidates for canonicity. There is no shame in a change of position, only in resolute rejection of the historical and logical data.

For those who have held to the Jewish and Protestant Old Testament there is the implication of comfort, assurance, as well as a deepening devotion to what God has not only seen fit to reveal to us, but that which He has seen fit to uphold and confirm to us through many different agencies.

Wayne Stiles received his Master of Theology degree and Doctor of Ministry degrees from Dallas Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Cathy, have two daughters. Read Wayne's blog at www.waynestiles.com where he connects the Bible and its lands to life.