

D. The Old Testament Canon

1. The Jamnia Theory

Many scholars have theorized that a council of rabbis that convened at Jamnia, near Jaffa, in AD 90 finally agreed upon which books would be included in the Hebrew canon and which ones would not. The problem with this theory is that the Jamnia gathering reached neither of these conclusions. The rabbis did not fix (settle upon a final list for) the canon, but rather “raised questions about the presence of certain books in the canon. Books that the council refused to admit to the canon had not been there in the first place. The primary concern of the council was the right of certain books to remain in the canon, not the acceptance of new books.” (Ewert, FATMT, 71) The rabbis discussed questions surrounding Esther, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, and Ezekiel. “It should be underscored, however, that while questions about these books were raised, there was no thought of removing them from the canon. The discussions at Jamnia dealt not so much ‘with acceptance of certain writings into the Canon, but rather with their right to remain there.’ ” (Ewert, FATMT, 72)

H. H. Rowley writes about the Council of Jamnia: “We know of discussions that took place there amongst the Rabbis, but we know of no formal or binding decisions that were made, and it is probable that the discussions were informal, though none the less helping to crystallize and to fix more firmly the Jewish tradition.” (Rowley, GOT, 170)

Prominent New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman states,

Most scholars agree that by the time of the destruction of the second Temple in 70 C.E. most Jews accepted the final three-part canon of the Torah, Nevi'im, and Kethuvim. . . . This was a twenty-four-book canon that came to be attested widely in Jewish writings of the time; eventually the canon was reconceptualized and renumbered so that it became the thirty-nine books of the Christian Old Testament. But they are the same books, all part of the canon of Scripture. (Ehrman, *The Bible*, 377)

Bible scholar David Ewert explains that

no human authority and no council of rabbis ever made an [Old Testament] book authoritative. These books were inspired by God and had the stamp of authority on them from the beginning. Through long usage in the Jewish community their authority was recognized, and in due time they were added to the collection of canonical books. (Ewert, FATMT, 72)

2. The Recognized Canon

The evidence clearly supports the theory that the Hebrew canon was established well before the late first century AD, more than likely as early as the fourth century BC and certainly no later than 150 BC. A major reason for this conclusion comes from the Jews themselves, who from the fourth century BC onward were convinced that “the voice of God had ceased to speak directly.” (Ewert, FATMT, 69) In other words, the prophetic voices had been stilled. No word from God meant no *new* Word of God. Without prophets, there can be no scriptural revelation.

Concerning the Intertestamental Period (approximately four hundred years between the close of the Old Testament and the events of the New Testament) Ewert observes,

In 1 Maccabees 14:41 we read of Simon who is made leader and priest “until a trustworthy prophet should rise,” and earlier he speaks of the sorrow in Israel such “as there has not been since the prophets ceased to appear to them.” “The prophets have fallen asleep,” complains the writer of 2 Baruch (85:3). Books that were written after the prophetic period had closed were thought of as lying outside the realm of Holy Scripture. (Ewert, FATMT, 70)

The last books written and recognized as canonical were Malachi (written around 450 to 430 BC) and Chronicles (written no later than 400 BC). (Walvoord and Zuck, BKC, 1573; 589) These books appear with the rest of the Hebrew canonical books in the Greek translation of the Hebrew canon called the Septuagint (LXX), which was composed around 250 to 150 BC. (Geisler and Nix, GIB, 24)

Bruce affirms that “The books of the Hebrew Bible are traditionally twenty-four in number, arranged in three divisions.” (Bruce, CS, 29) The three divisions are the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Here are the main categories of the Hebrew canon found in modern editions of the Jewish Old Testament.

- The Law (Torah): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
- The Prophets (Nebhim): Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings (former prophets), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve (latter prophets)
- The Writings (*Kethubhim* or *Hagiographa* [Greek]): Psalms, Proverbs, Job (poetical books), Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, Ecclesiastes (Five Rolls [*Megilloth*]), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles (historical books)

Although the Christian church has the same Old Testament canon, the number of books differs because we divide Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah into two books each, and we make separate books out of the Minor Prophets rather than combining them into one, as the Jews do under the heading “The Twelve.” (Geisler and Nix, GIB, 22–23) The church has also altered the order of books by sequencing the books in these categories: Pentateuch (Torah), History, Wisdom (some of the Writings), and Prophets.

3. Christ’s Witness to the Old Testament Canon

- Luke 24:44: In the Upper Room Jesus told the disciples “that all things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me” (ASV). With these words Jesus indicated “a threefold categorization of the sacred Scriptures [the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings], the third part of which is identified by its longest and presumably most important book, the Psalms.” (Ehrman, *The Bible*, 377)
- John 10:31–36; Luke 24:44: Jesus disagreed with the oral traditions of the Pharisees (Mark 7, Matt. 15), but *not* with their concept of the Hebrew canon. (Geisler and Nix, BFGU, 41) “There is no evidence whatever of any dispute between Him and the Jews as to the canonicity of any Old Testament book.” (Stonehouse and Woolley, IW, 60)
- Luke 11:51 (also Matt. 23:35): “From the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah.” With these words Jesus confirms his witness to the extent of the Old Testament canon. Abel was the first martyr recorded in Scripture (Gen. 4:8) and Zechariah the last martyr to be named in the Hebrew Old Testament order, having been stoned while prophesying to the people “in the court of the house of the LORD.” (2 Chr. 24:21). Genesis was the first book in the Hebrew canon and Chronicles the last. Jesus, then, was basically saying, “from Genesis to

Chronicles,” or, according to our order, “from Genesis to Malachi,” thereby confirming the divine authority and inspiration of the entire Hebrew canon. (Bruce, BP, 88)

New Testament scholar and author Craig A. Evans notes, “Jesus quotes or alludes to *all* of the books of the Law, *most* of the Prophets, and *some* of the Writings. Superficially, then, the ‘canon’ of Jesus is pretty much what it was for most religiously observant Jews of his time.” (Evans, SJ, 185)

4. The Testimonies of Extrabiblical Writers

a. Dead Sea Scrolls

In the Dead Sea Scrolls document 4QMMT, “dated to c. 150 BCE,” the writer states, “[. . . we have wri]tten to you so that you would understand the book of Mos[es and] the book[s of the Pro]phets and Dav[id]” indicating the three-fold division of Law, Prophets, and Writings. (Weissenberg, 4QMMT, 15, 103)

b. Ecclesiasticus

Possibly the earliest reference to a three-fold division of the Old Testament is in the prologue of the book Ecclesiasticus (about 130 BC). In the prologue the author’s grandson says, “Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them. . . . So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors . . .,” indicating three divisions of the Hebrew canon. (Trebolle Barrera, OTOT, 129) The grandfather, named Jesus ben Sirach, had written in Hebrew. The grandson who translated the manuscript from Hebrew to Greek mentions this three-part division three times in the prologue, once as he discusses his making the translation. He encourages lovers of learning to give attention to these writings (especially that they might live according to the law with understanding and be able to help others understand). But he acknowledges that translation carries a difficulty, for words of different languages do vary: “Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original.” (quoted in Kaminsky et al., AIB, 249) He also “refers to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, as well as ‘the bones of the Twelve prophets,’ testifying that these fifteen books had already come to be viewed as sacred Scripture.” (Kaminsky et al., AIB, 249; see Sirach 48:20–49:10)

c. Philo

“Around the time of Christ, the Jewish philosopher Philo made a threefold distinction in the Old Testament speaking of the ‘[1] laws and [2] oracles delivered through the mouth of prophets, and [3] psalms and anything else which fosters and perfects knowledge and piety’ (De Vita Contemplativa 3.25).” (Geisler and Nix, BFGU, 103)

d. Josephus

The Jewish historian Josephus (end of the first century AD) also spoke about the threefold division. And about the entire Hebrew Scriptures, he wrote:

And how firmly we have given credit to those books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them or take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it becomes

natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them. For it is no new thing for our captives, many of them in number, and frequently in time, to be seen to endure racks and deaths of all kinds upon the theatres, that they may not be obliged to say one word against our laws, and the records that contain them. (Josephus, WFJ vol. 4, 158–159)

e. The Talmud

The Talmud is an ancient “collection of rabbinical laws, law decisions and comments on the laws of Moses” (Tenney et al., ZPEB, 589) that preserves the oral tradition of the Jewish people. One compilation of the Talmud was made in Jerusalem circa AD 350–425. Another more expanded compilation of the Talmud was made in Babylonia circa AD 500. Each compilation of the Talmud is known by the name of its place of compilation—for example, the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud, respectively. The Talmud helps to establish the Jewish canon by rejecting later writings, including the Christian Gospels. The Talmud rejects these later writings because they were written after the Holy Spirit ceased inspiring texts (see below) or because they judge them to be heretical works.

- *Tos. Sotah 13:2: baraita in Bab. Yoma 9b, Bab. Sotah 48b and Bab. Sanhedrin 11a* says, “With the death of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi the latter prophets, the Holy Spirit ceased out of Israel.” (R. Beckwith, OTC, 370)
- *Seder Olam Rabba 30* states, “Until then [the coming of Alexander the Great 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.’” (R. Beckwith, OTC, 370)
- *Tosefta Yadaim 3:5* says, “The Gospel and the books of the heretics do not make the hands unclean; the books of Ben Sira and whatever books have been written since his time are not canonical.” (Pfeiffer, IOT, 63) The reference to a book making the hands unclean meant that the book was divinely inspired and therefore holy. (R. Beckwith, OTC, 278–279) Handlers of the Scriptures were required to wash their hands after touching their holy pages. “By declaring that the Scriptures made the hands unclean, the rabbis protected them from careless and irreverent treatment, since it is obvious that no one would be so apt to handle them heedlessly if he were every time obliged to wash his hands afterwards.” (R. Beckwith, OTC, 280) A book that did not do this was not from God. These quotations are claiming that only the books assembled in the Hebrew canon can lay claim to being God’s Word.

f. Melito, Bishop of Sardis

Melito drew up the first known list of Old Testament books from within Christian circles (about AD 170). Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History IV. 26*) preserves Melito’s comments to Onesimus:

I went to the East [Syria] . . . I accurately ascertained the books of the Old Testament, and send them to thee here below. The names are as follows: Of *Moses*, five books, *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. *Jesus Nave, Judges, Ruth*. Four of *Kings*. Two of *Paralipomena* [Chronicles], *Psalms of David, Proverbs of Solomon*, which is also called *Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job*. Of prophets, *Isaiah, Jeremiah*. Of the twelve prophets, one book. *Daniel, Ezekiel, Esdras* [Ezra]. (Eusebius, EH, 164)

Bruce comments,

It is likely that Melito included Lamentations with Jeremiah, and Nehemiah with Ezra (though it is curious to find Ezra counted among the prophets). In that case, his list contains all the books of the Hebrew canon (arranged according to the Septuagint order), with the exception of Esther. Esther may not have been included in the list he received from his informants in Syria. (Bruce, BP, 91)

g. Mishnah

The threefold division of the present Jewish text (with eleven books in the Writings) is from the Mishnah (Baba Bathra tractate, fifth century AD). (Geisler and Nix, GIB, 24)

5. The New Testament Witness to the Old Testament as Sacred Scripture

- Matthew 21:42; 22:29; 26:54, 56
- Luke 24
- John 5:39; 10:35
- Acts 17:2,11; 18:28
- Romans 1:2; 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; 15:4; 16:26
- 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4
- Galatians 3:8; 3:22; 4:30 1 Timothy 5:18
- 2 Timothy 3:16
- 2 Peter 1:20, 21; 3:16

“As the *Scripture* has said” (John 7:38) is all the introduction a text needed to indicate the general understanding that a saying, story, or book was the very Word of God from the prophets of God.

6. Hebrew Apocryphal Literature

The term *apocrypha* comes from the Greek word *apokruphos*, meaning “hidden or concealed.” (Unger, NUBD, 85) In the fourth century AD, Jerome was the first to name this group of literature *Apocrypha*. (Unger, NUBD, 85) The Apocrypha consists of the books added to the Old Testament by the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants reject these additions as noncanonical.

a. Why Not Canonical?

Unger’s Bible Dictionary, while granting that the Old Testament apocryphal books do have some value, cites four reasons for excluding them from the Hebrew canon:

1. They abound in historical and geographical inaccuracies and anachronisms.
2. They teach doctrines that are false and foster practices that are at variance with inspired Scripture.
3. They resort to literary types and display an artificiality of subject matter and styling out of keeping with inspired Scripture.
4. They lack the distinctive elements that give genuine Scripture its divine character, such as prophetic power and poetic and religious feeling. (Unger, NUBD, 85)

b. A Summary of the Apocryphal Books

In his excellent study guide *How We Got Our Bible*, Ralph Earle provides brief details of each apocryphal book. Because of its quality, accuracy, and conciseness, we present his outline here in order to give the reader a firsthand feel of the valuable yet noncanonical nature of these books:

First Esdras (about 150 BC) tells of the restoration of the Jews to Palestine after the Babylonian exile. It draws considerably from Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. In addition, the author has added much legendary material.

The most interesting item is the Story of the Three Guardsmen. They were debating what was the strongest thing in the world. One said, “Wine”; another, “the King”; the third, “Woman and Truth.” [The third, Zerubbabel, wrote, “Women are the strongest, but above all things the truth conquers.” (1 Esdras/ Esdras 3:12)] They put these three answers under the king’s pillow. When he awoke he required the three men to defend their answers. The unanimous decision was: “Truth is greatly and supremely strong.” Because Zerubbabel had given this answer he was allowed, as a reward, to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem.

Second Esdras (AD 100–200) is a collection of three apocalyptic works containing seven visions. . . . Martin Luther was so confused by these visions that he is said to have thrown the book into the Elbe River.

Tobit (early second century BC) is a short novel. Strongly Pharisaic in tone, it emphasizes the Law, clean foods, ceremonial washings, charity, fasting, and prayer. It is clearly unscriptural in its statement that almsgiving atones for sin.

Judith (late second century BC) is also fictitious and Pharisaic. The heroine of this novel is Judith, a beautiful Jewish widow. When her city was besieged she took her maid, together with Jewish clean food, and went out to the tent of the attacking general. He was enamored of her beauty and gave her a place in his tent. Fortunately, he had imbibed too freely and sank into a drunken stupor. Judith took his sword and cut off his head. Then she and her maid left the camp, taking his head in their provision bag. It was hung on the wall of a nearby city and the leaderless Assyrian army was defeated.

Additions to Esther (about 100 BC). . . . Esther stands alone among the books of the Old Testament in having no mention of God. We are told that Esther and Mordecai fasted. No mention of prayer, however, is made. To compensate for this lack, the *Additions* have long prayers attributed to these two. Several letters supposedly written by Artaxerxes are also included.

The Wisdom of Solomon (about AD 40) was written to keep the Jews from falling into skepticism, materialism, and idolatry. As in Proverbs, Wisdom is personified. There are many noble sentiments expressed in this book.

Ecclesiasticus, or *Wisdom of Sirach* (about 180 BC), shows a high level of religious wisdom, somewhat like the canonical Book of Proverbs. It also contains much practical advice. For instance, on the subject of after-dinner speeches it says, “Speak concisely; say much in few words; act like a man who knows more than he says” (32:8).

In his sermons, John Wesley quotes several times from the Book of Ecclesiasticus. It is still widely used in Anglican circles.

Baruch (about 150 BC or AD 100) was reportedly written by Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah, in 582 BC. . . . It apparently attempts to interpret the destruction of Jerusalem in either 587/586 BC or AD 70. The book urges the Jews not to revolt again and to submit to the emperor. The sixth chapter of *Baruch* contains the so-called “Letter of Jeremiah,” with its strong warning against idolatry.

Our Book of Daniel contains twelve chapters. In the first century before Christ a thirteenth chapter was added, containing the story of *Susanna*. She was the beautiful wife of a leading Jew in Babylon falsely accused of infidelity. Because of Daniel’s wisdom she was rescued. He asked each of her accusers separately under which tree in the garden they found Susanna with a lover. When they gave different answers, they were put to death, and Susanna was saved.

Bel and the Dragon was added at about the same time and was called chapter 14 of Daniel. Its main purpose was to show the folly of idolatry. It really contains two stories. In the first, King Cyrus asked Daniel why he did not worship Bel, since that deity showed his greatness by daily consuming much flour and oil and many sheep. Daniel scattered ashes on the floor of the Temple where food had been placed that evening. In the morning Daniel showed the king the footprints of the priests and their families who had entered secretly under the table and consumed the food. The priests were slain and the temple destroyed. The story of the dragon is just as obviously legendary in character. Along with Tobit, Judith, and Susanna, these stories may be classified as Jewish fiction. They have little if any religious value.

The Song of the Three Hebrew Children follows Daniel 3:23 in the Septuagint and in the Vulgate. It describes what happened to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego inside the fiery furnace. Borrowing heavily from Psalm 148, it is antiphonal, like Psalm 136. The refrain “Sing praise to him and greatly exalt him forever” appears thirty-two times.

The Prayer of Manasseh was composed in Maccabean times (second century BC) or later as the supposed prayer of Manasseh, the wicked king of Judah. It was obviously suggested by the statement in 2 Chronicles 33:19: “His prayer and how God was moved by his entreaty . . . all these are written in the records of the seers” (NIV). This prayer is not found otherwise in the Bible and is likely legendary.

First Maccabees (first century BC) is perhaps the most valuable book in the Apocrypha. It describes the exploits of the three Maccabean brothers—Judas, Jonathan, and Simon—during the Jewish revolt against the Seleucid Empire in 167–164 BC. Along with Josephus, it is our most important source for this crucial, exciting period in Jewish history.

Second Maccabees (same time) is not a sequel to 1 Maccabees. It is a parallel account, treating only the victories of Judas Maccabeus. It is generally thought to be more legendary than 1 Maccabees. (Earle, HWGOB, 39–42)

c. Historical Testimony of Their Exclusion

Geisler and Nix give ten testimonies of antiquity that argue against recognition of the Apocrypha:

1. Philo, Alexandrian Jewish philosopher (20 BC–AD 40), quoted the Old Testament prolifically, and even recognized the threefold
2. classification, but he never quoted from the Apocrypha as inspired.

3. Josephus (AD 30–100), Jewish historian, explicitly excludes the Apocrypha, numbering the books of the Old Testament as twenty-two. Neither does he quote the apocryphal books as Scripture.
4. Jesus and the New Testament writers never once quote the Apocrypha although there are hundreds of quotes and references to almost all of the canonical books of the Old Testament.
5. The Jewish scholars of Jamnia (AD 90) did not recognize the Apocrypha. No canon or council of the Christian church recognized the Apocrypha as inspired for nearly four centuries.
6. Many of the great Fathers of the early church spoke out against the Apocrypha, for example, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Athanasius.
7. Jerome (AD 340–420), the great scholar and translator of the Latin Vulgate, rejected the Apocrypha as part of the canon. Jerome said that the church reads them “for example of life and instruction of manners,” but does not “apply them to establish any doctrine.” He disputed with Augustine across the Mediterranean on this point. At first Jerome refused even to translate the apocryphal books into Latin, but later he made a hurried translation of a few of them. After his death and “over his dead body” the apocryphal books were brought into his Latin Vulgate directly from the Old Latin Version.
8. Many Roman Catholic scholars through the Reformation period rejected the Apocrypha.
9. Luther and the Reformers rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha.
10. Not until AD 1546, in a polemical action at the counter-Reformation Council of Trent (1545–63), did the apocryphal books receive full canonical status from the Roman Catholic Church. (Geisler and Nix, GIB, 272–273)

III. Conclusion

After examining different issues regarding the reliability of the Bible, we agree with New Testament scholar Craig L. Blomberg’s conclusion:

Ironically, what has become best known in our culture over the past generation, both inside and outside of Christian circles, is the flurry of skepticism that certain narrow segments of scholarship and pseudoscholarship have unleashed. This is ironic because in each instance the less-quoted majority of scholars have increasingly come to recognize that the evidence is actually stronger for the trustworthiness of Scripture in each of these areas, as long as that trustworthiness is appropriately defined by the standards of antiquity [emphasis in original]. (Blomberg, CWSBB, 213)