

ISSUE

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BULLETIN OF
THE OLSEN
PARK CHURCH
OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

April 16,
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Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Steve Dixon

Ryan Ferguson

Arend Gressley

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Brady McAlister

Walker McAnear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Rusty Scott

Justin Smiley

Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope



The Close of the Old Testament Canon

How the Bible Came to Us (5)

By Kyle Pope

When my kids were little a series of children's videos came out known as *Veggie Tales*. These computer-generated animated films told moral and biblical stories featuring talking vegetables singing silly songs and acting out biblical accounts like David and Goliath and the battle of Jericho. I was never a big fan of *Veggie Tales* because I feared that the liberties they took in adding dialogue not found in Scripture and talking vegetables might lead children to remember the silly versions of these stories and not what is actually recorded in the Bible. As the years went on, although my children occasionally watched these videos, to my knowledge they never struggled to distinguish the facts of biblical accounts from the “veggied-down” versions of these stories.

Imagine that hundreds of years from now a researcher found these videos and began to consider them a part of the biblical record. What chaos would that cause? As unlikely as that might seem there have actually been times when people faced similar challenges in determining how to distinguish fictional literature featuring biblical characters from the inspired accounts of real people in the Bible. In the period between the Old and New Testaments some literature of this nature began to be produced. It may not have featured talking vegetables, but it portrayed imagined stories aimed at tickling the ears of the curious. These works were not inspired by God, but long after their creation some continue to struggle with how to distinguish them from genuine Scripture.

The Old Testament Canon

To understand this situation we must first discuss what constitutes the *canon* or “measuring line” of Old Testament Scriptures. The collection of books that formed the complete Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) was closed well before the New Testament period. It was made up of the 39 books we now have in our Bibles. Ancient Jews counted them a little different than we do. They considered some books we count as two volumes a single text. For example, the historical books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles were considered one volume each. The twelve books of prophecy we call the “Minor Prophets” they grouped together as one. The content was the same—the difference was how

they were arranged and counted. While we number them at 39 books, they considered them either 24, or (if Judges and Ruth, and Jeremiah and Lamentations were counted together) 22 books. Again, the content was the same—only the way it was calculated was different.

We know this because of another difference in how the Old Testament was originally arranged. Christians usually divide the Old Testament into four groups based on subject matter: *Law*, *History*, *Poetry*, or *Prophecy*. This was how it was arranged in the first Greek translation of the Old Testament done before the time of Jesus known as the *Septuagint*. Since Greek was the common language of the Roman Empire when Christianity was born, most people read Greek and the Old Testament they used was the Greek Old Testament. Familiarity with that arrangement of books became the accepted tradition among Christians and that continues even today. That wasn’t always how it was done. Ancient Jews (and even modern Jews) divided the same books into three parts: the *Torah* (or “Law”), the *Nevi'im* (or “Prophets”), and the *Ketubim* (or “Writings”). This three-part division allows us to see how early the 39 books of the Old Testament were considered the full canon of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Witnesses to a Closed Canon

An important example of this comes in the words of Jesus. In the First Century the gospel of Luke quotes Jesus to say, “...**These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the LAW, the PROPHETS and the PSALMS concerning Me**” (Luke 24:44; emphasis KP). Here Jesus used two of the designations employed by Jews to identify two divisions of the Hebrew Bible. We might imagine that His third reference to “**the Psalms**” meant only the book of Psalms, but in the Jewish arrangement of the Hebrew Bible Psalms was the first book of the third division called the *Ketubim* (or “Writings”). In this statement Jesus affirms His acceptance of the full Old Testament canon.

Jesus was not the only early example of this. A Jewish text written around 190 BC known as *The Wisdom of Ben*



Sirach claimed, “Many and great things have been given to us by the LAW and the PROPHETS and by OTHERS...” claiming his grandfather, “gave himself to the reading of the LAW and the PROPHETS and OTHER books of our fathers,” later referring to “...the LAW itself, and the PROPHETS and the REST of the books ” (Prologue; emphasis mine). Nearly two centuries before Jesus this is a Jewish writer referring to the three-part division of Hebrew Scriptures still used by Jews today!

In the First Century two other Jewish writers expressed this even more directly. Around 30 AD an Alexandrian Jew named Philo wrote of some Jews, “...studying in that place the LAWS and the sacred oracles of God enunciated by the HOLY PROPHETS and HYMNS and PSALMS...” (*On the Contemplative Life*, 25; emphasis KP). Around 80-90 AD the Jewish historian Josephus claimed, “We have...22 books which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be Divine,” explaining, “...five belong to MOSES... the PROPHETS wrote down what was done in thirteen books...the remaining four contain HYMNS to God and precepts for the conduct of life” (*Against Apion*, 1.8.1; emphasis KP). This not only utilizes the three-part Jewish division, but identifies their number. As discussed above, these 22 books contain the same content as the 39 books found in our Bibles today.

Skeptical Theories

While this evidence makes it clear that the Old Testament canon was closed well before the First Century, skeptical scholars have disputed this. Some used to argue that it was not until the end of the First Century that Jewish scholars in the city of Jamnia decided for themselves what should and should not be considered Scripture. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD Jewish teachers settled in Jamnia and established rabbinical schools there. While it is clear that Jewish teachers in Jamnia discussed Scripture, there is no evidence that they presumed to determine for themselves what constituted Scripture. Author Robert New-

man in his study “The Council of Jamnia and the Old Testament Canon” analyzes the evidence concerning Jewish discussions at Jamnia and concludes, “it appears that a general consensus already existed regarding the extent of the category called Scripture” (348).¹ Jamnia didn’t *determine* the canon of the Old Testament; it simply reflected what was already understood. Fewer and fewer scholars now accept this false theory that a “council” at Jamnia created the Old Testament canon.

Non-Canonical Books

It is clear that additional religious literature was produced following the revelation of the last book of the Old Testament, but not all of this literature was of the same nature. We can divide it into two groups: *Apocrypha* and *Pseudepigrapha*.

Apocrypha. The *Apocrypha* consists of fourteen Jewish historical and religious texts written from 300 BC - 70 AD. The Jews did not view these books as inspired. They

¹ Newman, Robert C. *Westminster Theological Journal* 38.4 (Spr. 1976) 319-348.



were supplementary readings that held no authority. We can see this in the fact that Jesus and New Testament writers don't quote from apocryphal books although they quote extensively from the canonical books. Josephus, in his work *Against Apion* claimed books written after the canonical books, "have not been esteemed with the same authority as the former by our forefathers because there has not been an exact succession of prophets from that time" (1.8.1). Although many copies of the Greek Old Testament included some of these books, they were likely included only as supplementary material like notes in a modern study Bible. Unfortunately, over time this led some to view them as a part of inspired Scripture. Roman Catholic Catholics consider them a part of Scripture even though Jerome, the ancient

scholar who translated the Latin Bible used by Catholics for centuries did not consider them to be inspired.² The Apocrypha has some historical value, but it is not inspired.

Pseudepigrapha. A book written under a pseudonym is a text whose author assumes a false name under which to write. The author Samuel Clemens, for example, wrote under the pseudonym Mark Twain. In biblical study *Pseudepigrapha* is literature written from about 200 BC - 200 AD whose authors wrote under the names of ancient biblical characters. Works such as the *Life of Adam and Eve*, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Book of Enoch*, and others played on the curiosity of those familiar with biblical characters. In some cases these were little more than moralistic religious fiction set in biblical times. In other cases they were texts penned by members of heretical religious groups aimed at altering scriptural accounts and promoting false doctrine. Jerome called some of them, "...the crazy wanderings of a man whose senses have taken leave of him" (*Epistle 57.9*). Many of these works were well-known among the Jews (and later among Christians), but like the Apocrypha they were not viewed as inspired and held no authority. Some pseudepigraphic texts were found among the many scriptural and secular texts found in the library of manuscripts known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Does that mean we should consider them inspired? No more than the presence of *Veggie Tales* in a religious bookstore would mean they are inspired.



² In Fourth Century in the preface to his translation of the apocryphal book known as the *Wisdom of Solomon* Jerome wrote, "As the Church reads the books of Judith and Tobit and Maccabees but does not receive them among the canonical Scriptures, so also it reads Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus for the edification of the people, not for the authoritative confirmation of doctrine."