

Formation of the Old Testament Canon
or The Formation of A Community

OT 5202 – Old Testament Text and Interpretation
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December 2, 2010

Introduction

While the notion of “canon” may seem ill-fitting to a discussion of the Old Testament since it does not fit the mold of its own making and was even anachronistic as late as the Second Temple period, it is still important that one come to grips with the content of this *idea* of “canon” in relation to the Old Testament.¹ The idea pertained to those authoritative and inspired books which were received by the community of faith. Peter Flint offers the following helpful definition: “A canon is a closed list of books that was officially accepted retrospectively by a community as supremely authoritative and binding for religious practice and doctrine.”² With these minimal introductory comments let us pursue the move towards an Old Testament canon, its formation as such, and finally, some diverse matters relevant towards a conclusion.

Towards an Old Testament Canon

How should we understand the move towards an Old Testament canon? Was it a monolithic movement? Was it even a sensibly perceptible movement? There was, as such, no single group or individual that was determinative of a “canon” of the Old Testament at any point in its history of development. It is imperative that this be kept in mind. It was work that was received by the community rather than determined by a committee. “It may be said that before the Israelites became the proverbial 'People of the Book', the corpus of literary traditions, in part transmitted orally and in part handed down in writing, was the 'Book of the People', which constituted the corporate biography of biblical Israel from Creation to the height of the Second Temple period.”³ What occurred can only be described as acceptance of the inspired authority of

¹ Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), 63; Peter Flint, “Scriptures in the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Evidence from Qumran,” in *Studies in the Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov* (ed. Shalom Paul et al.; VTSup xciv; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), 269-272; Shemaryahu Talmon, “The Crystallization of the 'Canon of Hebrew Scriptures' in the Light of Biblical Scrolls From Qumran,” Edward D. Herbert and Emanuel Tov, *The Bible as Book. The Hebrew Bible and the Judaean Desert Discoveries* (London: British Library ; Oak Knoll Press, 2002), 7, 8.

² Flint, 270.

³ Talmon, 7.

the Scriptures of the Old Testament as “canon” without any set parameters of just what should constitute a “canon” ahead of time.

However, it is abundantly clear that as the traditions of Israel grew over time and as the various texts were passed on, there was need for some sense of recognizing delimitations, even with regard to the additions of the oral tradition. Not all of the traditions were equally received or recognized as authoritative by the community. For instance, as authoritative as the תורה פה שכעל פה “the oral tradition” of the Jewish sages of the Second Temple period was considered to be, it was still clearly distinguished from the תורה שבכתב “the written law” (that is the “written Scriptures” received as such). In this particular case, this guarded that which was considered to be ultimately authoritative from that which was penultimately authoritative for the community of Israel, particularly after the destruction of the Temple and the waning of the variant streams of other traditions in light of that great upheaval.⁴

What was considered to distinguish the texts which were received as holding ultimate authority by the community? It was the inspiration of God recognized to have been “extended from the oral form...to the written form.”⁵ The self-testimony of God (explicit and implicit) having spoken and revealed what has been preserved in the texts of the Old Testament serves as witness to the inspiration of those texts. In the words of Gleason Archer, “The only true test of canonicity...is the testimony of God the Holy Spirit to the authority of His own Word. This testimony found a response of recognition, faith and submission in the hearts of God's people who walked in covenant fellowship with Him.”⁶ This is not to suggest that other texts which were not ultimately received by the community of Israel did not make such claims of God's self-

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ Beckwith, 68.

⁶ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), 69.

testimony, but that they were not recognized to have that same sense of inspiration as those which had been received at an earlier time and place.⁷

Already mentioned and intimately connected to the inspiration of these texts is the acceptance of their inherent authority for the community of faith. Those texts which were received as “canon” were considered to hold a place of authority for the life of the community concerning their whole identity as a people in relation to YHWH. These texts in particular spoke on matters of faith and conduct that held ultimate significance for the community where others were only penultimate or even only authoritative for a local community at a specific time. It was recognized that the texts (though specific to a certain time and place) held authority for all times and places for the community and thus were to be received by the whole community as Scripture.

What role did the community play in this process of the move towards a “canon”? There was no formal decision ever made concerning books to be included. It was simply the recognition by the community that certain books were inspired and held authority for the faith and life of the community for all times everywhere. It did not even matter that those texts which included stories outside of *torah* should be included. “The *vox populi*, rather than formal decisions of authoritative institutions, assured [the] inclusion in Israel's cultural legacy” of such inspiring stories as “feats of Jephthah, Samson or David.”⁸ “To take the canonical shape of these texts seriously is to seek to do justice to a literature which Israel transmitted as a record of God's revelation to his people along with Israel's response.”⁹ Perhaps it may be argued the community is a part of the “canon” itself through its reception and response. At the very least, the communities existence is so intertwined with the existence of its “canon” that to distinguish the

⁷ I am thinking in particular of such texts as *Sirach* and *Wisdom of Solomon*.

⁸ Talmon, 9.

⁹ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 73.

two too sharply is to destroy the very *raison d'être* of the community of the faith of Israel (and ultimately even the faith of the Church).

Formation of an Old Testament Canon

What clues do we have to help us formulate a clear understanding of the formation of an Old Testament canon? The issues are not clear by any means. The Old Testament itself has more often than not obscured the details of its own formation, so any reconstruction leads inevitably to speculative domains beyond the specifics of the actual data. The concern of Talmon should be kept in mind that “identifying ‘pre-canonical’, ‘proto-canonical,’ or ‘quasi-canonical’ stages of development...obfuscate[s] the pivotal issue under consideration by watering down the essentially hard and fast signification of *canon*.”¹⁰ Brevard Childs also tellingly notes,

We are faced with an obvious dilemma. Clearly the role of the canon is of fundamental importance in understanding the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet the Jewish canon was formed through a complex historical process which is largely inaccessible to critical reconstruction. The history of the canonical process does not seem to be an avenue through which one can greatly illuminate the present canonical text. Not only is the evidence far too skeletal, but the sources seem to conceal the very kind of information which would allow a historian easy access into the material by means of uncovering the process.¹¹

So how should one proceed to formulate any understanding of the formation of the canon of the Old Testament? Perhaps the best way to proceed would be to discuss the various communities reception of a “canon” of sorts.¹²

Those texts which were ultimately included were included by different communities at different times. How does one distinguish these groups “canons” especially since there was never (until very late and only in the case of the Church) any “councils” to discern an actual

¹⁰ Talmon, 6. *Original emphasis*.

¹¹ Childs, 67, 68.

¹² These texts cannot be discussed with any detail due to the brevity of this project and the need to discuss a great many texts. So in some sense specifics will be given, but in another generalities must also be given for the sake of argumentation.

canon? It would be helpful just to give a brief survey of their respective processes of the recognition of Scripture and by doing so the recognition of a “canon” of sorts. It should also be borne in mind that the “term 'canon', when applied to the collection of books and not to the lists expresses the vital fact that the books rightly included in the collection form a 'rule' for the faith and practice of God's people.”¹³ This was paramount for each individual community and for the wider community.

The Jewish community in Alexandria in the centuries before Christ apparently received the text with all of the books commonly called the Old Testament as these were translated into Greek for the purpose of the life of the community. However, there were other texts (and additions to some of the texts commonly received elsewhere) as well that were recognized within the community.¹⁴ What role did these play for the community? Were they ever considered to hold the same authority and were they received as inspired or were they among those texts that were among the many other texts that the wider communities maintained that were considered only of penultimate authority? It would appear that they never held the same level of authority for the community as the other Scriptures (though some did certainly hold a very high authority such as *Sirach*). Certainly these extra texts were never considered Scripture by the wider community of faith, though received by some in certain places at certain times.

Peter Flint argues for several criteria which give testimony to community authority as possibly canonical at Qumran, but at most “were viewed as Scripture.”¹⁵ Among these he discusses the predominance of certain texts,¹⁶ the translations into Greek and Aramaic of certain

¹³ Beckwith, 65.

¹⁴ Additions to Esther, Additions to Daniel, Tobit, 1-2 Maccabees, Jesus ben Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, Psalm 151, among other texts.

¹⁵ Flint, 300.

¹⁶ He specifically mentions Psalms having 36 manuscripts; Deuteronomy 30 mss; Isaiah 21 mss; Genesis 20 mss; Exodus 17 mss; *Jubilees* 15 mss; Leviticus 14 mss and *1 Enoch* 12 mss on page 296.

texts,¹⁷ and *pesharim* or commentaries on texts deemed authoritative enough to deserve comment.¹⁸ Further, the Qumran community included many citations and allusions to texts treating them as Scripture. While none of these are conclusive evidence for a “canon”, they are certainly weighty in pointing towards texts that were considered authoritative for the community of Qumran. However, just as the community around Alexandria held to certain texts as Scripture, the wider community never received these. This was so with many of the extra texts of Qumran community.

“By the close of the first century C.E....there was as yet no canon in the sense of a closed list of books that was accepted retrospectively by all Jewish people as supremely authoritative. However, the ancient sources do bear witness to the canonical process, or a canon in the making.”¹⁹ Unless we do take the cue of Gleason Archer who has argued that “the various books of the Bible were canonical from the moment of their inception, by virtue of the divine authority...behind them, and the books received immediate recognition and acceptance by the faithful as soon as they were made aware of the writings.”²⁰ Perhaps some of the books could arguably be said to have been received more readily and more quickly by the community than others, but all of them eventually found a place within the community of their own accord and authority. Josephus (*Contra Apionem* I.8) says, “We have not tens of thousands of books, discordant and conflicting, but only twenty-two containing the record of all time, which have

¹⁷ Exodus (pap7QLXXExod), Leviticus (4QLXXLev^a and pap4QLXXLev^b), Numbers (4QLXXNum), Deuteronomy (4QLXXDeut), the Letter of Jeremiah (pap7QEJer gr), *1 Enoch* (pap7QEn gr) and a Greek scroll containing the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets at Nahal Hever. Ibid.

¹⁸ Genesis and Exodus (4Q422), the “Law of Moses” (4Q251), Isaiah (3QpIsa, 4QpIsa^{a-c}), Hosea (4QpHos^a, 4QpHos^b), Micah (1QpMic, 4QpMic?), Zephaniah (1QpZeph, 4QpZeph^a), Nahum (4QpNah), Habakkuk (1QpHab), the Psalms (1QpPs, 4QpPs^a, 4QpPs^b) and Apocryphal Malachi (5Q10).

¹⁹ Flint, 289; Armin Lange prefers the term “biblical” for what was happening among these early groups. See particularly his comments in “The Status of the Biblical Texts in the Qumran Corpus and the Canonical Process,” in *The Bible as Book: The Hebrew Bible and the Judaean Desert Discoveries* (ed. Edward Herbert and Emanuel Tov; The British Library & Oak Knoll Press, 2002), 21, 22.

²⁰ Archer, 71.

been justly believed to be divine.”²¹ These were the recognized and received texts of the community that were vehemently preserved against destruction when the Temple was destroyed and the Jewish nation scattered.²² The community and the “canon” were preserved together...and so this act became something of an informal and final canonizing for the community of Israel.

For the Church, the testimony of Jesus was normative in establishing the idea of “canon”. As such they looked to the testimony as passed down in the Gospel traditions. In Jesus's own day he may have referred to a “canon” of sorts with his reference to the time from the murder of Abel (Gen.4:8) to the murder of Zechariah (2 Chron.24:20-22), following what would be the

traditional Hebrew arrangement of *Torah*, *N^e bi’im*, and *Kethūbim*.²³ There may also be testimony to such by the repeated claims of the authority of “the law and the prophets” (Matt.5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16, 29; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 28:23; Rom.3:21); “Moses and [all] the prophets” (Luke 16:31; 24:27) and “the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms” (Luke 24:44).

However, the Church would wrestle with this question for some time as there was no settled number. Bishop Melito of Sardis (ca. 170 CE) mentions all of the books of the Hebrew canon except Lamentations, Nehemiah and Esther, but the first two may likely be subsumed under their other respective writings, and the latter is simply absent. Tertullian (2nd -3rd century CE) listed twenty-four books of the Old Testament. Origen (3rd century CE), according to

²¹ The twenty-two books of Josephus correspond to the thirty-nine books of the Protestant canon. The following books were grouped together: 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, the Twelve Minor Prophets and likely Ruth with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah though these last two are less certain as there were other lists that contained twenty-four and separated off those two. Archer, 60.

²² Roger Beckwith argues “if it became possible, after the destruction of the temple, to add *disputed* books to the canon (which is conceivable), the *undisputed* books, in all three sections of the canon, must have been canonical before the temple was destroyed, and not just for a little while before, but for a very long while,” 86, *original emphasis*.

²³This is not without its difficulties, in particular because of the name of the father of Zechariah cited by Jesus, which may even make this individual the one who was killed in the Jewish revolt recorded by Josephus according to Peter Flint 287.

Eusebius (*Ecc. Hist.* vi.25), made a list of twenty-two books which is identical to Josephus's list with the exception that he also includes the letter of Jeremiah. Jerome (late 4th century CE) in his *Prologus Galeatus* argued for the Hebrew canon of only the twenty-two books (which appears to be the twenty-two of the other writers). In Athanasius's thirty-ninth letter, he enumerated again the twenty-two book canon testifying to the Old Testament for the Church that followed the Hebrew Canon found now in the Protestant Bible. This finally established the limitations for the Church of what constituted “canon” for the Old Testament, even while there would be other portions which would continue to be read and included for the benefit of the community of faith. These would remain at the boundaries of the community and not as essential and not as constitutive of the community. The twenty-two (twenty-four or thirty-nine as they are variously finally enumerated) texts were considered to be received by the community as of ultimate inspiration and authority for faith and life.

What must be said of those texts which are mentioned in the Old Testament itself but have not been preserved? They were deemed important enough to cite by name (and thus contained some material likely deemed inspired and authoritative), but not entirely to be maintained for the ongoing life of the community of faith (and thus not deemed ultimately authoritative for the community as the other books which were ultimately included).²⁴ In the end, “public acclaim” seems to have been the decisive factor in which books were maintained by the traditions.²⁵

Diverse Communities; Diverse Canons?

²⁴ Those books which are mentioned are: the Book of the Wars of YHWH (Num.21:14); the Book of Jashar (Josh.10:13; 1 Sam.10:25); the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (1 Ki.14:19; 15:31); the Acts of Uzziah (2 Chron.26:22); the Words of the Prophet Samuel (1 Chron.29:29; 2 Chron.2:29); the Words of Shemiah the Prophet (2 Chron.12:15); the Midrash of the Prophet Iddo (2 Chron.13:22); the Vision of Iddo the Seer (2 Chron.9:29); and the Words of Iddo the Seer (2 Chron.12:15).

²⁵ Talmon, 10.

A “biblical canon is never universal” as testified to in the various canons of the Jewish faith, the Samaritan, the (nebulous) Qumran, the Eastern Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Protestant Church.²⁶ While Brevard Childs argues persuasively for the Masoretic Text as the “*vehicle* both for the recovering and for the understanding of the canonical text of the Old Testament,” there must be an allowance for caveats in such important matters as variant readings and arrangements.²⁷ His arguments do, however, make a strong case for the exclusion of several of these variant authoritative “canons” (particularly the Samaritan and Qumran, but also several notable weaknesses of the Roman and Eastern as well). “The Bible takes its origins from within the life of believing communities; it is interpreted within the continuing life of these communities; the standard of its religious interpretation is the structure of faith which these communities maintain; and it has the task of providing a challenge, a force for innovation and a source of purification, to the life of these communities.”²⁸

While it was not a matter of primary importance to set the parameters of a “canon” *per se*, there was still a limitation inherent to which books were included and even to the allowance of materials to be redactively allowed within those books by the community of faith. Perhaps a better way of stating this would be to say that the limitations of the canon are those books and their limits which were recognized and held by the community of faith at various times without any specific council or body having determined books for canonization.²⁹ “The significance of the final form of the biblical text is that it alone bears witness to the full history of revelation.”³⁰

²⁶ Ibid., 7, 8.

²⁷ Childs, 97-99, *original emphasis*. He later clarifies that “the Masoretic text is not identical with the canonical text, but is only a vehicle for its recovery. There is no extant canonical text.” p. 100.

²⁸ James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 111.

²⁹ All notions of a “council” of Jabneh/Jamnia at the end of the first century CE which was purported to have dealt with the issue of the “canon” are to be rejected on critical grounds though still presented as such in most popular literature.

³⁰ Childs, 75, 76.

It should be recognized, however, that the more significant and important “canon” of the Old Testament within the earliest communities of faith was really something more akin to the *regula fidei* later expounded by the Church Fathers Irenaeus and Tertullian.³¹ This is where we must also find ourselves—not ultimately entangled in contests of lists competing over the boundaries of books and their composition (as important as such a task may prove to be), but ultimately concerned with that which is the *standard* by which we *believe* and *live* and are sustained as a community of faith having been constituted by God Himself.

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³¹ Barr, 121.