

What Can 2Macc 2:13-15 Tell Us about the Biblical Canon?

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Abstract

Many scholars have used two verses from an epistle appended to the main body of 2 Maccabees to suggest a canon, proto-canon, or body of scripture is present already during the Hasmonean era and even before. We question such conclusions by investigating the background and contents of the epistle, using both historical-critical and rhetorical methods. This investigation concludes that it is more likely that the collections of books gathered by both Nehemiah and Judas Maccabeus are nationally edifying proof-texts for the customs argued for in the epistle. It is clear from the statements in 2 Maccabees 2:13-15 that the collection assembled by Nehemiah and Judas would be vastly different from any later notions of canon in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. These texts are not being offered to the addressees as the official word (whether of God, or of the temple authorities in Jerusalem), but as evidence of practices for which the epistle is advocating on the basis of their antiquity.

Keywords: 2 Maccabees, Canon, Hasmonean

Article

In the ongoing discussion concerning the process of canon formation in antiquity, 2Macc 2:13-14 has taken a central place. It has, among some scholars, been used as a proof text for the closure of the canon of the Hebrew bible in the Hasmonean era (Leiman 1976, 29; Davies 2002, 50; Evans 2002, 188).¹ For others, this text has been seen as evidence of an important step in the canonical process, whether that is the collection and existence of a temple library, or the recognition of a certain body of works as authoritative (Trebolle Barrera 2002, 130).² Still, a third set of scholars have doubted the utility of 2Macc 2:13-14 in the canon discussion, noting the many difficulties

¹ S.Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of the Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1976), 29. Philip R. Davies, "The Jewish Scriptural Canon in Cultural Perspective" in *The Canon Debate* (eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 50. Craig A. Evans, "The Scriptures of Jesus and His Earliest Followers" in *The Canon Debate* (eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 188.

² Julio C. Treballe Barrera, "Origins of a Tripartite Old Testament Canon" in *The Canon Debate* (eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 130. David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

surrounding the content and context of the passage (Lange 2007, 167; Schorch 2007, 172, 174; McDonald 2007, 85; Van Seters 2008, 236).³ This paper represents an inquiry into these verses and their context in order to once again examine what can really be said about the canon using this passage as evidence. It is our hypothesis that these verses offer little for those in search of a canonical list, a proto-canon, or even a foundation myth for the temple library, because much of the discussion has ignored both the rhetorical context and the actual contents of these verses. However, we should stress that all hope is not lost; 2Macc 2:13-15 may offer the student of the canonical process indirect evidence of one of the ways by which texts gained authority.

For the sake of clarity, we will make this argument first by presenting the context and underlying issues surrounding the interpretation of 2Macc 2:13-15. We will then present five proofs against the hypothesis that a canon, proto-canon, or even a landmark in the canonical process is preserved in this text. Finally, we will offer our suggestion for why this text may still be useful for discussion of the process by which texts gained authority beyond the borders of one sphere of influence.

Content, Context, and Method

Let us now discuss some of the more important issues at play when discussing this passage. The first is its contents, worth repeating here:

The same things are reported in the records and memoirs of Nehemiah, and also how he founded a library and collected the scrolls concerning the kings, of prophets, those of David, and letters of kings concerning votive offerings. Likewise, also Judas gathered together all those, which had been destroyed on

³ Armin Lange, “2Maccabees 2:13-15: Library or Canon?” in *The Books of the Maccabees: History, Theology, Ideology. Papers of the Second International Conference on the Deuterocanonical Books, Pápa, Hungary, 9-11 June, 2005*. (eds. Géza Xeravits and József Zsellengér; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 167. Stefan Schorch “The Libraries in 2Macc 2:13-15, and Torah as a Public Document in Second Century BC Judaism” in *The Books of the Maccabees: History, Theology, Ideology. Papers of the Second International Conference on the Deuterocanonical Books, Pápa, Hungary, 9-11 June, 2005*. (eds. Géza Xeravits and József Zsellengér; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 172, 174. Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 85. John Van Seters “The Origins of the Biblical Canon: Some New Answers to Old Questions. Part Two” *JANER* 7,2 (2008), 236.

account of the war that had come to us, and they are in our possession. Therefore, if you have need of them, send to us couriers.

It is no wonder that such a detailed passage, filled with rich description, has inspired many of those searching for the foundations of the biblical canon to look no further. It contains the names of historical personages we recognize, books we believe we know, and even speaks of a library, which gives the appearance of an official collection. It would seem to be all that anyone who wants to prove the early existence of a canon needs.

In addition to this, the broader context of 2Macc 2:1-12 reveals stories about the prophet Jeremiah, Moses, and Solomon. 2:1 and 2:4 even cite documents (ἀπογραφὴ/γραφὴ) which seem to report both Jeremiah's deeds and oracles. Even more exciting for those building a case for the early canon, 2:2 reports that the prophet gave deportees the law. Further, 1:20-1:36 report on a story concerning Nehemiah and the reestablishment of the temple, possibly revealing some of the contents of the records and memoirs of Nehemiah mentioned in 2:13.

All of these passages belong to a section roughly in the form of an epistle that begins at 1:10 and ends at 2:18 (Wacholder 1978, 129-130).⁴ This letter is attributed to Judas and the senate and all those in Jerusalem and Judea, and is addressed to Aristobulus, of the family of anointed priests, teacher of King Ptolemy, and to all the Jews in Egypt. The letter purports to be written on the occasion of the rededication of the temple led by Judas Maccabeus following the death of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, which it reports (164 BCE). The epistle appears to be appended to another letter in 2Macc 1:1-9, also claimed to be written by Jews in Jerusalem and Judea, and addressed to the Jews in Egypt in the 188th year of the Seleucid era (124 BCE) (Wacholder 1978, 89).⁵ Moreover, both of these epistles seem to be artificially attached to the main body of the work of 2Maccabees, which is an epitome of a larger five-volume history of the Maccabean rebellion. The brief first epistle has been judged by the majority of scholars as authentic,

⁴ Ben Zion Wacholder, "The Letter from Judah Maccabee to Aristobulus. Is 2 Maccabees 1:10b-2:18 Authentic?" *HUCA* 49 (1978) 89-133, 129-130.

⁵ *Ibid*, 89.

as it follows normal Seleucid epistolary conventions (Williams 2003, 72; Lange 2007, 164).⁶

The second epistle, within which our verses appear, has been judged to be a later forgery, with suggested dates of composition stemming from 104 BCE -63 BCE (Williams 2003, 72-73).⁷ While there is broad agreement on its nature as a forged document, there is little concurrence on the relationship of this forgery to both the preceding letter and the main text. While it bears some similarities to the epitome, it disagrees on several details concerning the death of Antiochus IV, which would seem to be an oversight on the part of the epitomist if he were responsible for attaching or composing the letter. In its current place the letter appears to pretend to be a correspondence mentioned in the first letter, but both the dates and the circumstances would be rather hard to reconcile. Whatever the relationship between these three works is now, it appears that it was manufactured after the composition of all three works (Williams 2003, 72-73).⁸ Therefore discussion of the aim of the letter should be limited to 2Macc 1:10-2:18.

The aim of this second epistle, which it actually shares with the first epistle, is to convince the addressees to celebrate the festival of booths in the month of Chislev (Lange 2007, 165).⁹ It may well be the reason these two works were eventually joined together. While the first letter uses a rather straightforward rhetorical style, the second epistle goes to great lengths using historical proofs to show the validity of such a festival. After recounting the death of Antiochus IV, the second epistle makes the request for those in Egypt to celebrate the purification of the temple on the 25th of Chislev in company with

⁶ David S. Williams, "Recent Research in 2 Maccabees" in *Currents in Biblical Research* 2.1 (2003) 69-83, 72. Lange, "2Maccabees 2:13-15", 164.

⁷ Ibid, 72-73. *Pace* Charles C. Torrey, "The Letters Prefixed to Second Maccabees" in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 60, 2 (June 1940), 119-150, 123; and Wacholder, "Letter from Judah", 132, both of whom claim that a miscalculation of the date related to a misidentification of the Antiochus in the letter is to be blamed for the inconsistencies.

⁸ Williams, "Recent Research", 72-73.

⁹ Lange, "2Maccabees 2:13-15", 165. *Contra* Schorch, "Libraries", 170, who sees the intent of the second letter as a glorification of Judas.

two other festivals, booths, and the mysterious festival of fire (1:18). The epistle then goes on to recount the legend of the fire, which is associated with Nehemiah's dedication of the second temple and the miraculous circumstances surrounding that (1:19-1:36). Following this passage, the epistle describes a legend attributed to Jeremiah wherein miraculous fire, sacrifice, and a festival of eight days play a role in the previous institutions of the cult by Moses and by Solomon. It also describes an oracle given by Jeremiah concerning the revelation of the hiding place of the tent, the ark, the altar of incense, and the miraculous fire once all the people are gathered again (2:1-12). Then, we come to our passage, which cites the records and memoirs of Nehemiah, and describes his activity in founding a library, and Judas Maccabeus' similar work (2:13-15). Finally, the letter closes with a second plea to celebrate the purification in order to bring about the revelation given by Jeremiah (2:16-18).

There are multiple approaches taken to convince the audience of the validity of the festival. First, the miraculous nature of Nehemiah's dedication shows the divine approval of his work, as well as the historical basis for celebrating a dedication through sacrifice. Second, the story Jeremiah tells about Moses and Solomon also receiving divine fire and celebrating the institution of the cult for eight days provides continuity from the inception under Moses until Nehemiah. Each founder of the cult then carries on the traditions of the festival: Moses, founder of the cult in the desert, Solomon, founder of the first temple, Nehemiah, founder of the second temple, and Judas founder of the temple after Antiochus' destruction. Third, Jeremiah's oracle of the revelation of that same divine fire, as well as its recollection in the prayer of Nehemiah (1:26-1:29), encourage hope for some event which gathers the community together.

This all obviously points to the feast of purification under Judas, the supposed author of the letter, not only as the proper action based on the precedent set by Moses, Solomon, and Nehemiah, but also as the possible event which will bring about the revelation promised by Jeremiah. No doubt the author of this second epistle created a rather convincing argument. It is the nature of this context as an elaborate argument for the celebration of the purification that we should keep in mind while discussing our verses.

Five Proofs against a Canon/Proto-Canon

The first proof, and one often cited by other scholars who doubt the value of this text in discerning the early boundaries of the canon, is that the list of works collected by Nehemiah looks nothing like any modern scholar's idea of the earliest authoritative books (Schorch 2007, 171-172; McDonald 1996, 106; Van Seters 2008, 236).¹⁰ The scrolls concerning the kings might be some version of 1 and 2 Kings, or 1 and 2 Chronicles, or both (McDonald 2007, 85; McDonald 1996, 106; Treballe Barrera 2002, 130; Evans 2002, 188).¹¹ It may even be broadly interpreted to include some version of the books of Samuel. However, it is a stretch to posit, as some scholars have, that they include also the books of Joshua and Judges (Evans 2002, 188).¹² Further, it is just as likely that royal annals included as a source in some of the aforementioned works, or an entirely unknown set of records are referred to here. Without knowledge of their content, it is difficult to make a decision.

The scrolls of prophets, or alternatively the scrolls concerning prophets, depending on whether the περὶ should be taken distributively, are rather amorphous. They could well be a body of writings that is limited to only those prophetic books present in our modern canons (McDonald 2007, 85).¹³ However, the account taken from the records of Jeremiah, in vv.1-11, suggests that at least the contents of these scrolls of prophets were somewhat different from any version of Jeremiah of which we are aware. They could be collections of oracles, or if indeed the περὶ does refer also to the prophets, they could be collections of legends about the life and activity of some of the prophets (Schorch 2007, 171).¹⁴ Again, if the records of Jeremiah mentioned earlier in the letter are any clue, then both stories and oracles seem to be placed side by side in these scrolls

¹⁰ Schorch, "Libraries", 171-172; Lee Martin McDonald, "The Integrity of the Biblical Canon in Light of Its Historical Development" *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996) 95-132, 106; Van Seters, "Origins", 236; and even Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, is forced to admit the collection of books here looks nothing like a canon.

¹¹ McDonald, *Biblical*, 85; Idem, "Integrity", 106; Treballe Barrera, "Tripartite", 130; Evans, "Scriptures", 188.

¹² E.g. Evans "Scriptures", 188.

¹³ So McDonald, *Biblical*, 85.

¹⁴ Schorch, "Libraries", 171.

of prophets. We should add that the indication in this list is that the later designation of the books of kings, inter alia, among the former prophets does not seem to be endorsed.

The [scrolls] of David essentially have three possible interpretations. They could be scrolls attributed to David as author (McDonald 2007, 85).¹⁵ They could be scrolls about David, with him as the main character (Schorch 2007, 171).¹⁶ Or, they could be scrolls presumed to be collected by, or important to David. In the first case, we know of separate traditions that attribute to David authorship of some collection of psalms. Whether this refers to all the later canonical psalms, only those currently attributed to David within that collection, or a much broader body of psalmic and hymnic literature, is unclear.¹⁷ Equally unclear is whether a collection of scrolls attributed to David might include other writings not passed down through tradition. There is also the possibility that it is shorthand for all the writings not in the law and prophets, but his cannot be proven. In the second case, books concerning David might include some version of 1-2 Samuel, or some Davidic sources used in these texts, or could refer to a broader body of literature about David and his dynasty, including e.g. the book of Ruth. In the third case, though there is no outside reference, it is not out of the question that an even earlier proto-library than those of Nehemiah and Judas could be referred to here, one collected by David. While some version of the first possibility is most likely when considering the testimony of outside sources, the others cannot be ruled out.

The letters of kings concerning votive offerings, referred to here are rather hard to pin down. Those who wish to push the canonical significance of this list suggest that these are documents that might be preserved in texts found in our modern canons, such as the letter of Artaxerxes found in the Ezra-Nehemiah corpus (Evans 2002, 188),¹⁸ but the truth is there is no way of telling what form these letters might take nor how many of them there were.

¹⁵ McDonald, *Biblical*, 85.

¹⁶ Schorch, "Libraries", 171.

¹⁷ 11QPs^a xxvii 2f.

¹⁸ Evans, "Scriptures", 188.

So, even taking an interpretatively liberal (but canonically conservative) account of the evidence, the contents of Nehemiah's library might include the books of Kings, Samuel, Chronicles, the entire prophetic corpus (though with different contents), and the book of psalms. A student of the canon might reasonably question what to make of the Pentateuch, the book of Job, Daniel, Proverbs, Qoheleth, Ruth, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the Song of Songs. Defenders of this canon might cry loudly that the law is indeed mentioned in this context, as Jeremiah gives the law to the deportees in 2Macc 2:2 (Trebolle Barrera 2002, 130; McDonald 1996, 106),¹⁹ and that Moses is also mentioned several times in this section. While this may be, 1) neither the books of the law, nor any title that could include them, appear within the list of books collected by Nehemiah. And 2) the law given by Jeremiah to the deportees seems to not be a physical item, but a set of instructions, as indicated by his command not to forget the commandments and his exhortation to keep the law close to their hearts. This argues rather strongly for the law not being included in Nehemiah's library. A further counter might come with the mention of the memoirs and records of Nehemiah, which might be two separate works or one collected work at least partially attributed to Nehemiah. Though this is not found in Nehemiah's library, it seems to be found in Judas', as indicated by its use as a source for the account of the festival of fire in 2Macc 1. We are willing to concede this text might be part of the library, but note that it is obviously very different from the texts which are preserved in the modern canons related to Nehemiah. With these two points noted, it remains clear that this collection would make a very odd canon or even proto-canon.

A second proof is that there is little to indicate in these verses, or in their broader context, that the scrolls in this list are the object of any veneration or have any authority. The presence of these texts in a collection suggests nothing more than that they were collected in a central place. Along these lines, it is important to note that the only texts cited as proof for the validity of the author's argument are the records of Jeremiah, and the records and memoirs of Nehemiah. The other texts are simply mentioned within Nehemiah's library. Further, though when discussing canon, contents are less important

¹⁹ Trebolle Barrera, "Origins", 130; and even though not a defender of the canon in these verses, McDonald, "Integrity", 106.

than titles, it should not go unnoticed that both the texts cited do not appear in versions of the stories of Jeremiah and Nehemiah available to us outside of this source. Moreover, even if Nehemiah and Jeremiah have some authority, it seems to only stem from their historical witness of the events about which they report.

The third proof against a canon or proto-canon is that the context shows it was possible, or even probable that the recipients of the ostensible letter did not have access to the books mentioned within the letter. The first clue is that the stories of Nehemiah and Jeremiah are recounted in full, and not simply referred to in a short citation. The second indication of this is that verse 15 specifically offers the texts found in Judas' collection to the Jews in Egypt, with the expectation that they might not have them (Lange 2007, 166).²⁰ It is important to note this verse makes an offer, and not an order, and further, may refer specifically to the proof texts from Jeremiah and Nehemiah used earlier in the letter. This could thus simply be a chance for the community to check the sources for the Jerusalemite and Judean argument.

The fourth proof is that, even if we were forced to admit that this library represents some sort of oddly-shaped proto-canon, its sphere of influence would appear to be very small. It is clear from the context of the alleged letter, wherein repeated requests are made to celebrate the purification of the temple, and a separate request is made to send couriers for the scrolls at the temple, that Jerusalem did not have much authority for the community in Egypt. The community there is neither commanded, nor threatened to celebrate the feast. Might it also be the case that Jerusalem's authority was equally lacking for Jewish communities elsewhere in the Diaspora? We know already of the temples in Leontopolis, Trans-Jordan, and Samaria, which is to say nothing of the non-temple communities along the Levantine coast, in the trade towns of the desert, and all those communities further afield. If Jerusalem and its proposed proto-canon might not be applicable for Egypt, it is equally likely to have been a novelty for Jews in other places. Moreover, without some authority granted to Jerusalem even in matters of festivals, it is hard to believe Jerusalem's library would dictate the collections of these

other communities. Of course this proof rests on the false letter still communicating some truth about the situation regarding inter-community relations.

The fifth and final proof against this being a proto-canon brings us back to the intent of the letter we mentioned earlier. The context of this letter indicates that the authors in Jerusalem are attempting to persuade the recipients in Egypt to celebrate a feast of purification of the temple related to the feast of booths and to a former celebration of the dedication of Nehemiah's temple (perhaps a one-time event). The stories cited as support for the celebration of this event concern the characters of Nehemiah, Solomon, Jeremiah, and Moses. The characters all seem to be mentioned in the records relating to Jeremiah and to Nehemiah. However, it is not necessarily the case that these texts form the extent of their library. It is possible that the texts mentioned as part of the library of Nehemiah are not the extensive list of texts, rather they might be the texts seen by the author as supportive of his arguments. This might explain the rather odd mention of the library in the first place, and the seemingly odd collection that makes up the library. If these texts are simply mentioned as part of the library because they offer support for the feast of dedication, then it is surely not a proto-canon that is listed here, but merely a list of useful texts pertaining to this proposal.

Concluding Suggestion

Despite our repeated insistence here that 2Macc 2:13-15 does not refer to a canon, proto-canon, or landmark event in the canonical process in the 2nd much less the 5th century, we do not see it as being entirely useless in the canon debate. This passage may preserve important evidence for one of the processes by which texts gained authority. That is, groups of Jews, by using certain stories and texts in order to persuade each other of certain practices, beliefs, and festivals, may have begun to cite whatever scrolls were in their possession and seemed to pertain to the discussion at hand. In turn, these communities may have used these texts in concert with others, and through this organic development, created a body of texts that were authoritative for such arguments, and consequently classified other texts as having no authority. From the authority applied to certain texts among several disparate communities, there is no doubt that religious significance would be granted. Though each separate sphere of influence might have

held some texts as important for them, that were not important for others, their lack of effectiveness in these inter-communal communications might have contributed to less copying of the texts, decreased status of the texts, and certainly less recognition of the text in the other spheres of influence throughout the Jewish world. This would doom them by the time conscious decisions were made concerning the canonicity of texts centuries later.

Thus 2Macc 2:13-15, and its context, might provide a valuable reminder that the process of canon formation is both democratic (in that it stems from the people and not the authorities) and evolutionary, being the result of centuries of communication concerning different issues for which texts acted as important proof.

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