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The Scope of the Old Testament Canon

R. CHRISTOPHER HEARD

When you go out to buy an English Bible in the United States at the dawn of the twenty-first century, you find yourself confronted with a bewildering range of options. Publishers target you with a broad range of specialized “study Bibles” or “devotional Bibles” that seek your purchase based on your life situation or demographic group. Even more basically—but perhaps not so often noticed by Protestant Bible buyers—you have to choose from three canonical configurations. Sometimes that choice is made for you by the vendor from whom you purchase your Bible, but well-informed Christians should want to make this choice themselves.

Any two English Bibles you might buy will have the same 27 New Testaments books, almost always in the same order as one another (making due allowance for subsets explicitly printed as such; for example, the gospel of Luke or John printed independently as an evangelistic tool). We can’t say the same for the remainder of the Bible. Publishers package the pre-Christian contents of Christian Bibles in not one, but *three* distinct forms. The form most familiar to readers of *Leaven*—most of whom worship and minister within the scope of the Stone-Campbell restoration movement—is undoubtedly the 39-book Protestant Old Testament. English Bibles intended primarily for Roman Catholic readers feature a 46-book Old Testament; a few of those books (Daniel, Esther) are longer than their namesakes in Protestant Old Testaments.

Other English Bibles try to “have it both ways” (and thus gain a wider market share) by printing the 39 books as “the Old Testament” and the other seven books (plus a few other materials) as “the Apocrypha.” And this overly simplistic description leaves aside Greek Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Bibles, which have yet different tables of Old Testament contents than these three variations. How should Christians—especially, for *Leaven* readers, restorationists in the Stone-Campbell tradition—negotiate this confusing terrain?

RESTORATIONISM AND THE BIBLICAL CANON

We in the Stone-Campbell tradition often identify “restoring the New Testament church” as one of our movement’s distinctive characteristics. By “New Testament church,” we do not mean any particular congregation mentioned in the New Testament, nor even an amalgam of them all, but rather a transhistorical church embodying the ideals propounded in the New Testament. For restorationists, then, the task of choosing an Old Testament canonical configuration (table of contents) would seem quite straightforward: we should use whichever Old Testament canon the New Testament endorses.

Unfortunately for restorationism, however, the New Testament does not come right out and endorse any particular Old Testament canon. This simple fact renders the “restoration plea” impossible to enact with regard to the Old Testament canon. There just isn’t any Old Testament canon—any list of pre-Christian scriptures to be taken over by Christians—there to restore.

No one can deny that the New Testament altogether lacks a list of which books should constitute the Old Testament. That much is noncontroversial. Nevertheless, some Christians have argued that the New

Testament contains sufficient information to allow confident inferences as to the canon of Old Testament scriptures the earliest Christians would have accepted. Before turning to these arguments, however, we should clarify a few basic terms and concepts.

BASIC TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Careful consideration of the issues related to the earliest Christian Old Testament canons requires scrupulous use of several key terms. The term “Old Testament” names pre-Christian Jewish writings affirmed by Christians as scripture. The term itself first appears (in this sense) in the writings of Irenaeus, dated to the late second century CE. It is not altogether anachronistic to speak of an Old Testament before this time, because even the very first Christians already affirmed certain Jewish writings as scripture. Nevertheless, we should remember that we have no evidence of Christians themselves referring to a set of scriptures as “the Old Testament” before about 170–180 CE.

The term “Hebrew Bible” is sometimes used as a synonym for “Old Testament,” but the two terms are not equivalent. Indeed, the term “Hebrew Bible” is itself not an entirely accurate designation of that to which it refers, since a few notable portions of the “Hebrew Bible” were written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. Jewish tradition prefers the term “Tanakh,” an acronym for the three subsections into which its 24 books are grouped: *Torah* (“Instruction”), *Nevi'im* (“Prophets”), and *Kethuvim* (“Writings”).

Some contemporary English Bibles categorize some of their contents as “the Apocrypha.” In this context, “Apocrypha” names those materials found in ancient Christian bound volumes of the Old Testament but not in the Tanakh.¹ (These bound volumes are called *codices* [singular *codex*], and are similar to books in our modern format, as distinct from the scrolls more popular in Judaism.) This use of the term “Apocrypha” is of relatively recent origin. When early Christian writers used the term “apocrypha,” they did not use it to refer to a specific collection of writings, as the term Apocrypha is commonly used in Bible publishing today. In early Christianity, apocrypha was a category term; not all early Christian writers meant the same thing by apocrypha, nor did they all agree on which literary works belonged in that category. No *collection* of writings corresponding to the modern Apocrypha existed in antiquity, although the writings themselves enjoyed wide circulation.

Indeed, all the documents that Christians now consider scripture originated and, at first, circulated independently (allowing for one or two possible two-volume works like Ezra–Nehemiah and Luke–Acts). Individual biblical books were written on scrolls or smaller papyrus or vellum rolls.² The Bible did not begin

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to circulate as a single “book” in the modern sense—that is, in the “codex” form of individual leaves of papyrus or vellum bound together between a pair of outer covers—until well into the fourth century CE. Prior to that time, codices could not hold more pages than would accommodate text about the length of the four gospels combined.

By the time that the Greek language and culture spread throughout the Mediterranean world in the wake of Alexander the Great’s conquests, the

Hebrew language had already fallen into disuse for everyday conversation. Even in Palestine, Aramaic was more commonly used than Hebrew (and Greek may have been as common as Aramaic, or even more so); outside of Palestine, Jews (like everyone else) commonly spoke Greek. This situation prompted the translation of a number of Hebrew documents, including those later constituting the Tanakh, into Greek. The most widely used ancient Greek translations of these documents (along with some other materials, now placed among the Apocrypha in Bibles using that term) are often collectively called “the Septuagint.” This usage of

the term is convenient but somewhat misleading. The term Septuagint derives from a tradition that 70 or 72 translators produced the translation of the Torah (Pentateuch) into Greek in the early third century BCE.

Translations of other Jewish scriptures came later, and not necessarily as part of one continuous project with the translation of the Torah (the widely varying literary qualities of the translations of various books make it hard to believe that the entire project was undertaken as a conscious attempt to translate a well-recognized coherent group of scriptures). Use of the term “the Septuagint,” then, must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the creation of the Septuagint was a long process of growth, a process in which the final product was probably not envisioned at the beginning.

Although the Septuagint forms of the books it contains are pre-Christian, our earliest complete (or very nearly so) Septuagint codices date from the fourth and fifth centuries CE and stem from Christian circles. In other words, the books of the Septuagint are Jewish in origin, but the Septuagint itself (i.e., as a collection) is of Christian origin. Sometimes, scholarly efforts to simplify this point leave the impression that a collection of scriptures, in Greek translation, circulated in pre-Christian Judaism, and that the earliest Christians adopted this Greek Bible as their Old Testament (because of the overwhelming dominance of the Greek language outside of Palestine). We cannot demonstrate historically, however, that any such collection existed before the third century CE, and we have no complete copies of such a collection predating the fourth century CE. Moreover, the very text (wording) of the Septuagint was not a fixed entity in early Christianity; the early Christian scholars Origen (third century CE) and Jerome (fourth century CE) seem to have known several of the Septuagintal books in at least three different versions.

The classic Septuagint codices—Alexandrinus, Sinaiticus, and Vaticanus—do not mirror each others’ tables of contents precisely, but they all resemble the contemporary Roman Catholic 46 book Old Testament canon very closely. For the sake of simplicity, questions about the Christian Old Testament canon are often reduced to a contest between the Septuagintal (Roman Catholic) canon and the Tanakh (Protestant) canon. As we shall see, however, this oversimplification does a disservice to our understanding of the earliest Christians’ adoption of Jewish scriptures.

NEW TESTAMENT CLUES TO AN OLD TESTAMENT CANON

We are now in a position to consider whether the New Testament contains sufficient information to allow confident inferences as to the canon of Old Testament scriptures the earliest Christians would have accepted. Here we must proceed with care, setting aside any false assumptions that may arise from the current form of printed Bibles or even the bound forms of Jewish and Christian Bibles from late antiquity or the medieval period. We would do well to keep Jacob Neusner’s oft-repeated axiom firmly in mind: “What we cannot show, we do not know.” With these caveats, let us examine the two most commonly invoked arguments for deriving an Old Testament canonical configuration from New Testament statements.

Alleged References to a Tripartite Canon

As already noted above, the Tanakh has a tripartite (three-part) structure: the law, the prophets, and the writings. Some readers have perceived certain New Testament phrases as evidence that Jesus and the New Testament writers knew this tripartite canon in the form known to us from later Judaism. If it could be shown that Jesus and the New Testament writers presupposed this form of the tripartite Hebrew canon, then restorationists would have a strong clue to Jesus’ own canonical practice, upon which we might base our choices between the variant Old Testament canons now in use.

Luke quotes the post-resurrection Jesus as referring to things written about him in “the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms” (Luke 24:4). Some readers argue that the term “the psalms” here does not refer to the book of Psalms alone, but to the entire writings section of the Tanakh. Proponents of this view point to the fact that the book of Psalms stands at the beginning of the writings in the major codices of the

Tanakh—the Aleppo Codex (tenth century CE) and the Leningrad Codex (eleventh century CE)—on which modern critical editions of the Hebrew Bible are based.

Accepting this proposal requires us to believe two things, however, which are very difficult to prove. First, to take “the psalms” in Luke 24:4 as an alternate name for the writings, we must conclude that a canonical division of the Tanakh could be referred to in antiquity by the name of its first book. No such usage can be demonstrated, however; the New Testament writers never refer to the Torah as “Genesis,” nor do they ever refer to the prophets as “Isaiah.” We are thus forced to conclude either that “the psalms” means just what it says—the book of Psalms—or that the usage here is quite exceptional.

Second, and more important, the argument assumes a canonical division (the writings) with a specific order, though the order of the writings is largely dependent on the codex form, which significantly postdates the lifetime of Jesus. During Jesus’ lifetime, the scriptures were written on scrolls, and the “order” of the scriptures outside the Torah was somewhat fluid. The book of Psalms does stand first in the writings in later *Sephardic* Jewish tradition, but in the *Ashkenazic* Jewish tradition, Chronicles stands first in the writings. The argument that Jesus alludes in Luke 24:4 to a tripartite Hebrew canon equivalent to the later Tanakh thus depends on a tendentious assumption about the term “the psalms” in this verse and an anachronistic and selective retrojection of later Jewish canonical ordering into the first century CE.³

The reference to martyrs from Abel to Zechariah (Matt 23:35; Luke 11:51) is also sometimes cited as evidence for a first-century CE Hebrew biblical canon identical to that of the later codices. Abel is, of course, killed near the beginning of the book of Genesis; the martyrdom (so to speak) of Zechariah son of Jehoiada (not to be confused with the prophet Zechariah) is narrated in 2 Chronicles 24. Some readers have taken the phrase “from Abel to Zechariah” to indicate that Jesus knew a biblical canon that began with Genesis and ended with Chronicles. Such an inference hangs by a fairly thin thread. We can take this phrase as firm evidence that Jesus knew the same biblical canon as that represented in the later codices only if we can show convincingly that Jesus selected Abel and Zechariah on the basis of a canonical decision. Insofar as the Jewish scriptures did not circulate in codices until very much later than Jesus’ lifetime, it would be very difficult to show that Jesus would have thought of the various scrolls that comprised the Jewish scriptures as having a specific canonical order (as distinct from a chronological, narrative order). Here too, the fact that Chronicles does not stand last uniformly in Jewish tradition recommends against too confident a retrojection of the later codex order into an early time period.

The majority of New Testament references to pre-Christian scriptures use the phrase “the law and the prophets,” or simply “the scriptures.” Synagogue practice at the time of Jesus seems to have been to read from the law and the prophets (cf. Acts 13:15); no other category of scriptures is mentioned. The reference in Luke 24:44 to “the law, the prophets, and the psalms” is exceptional rather than typical. The New Testament does not give us sufficient evidence for claiming that Jesus and the apostles knew the tripartite Jewish canon attested in later centuries.⁴

Quotations

In the absence of a clear New Testament list of pre-Christian scriptures, some Christians have supposed that a careful and thorough identification of the pre-Christian writings quoted as scripture in the New Testament would yield an indication of which pre-Christian writings the earliest Christians *received* as scripture. Often this statement appears as a negative criterion, with the claim advanced that the New Testament nowhere quotes from the Apocrypha. Yet the argument from quotation proves both too little and too much to be of substantial benefit in this discussion.

The argument from quotation proves too little in that it cannot alone establish positively that all 24 books of the later standardized Jewish canon (equivalent in content to the 39 books of the Protestant Old Testament canon) were esteemed as scripture by the New Testament writers. In fact, the New Testament

explicitly identifies as “scripture” only the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Kings, Isaiah, Micah, Zechariah, and Psalms.

Additionally, the New Testament writers use the formula “it is written”—presumably implying that the subsequent material is written in scripture—to introduce quotations from most of the other books found in the Protestant Old Testament—but not Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Ezra–Nehemiah, Esther, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Lamentations, Obadiah, Nahum, or Zephaniah. We are not in a position to say that because the *other* books of the later Jewish canon were quoted as scripture, that *these* were held to be scripture by those doing the quoting (except, probably, in the case of Obadiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah, since the “canonicity” of the Twelve Prophets was very well established in pre-Christian Judaism). To make that argument presupposes the existence of a well-defined canon, which is the very question at issue.

The argument from quotation proves too much in that the New Testament writers clearly did make significant use of materials that are not contained in the Jewish biblical canon or the Protestant Old Testament. Most notable is Jude’s prominent quotation of 1 Enoch 1:9 as a genuine prophecy, introduced with a phrase that sounds very much like a formula for introducing a scriptural quotation. Heb 11:35 seems to refer to the narrative in 2 Maccabees 6:18–7:42, and Heb 11:37 seems to draw upon a poorly known (to us) work called the Assumption of Isaiah. Indeed, Hebrews 11 as a whole seems to be patterned on Sirach 44–50. Readers familiar with the Wisdom of Solomon 13 can hardly overlook the debt that Paul’s discussion of paganism in Romans 1 owes the earlier book.

Moreover, there are a few New Testament quotations that are very clearly intended as scriptural citations, but which cannot be located in any source now known (Matt 2:23; John 7:38; 1 Cor 2:9; James 4:5). Paul even quotes (approvingly) the Greek writers Epimenides (Titus 1:12) and Menander (1 Cor 15:33). If we take quotations as our guide to discerning which writings the New Testament writers affirmed as scripture, our list will have to be rather longer than the 39-book Protestant Old Testament canon—and will have to include some sources that centuries of study have as yet failed to identify.

In sum, we must frankly admit that the New Testament itself provides relatively little guidance for Christians looking to fix the bounds of the Old Testament canon. Alleged references to a tripartite Jewish canon in the gospels are weak and, even if they do imply a tripartite canon, do not provide definitive information about the books assigned to each canonical division (especially the amorphous third division). The use of New Testament quotations to establish the range of pre-Christian writings accepted by Jesus and the New Testament writers as scripture is fraught with difficulties. We simply cannot identify the extent of the Old Testament canon solely by reference to the New Testament. The concept may be attractive, but the theory cannot be put into practice.

HISTORICAL CLUES TO EARLY CHRISTIAN OLD TESTAMENTS

Jewish Scriptures at the Birth of Christianity

Jesus was a first-century CE Palestinian Jew. So were his closest followers. The earliest Christians were Palestinian and diaspora Jews, and the Christianity described in the book of Acts had a strongly Jewish character. It is fairly reasonable to assume that the earliest Christians continued to use basically the same range of sacred writings that they had used before they came to believe that Jesus was the messiah. Thus, if the scope of Jewish scripture at the turn of the common era could be reliably described, restorationists might have a useful guide to the canon of the first-century church—not quite as good as having a list somewhere in the New Testament itself, but at least derived from those among whom Christianity was born and first flourished.

The testimony of Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian writing in the late first century CE, is often cited in this connection. In a polemical defense of Judaism against attacks made by a critic named Apion, Josephus writes that the Jews of his day had exactly 22 sacred books (*Against Apion* 1:37–43). A few other ancient and not-so-ancient sources also give 22 as the number of the Jewish sacred books. The number “22”

seems to be paradigmatic because it is based on the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. However, no ancient Jewish source that mentions a 22-book set of scriptures actually lists the names of those books. A number of early Christian leaders investigated this 22-book canon and compiled their own lists. The lists of Old Testament books drawn up by Melito of Sardis (late second century), Origen (early third century), Cyril of Jerusalem (mid-fourth century), Gregory of Nazianus (mid-fourth century), and the Council of Laodicea (mid-fourth century) all contain 22 books, but no two of these lists is identical.⁵ The fact that Christians in the second through fourth centuries could not establish with certainty the limits of the supposed 22-book Jewish canon strongly suggests that no such canon was in fact firmly established within Judaism itself.

Other ancient sources mention a 24-book canon of Jewish scripture. Fourth Ezra, a Jewish apocalyptic writing probably dating to the late first or early second century CE, refers to 24 sacred books for public consumption, and another 70 sacred books reserved for the wise. Fourth Ezra does not provide a list of the books in either category. A rabbinic tradition perhaps as early as the late first or second century CE, preserved in the later *Baba Bathra* (part of the Babylonian Talmud), lists the 24 books of the familiar Jewish canon (but not, in the third division, precisely the same order found in later manuscripts). Yet later rabbinic materials from the third through sixth centuries show continuing debate over the canonical status of certain books (Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, Esther, and Ezekiel).⁶

Thus, the early Jewish materials testify to both 22 and 24 as the number of books in the Hebrew canon but also to some degree of variety and dispute as to the list of books making up either canon. Modern researchers may find it tempting to “wave away” the difference between 22 and 24 by harmonizing the traditions of a 22-book Jewish canon with those of a 24-book Jewish canon. Such harmonization is usually attempted by starting with the *Baba Bathra* list and combining Judges with Ruth and Jeremiah with Lamentations to get the count down to 22. (Note that Protestants count the same materials as 39 by dividing the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra–Nehemiah into two each, and by counting each of the Twelve Prophets—that is, the “minor” prophets—as one book each). These attempts to make a 24-book canon the same as a 22-book canon are a little bizarre in that they must impose a Septuagint-type sequence of books (Ruth after Judges, and Lamentations after Jeremiah) on a Hebrew canon devoid of all other unique features of the Septuagint.

It is also worth noting that, during the reconstruction of Judaism after the Jewish revolt of 66–70 CE, Jewish leaders took great pains to distinguish themselves from Christians. The earliest churches had rapidly adopted the Septuagint forms of the Jewish scriptures as normative. In response, Jewish leaders strongly emphasized the Hebrew form of the text over against the Septuagint form. Moreover, Jews in this period

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produced new Greek translations of Jewish scriptures. It is thus clear that, to a significant degree, Jewish practices of scriptural transmission developed in explicit reaction against Christian practice. The same is likely true of Jewish canonical practice: in part, Jews affirmed, and restricted themselves to, the Hebrew Tanakh precisely because Christians tended to embrace a wider Greek canon.

Jewish canonical practice in the first and second centuries CE thus fails to provide much guidance for restorationists wishing to describe “the Old Testament of Jesus and the apostles” (so to speak). The sources testify to a core set of scriptural materials having great authority (the law and the prophets) and to a sense that there were other documents than these (the writings) that should enjoy similar status in the worshiping community. The sources also testify to a sense that this list of scriptures had, or should have, 22 or 24 entries, but specifying exactly what all 22 or 24 entries were is not possible with absolute certainty (again, the uncertainty attaches mostly to certain books in the third division of the Hebrew Bible, the writings).

Moreover, virtually all attempts to specify a first-century CE Jewish canon of scripture more precisely depend on sources from the second century CE and later, and thus stem from a time when Jewish attitudes toward scripture were in part shaped by reaction against Christian handling of scripture.

The Earliest Christian Old Testaments

Restorationists who want to draw up a definitive list of books Jesus and his apostles would have considered to be scripture are probably out of luck. Adding certain books (the law and the prophets) to the list is easy, but defining the exact limits of the list seems to be impossible given the available data. Neither the New Testament itself nor contemporary Jewish sources provide sufficient information. Therefore, restorationists might gravitate to nonbiblical sources of information about the earliest Christian practices, given that these earliest Christians were (at least theoretically) in the best position to know and imitate the practices of Jesus and the apostles. In fact, repetition of the apostles' teaching, and the establishment of a teacher's authority based on "apostolic pedigree," was prevalent enough in early Christianity that we may suppose the earliest Christians would have paid a great deal of attention to any apostolic teachings on the scope of the scriptures.

When one actually turns to examine the earliest Christian practice, however, what one finds is, as in the Jewish case, a fairly stable core of law and prophets plus additional writings whose categorization or non-categorization as "scripture" varies. Certain trends within early Christianity make it convenient to speak of "eastern churches" and "western churches." The eastern churches do seem to have tended toward a shorter canon more similar to that later represented by the traditional Hebrew text—but again, not uniformly. The Old Testament canon lists (we cannot speak of bound volumes until a bit later) found in the extant writings of or quotations from Melito of Sardis, Origen, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, Amphilochius, and the Council of Laodicea are very similar, but each differs from all of the others in some detail of inclusion/exclusion or sequencing.⁷

Melito mentions neither Esther nor Lamentations. Athanasius combines the books of Jeremiah, Baruch, Lamentations, and the Epistle of Jeremiah into one, and does not mention Esther. Cyril of Jerusalem's list is similar to Athanasius's but includes Esther and combines Judges with Ruth to keep the number at 22. Examples could be further multiplied (Epiphanius even gives three different lists in three different works). The variety in the western churches was even wider, ranging from Jerome's two lists—which, though not identical to each other, are both very similar to the 24 book list in *Baba Bathra* and to contemporary Protestant Old Testaments—to Augustine's, which is very similar to contemporary Roman Catholic Old Testaments. The development of codices capable of embracing both Old and New Testaments within a single pair of covers was a marvelous early Christian technological innovation. The codices that the early Christians produced using this new technology gave us "the Septuagint" as a collection, that is, the 46-book Old Testament canon.

That canon remained the *de facto* norm for Christians until the fifteenth century, when Martin Luther and other first-generation Reformers reopened the question on a large scale. Luther's goals of curbing some abuses in the Catholicism of his day could be served in part, he discerned, if his contemporaries could not appeal to certain passages. Second Maccabees 12:43–45, for example, seemed to provide scriptural support for the doctrine of purgatory and the practice of holding "masses for the dead," which early Reformers opposed. The Reformers could not, however, selectively jettison just those books that taught doctrines they found objectionable.

Rather, they had to find some clear and arguable basis for "decanonizing" certain books. The necessary principle was found in the distinction between the books accepted as canonical in Judaism—the Tanakh—and the Jewish writings outside the Tanakh that had also been considered scriptural in Christianity for the previous millennium—the Apocrypha. Protestants insisted on a canon with the contents of the Tanakh (but with the order of the Septuagint, a decision not without significant interpretive consequences), while the

Council of Trent reaffirmed the longer Septuagintal canon for Roman Catholics.⁸ The competition between “Catholic Bibles” and “Protestant Bibles,” which would later occupy much attention in North Atlantic Christianity (right down to the very essay you are now reading), was thus introduced.

WHAT THEN SHALL WE READ?

In the Stone-Campbell tradition, restorationism has always gone hand-in-hand with biblicism, or the claim to appeal to the Bible as the only standard for Christian faith and practice. Because of this linkage between restorationism and biblicism, heirs of the Stone-Campbell heritage may find the discussion above somewhat unnerving. Of what can we be certain regarding the earliest Christians’ canonical practice with regard to Jewish scriptures—exempting those Christians, judged heretical by the church at large, who rejected Jewish scriptures altogether?

First, there was unanimous reception of the written Torah (the Pentateuch) as scripture in all varieties of first-century Judaism and among all orthodox first- and second-century Christians. No Jew or orthodox Christian of the first or second centuries CE ever questioned the “canonicity” (a slightly anachronistic, but serviceable, term in this context) of Genesis through Deuteronomy.

Second, there was unanimous reception as scripture of at least the latter prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Prophets) and most likely the former prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) as well in Pharisaic and Essene Judaism and earliest Christianity (but not among the Samaritans or, possibly, the Sadducees).

Third, there was near-unanimous, if not quite unanimous, reception as scripture by Pharisaic Judaism, Essene Judaism, and early Christianity of certain books among the writings. The books of Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Daniel, and probably Ruth and Chronicles were very widely accorded scriptural status. However, the category “writings” had not yet received a specific name in widespread use, and no specific list of books in this category commanded assent (it is unlikely that any such list was even attempted among first-century Jews). Moreover, there was lingering dispute over the “canonicity” of some of the books of the writings, most prominently Ecclesiastes, Esther, and the Song of Songs.

Fourth, there was widespread use in early synagogues and churches of books that were not later included among the writings in the Jewish canon. Wisdom literature such as the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon were particularly popular. Moreover, the Greek forms of the books of Esther, Daniel, and Jeremiah enjoyed considerable popularity and probably more widespread circulation than their Hebrew and Aramaic counterparts.

Fifth, there appears to have been a significant constriction of the Jewish canon as a result of the growing differentiation between Jews and Christians beginning in the late first century CE. Christian preference for the Greek translations of the Jewish scriptures may have been quite influential in leading Jewish leaders to restrict their canon to books known in Hebrew and Aramaic, rejecting those composed or primarily circulating in Greek.

Sixth, there were two broad tendencies in the early churches’ Old Testament canonical practice. The western churches (those in Greece, Italy, and other parts of Europe and North Africa) tended to embrace a larger set of scriptures (what Protestants nowadays call the Old Testament and the Apocrypha), while the eastern churches (those in Asia Minor and Syria-Palestine) tended to try to make their Old Testament conform to Jewish canonical practice. However, the variety still evident in fourth-century Christian Old Testament canon lists within each of these broad tendencies demonstrates that the “edges” of the canon were still “blurry” for Jews and Christians even at that relatively late date.

In sum, the heart of the Protestant Old Testament canon—the Pentateuch, the former and latter prophets, and the Psalms—was never in doubt in early Judaism and Christianity. At the same time, the scriptural status of a few books now found in Jewish Bibles and Protestant Old Testaments occasioned no little dispute in early Judaism and (to a lesser and perhaps derivative extent) Christianity. Both Jews and Christians also

received as scripture books that are not now found in Jewish Bibles or Protestant Old Testaments, but which are represented in Catholic Old Testaments or in some Bibles in the category, Apocrypha. Judaism eventually restricted its canon in a manner that excluded these books. Christians continued to diverge on their use.

Because there is no clear New Testament indication of precisely which pre-Christian Jewish scriptures should be brought over into Christianity, restorationists are drawn toward the practice of the first- through fourth-century churches (and it is the later churches who actually engaged in the relevant discussions and began to make canon lists) to discover the scope and limits of their Old Testaments. Yet our best evidence testifies to a significant variety of Old Testament canon lists among early Christians. Given the available data, we are forced to conclude that those who confine themselves to the shorter 39-book "Protestant" canon and those who embrace the longer 46-book "Catholic" canon are equally "restorationist" in their canonical practice. So, for that matter, are those who affirm the "Protestant" canon minus Esther, or the "Protestant" canon plus Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah, or the "Protestant" canon with the longer forms of Esther and Daniel, or the "Catholic" canon minus Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.

There simply never was a single Old Testament canon in Christian antiquity that restorationists might now "restore." Virtually all Christians agreed that their scriptures included the books we know now as Genesis through 2 Kings along with 1–2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah; the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Twelve Prophets; and the books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Job. The book of Jeremiah also belonged to this group, though the major subdivisions/appendices of the book (that is, whether it should carry along with it the Letter of Jeremiah and the books of Baruch and Lamentations) were fluid. Early Christians varied considerably on how many books beyond this stable core they affirmed as scripture.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Some modern writers use the term "Septuagintal plus" for these materials.
- 2 Neil Lightfoot offers a helpful look at the physical forms of ancient "books" and the materials used in making them, in *How We Got the Bible* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 13–22.
- 3 Unfortunately, Lightfoot follows this very course in *How We Got the Bible*, 106–107.
- 4 In fact, John Barton cautions against thinking that even "the prophets" constituted a fixed list during the first century CE, in *How the Bible Came to Be* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 77.
- 5 For synopses of the work of Melito, Origen, Cyril, and so on with regard to the making of canon lists, see F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 68–97; and Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* revised and expanded ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 108–114, 268–273.
- 6 In some circles, much has been made of a supposed rabbinic "council" at Jamnia that "closed" the biblical canon. That the scriptural status of some books (such as Ecclesiastes and Esther) was discussed by rabbis at Jamnia is almost certain; that the Jamnia "council" made an authoritative decision about the Jewish canon is quite unlikely, given the persistence of such discussions 200–400 years after the rabbinical academy's sessions at Jamnia. For more on Jamnia, see Bruce, 34–36; McDonald, 49–50; and Jack P. Lewis, "What Do We Mean by Jabneh?" *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32 (1964): 125–132.
- 7 See the charts conveniently assembled by McDonald, 268–273.
- 8 Thus, Lightfoot is quite incorrect to write that "the Apocrypha would never have posed a serious problem were it not for the usurped power of Rome over Scripture" (122). It was Luther and other reformers, not the Roman Catholic Church, who departed from centuries of Christian canonical practice. See Barton, 80–81 for a more sober historical judgment.