

The Canon of the Old Testament

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Abstract

After defining the concept of canon, the article provides a survey of early witnesses to the Old Testament canon (Jesus and early Jewish and Christian texts) that shows a broad consensus about the numbers of books to be included in the Old Testament. The rabbinic discussions at Jamnia are not so much the establishment of the canon as they are the acknowledgment of its reality. The principle to establish the canon is more internal (the structure of its authority and the notion of prophecy). Protestants together with Jews, in contrast to Catholics, do not accept the Old Testament Apocrypha as canonical. (These, written between the Old and New Testaments, are briefly reviewed.)

Sometimes it is reasonably asked, Who was responsible for setting up the criteria that were used to determine which books, or even how many books, should be included in what we now call the “canon,” or the official and authorized set of books, in the Old Testament? Was a special Jewish group of rabbis charged with this task, and did such a group set up the standards and the rules as to which books should be accepted as part of such an identified collection? Or were these books progressively recognized by the generations in which they appeared as part of divine revelation, perhaps under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the work of a stream, or chain, of true prophets commissioned by God over the years?

I. *The Concept of a Canon*

The term *canon* has become a standard designation for those titles that were and still are accepted as the authoritative books of the Old and New Testaments. The word “canon” comes from the Hebrew word *qaneh*, meaning a reed or stalk (1 Kgs 14:15; Job 40:21), which was used to measure things. The Greeks adopted the word into their language as *kanon*, which also meant a measuring rod, but with a slightly broader sense of a rule, standard, or guideline.

It should also be noted before we go too far into this discussion that the designation “Old Testament” is itself an anachronistic term that was not used internally within the first thirty-nine books as the way to refer to the complete set of books that appeared first in the order of books in the Bible. Some say it was the Alexandrian church father Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254 AD) who began to use the term canon to refer to the church’s “rule of faith.” Nevertheless, it became an ecclesiastical convention that now dictates our continued use of the term Old Testament. Others more correctly point to Bishop Athanasius (AD 296–373) as the one who first used the word canon in a letter he circulated around AD 367, but the concept may already have been in vogue by that time. Originally, the Jewish population referred to this collection of books with such designations as “the Scriptures,” “the Writings,” “the Law and the Prophets,” “Moses and all the Prophets,” or “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and Psalms.”¹ The Jewish rabbis, however, also spoke of these books as those that “defile the hands.” These, then, were the books in our canon that were esteemed to be holier than all other books and the ones that represented the words of God.

At other times, verbal formulas were employed, such as “God said,” “Scripture says,” “Isaiah says,” or “Moses wrote” to indicate the superior status of their content and the divine authority these books possessed. These designations became the proper way to appeal to the divine authority these books contained as well as the basis and ultimate source of their written material. The prophets were seen as “men of the Spirit” (Hos 9:7; 1 Cor 14:37), just as the Holy Spirit was seen as the “Spirit of prophecy” (Acts 2:17). From the perspective of the later testament (i.e., the New Testament), they saw the books of the earlier and emerging testament precisely in just this way:

¹ For Scripture references to these terms, see E. Earle Ellis, “The Old Testament in the Early Church,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 653, nn. 4–8.

All Scripture [which at that time included only the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament] is inspired by God [or “God-breathed”] and is profitable[useful] for teaching, rebuking, correcting in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16–17)

No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man but, being carried along by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God. (2 Pet 1:21)

If it is asked whether all prophetic words were included in the holy Scriptures, the answer seems to be no, for in 1 Samuel 10:10, King Saul joined a procession of prophets and soon he too prophesied. But there does not appear to be any record of what they said on this occasion in the Scripture.

There were also a number of books no longer known or available to us mentioned in the historical books of the Old Testament. For example, there is “the Book of Jasher” (Josh 10:13), “the Book of the Wars of the LORD” (Num 21:14), “the Book of the Acts of Solomon” (1 Kgs 11:41), “the book of the genealogy” (Neh 7:5), along with 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs by Solomon (1 Kgs 4:32), of which we seem to possess only a small fraction!

II. *First-Century Witness to the Canon*

1. *Jesus of Nazareth*

In Luke 11:50–51a, Jesus spoke of the range of the earlier canon by referring to all the blood that was shed from the foundation of the world, specifically, the blood of Abel shed by Cain, who were both Adam and Eve’s sons (Gen 4:8), until the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the house of God (2 Chr 24:20–22). When Jesus used this summary, he covered the complete corpus of the Old Testament’s thirty-nine books, for the first murder was in the book of Genesis and the last murder was in the book that appears last in the book of Chronicles in the Hebrew order of the books of the Old Testament. The reference to “Zechariah” probably was a reference to the son of Jehoiada, who was stoned to death in the court of Yahweh’s sanctuary because he spoke by God’s Spirit as he rebuked the king and the people of Judah for transgressing the commandment of the Lord. Thus, then, Jesus was saying “from the first murder in the Bible until the last [murder]” mentioned in the set of books now called the Old Testament. This statement showed the breadth and scope of his approval of the canon of those thirty-nine books; it would be like saying today (to use our current order of the books of the Old Testament) “everything from Genesis to Malachi.”

Another designation for the extent of the Old Testament canon was “the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.” The one place that may reflect this threefold division (here referred to as “the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms”) of the older testament is found in Luke 24:44. On the first Easter Sunday, our Lord suddenly joined the two headed for the town of Emmaus. There he reminded them that “everything written of [him] in the law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” In this instance, the word “Psalms” denoted, in addition to the obvious contents of the Psalms, the contents of the whole third division—the Writings, of which the book of Psalms was the first book—and thus was used in this case to stand for the entire collection of Writings.

2. *Flavius Josephus*

Both Jewish and Christian writers gave early witness to the same canon of books. Usually, the name of the Jewish-turncoat-historian named Flavius Josephus (ca. AD 37 to ca. 100) is mentioned first in the study of the canon, for he is said to be the earliest witness to the same. This citation from Josephus is of a response Josephus made in a debate with the anti-Semite Apion:

We do not have myriads of inconsistent books, conflicting with each other. Our books, those which are justly accredited, are but two and twenty, and contain the record of all time.

Of these, five are the books of Moses, comprising the laws and the traditional history from the birth of man down to the death of the lawgiver. This period falls a little short of three thousand years. From the death of Moses until Artaxerxes, who succeeded Xerxes as King of Persia, the prophets [who were] subsequent to Moses wrote the history of events of their own times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.²

Josephus’s count of twenty-two books (5 + 13 + 4) is equal to our present thirty-nine (5 + 30 + 4), for they may be tallied up according to this way of counting in that era:

² Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.8.38–41 (LCL).

The Five Books of Moses	Prophets (Thirteen Books)	Four Hymns
1. Genesis	1. Joshua	1. Psalms
2. Exodus	2. Judges-Ruth	2. Proverbs
3. Leviticus	3. 1 and 2 Samuel	3. Song of Solomon
4. Numbers	4. 1 and 2 Kings	4. Ecclesiastes
5. Deuteronomy	5. Isaiah	
	6. Jeremiah-Lamentations	
	7. Ezekiel	
	8. Twelve Minor Prophets	
	9. Daniel	
	10. Job	
	11. 1 and 2 Chronicles	
	12. Ezra-Nehemiah	
	13. Esther	
Five books	Thirty books	Four books = Thirty-nine books

3. Philo of Alexandria

Philo (ca. 20 BC–ca. AD 50) is a second Jewish witness to the canon. While he is less specific, he is nevertheless in essential agreement with Josephus. Philo was a Hellenized Jewish thinker who tried to reconcile Greek philosophy with biblical thought. This is what he said of the books of Moses:

[The Jews] have not altered even a single word of what had been written by him [who gave them their laws] but would rather endure to die the thousand times than yield to any persuasion contrary to his laws and customs.³

4. The Wisdom of Ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus

A third early witness would be the Wisdom of Ben Sira, for he may be cited as another witness besides Jesus (in Luke 24:44, “the law of Moses, and the Prophets, and Psalms”) to a tripartite division of the Old Testament. In his prologue to a work in Hebrew under his own name (ca. 132 BC), he wrote,

³ A hyperbolic statement found in a fragment of Philo’s *Hypothetica* 6:9, but preserved in Eusebius’s *Preparation for the Gospel* 8:6–7, 11. While it exaggerates, it is nevertheless a witness to the sanctity accorded to the Scriptures.

“My grandfather Jesus [devoted himself] to the law and the prophets and the other ancestral books.”⁴

Ben Sira emigrated from Palestine to Alexandria, Egypt in 132 BC, where he translated his grandfather’s book, called *Sirach* or *Ecclesiasticus*, from Hebrew into Greek. In the prologue to that book, he depicted his grandfather as a student of “the law and the prophets and the other books of our fathers.”

III. *Second- and Third-Century Witnesses to the Canon*

1. *Melito, Bishop of Sardis*

Melito (died ca. AD 190) answered an inquiry concerning the “number” and “order of the old books,” and thus he wrote the following around AD 170:

When I came to the east and reached the place where these things were preached and done, and learnt accurately the books of the Old Testament, I set down the facts These are their names: five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four of the Kingdoms, two books of Chronicles, the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon and his Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Job, the prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Twelve [Minor Prophets] in a single book, Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra.⁵

In light of subsequent lists, this listing of books includes Samuel within Kings, Lamentations within Jeremiah, and an identification of Ezra-Nehemiah as Ezra.

Thus, apart from Esther, Melito’s enumeration included the same listing of books as those we have today as the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament.

2. *Tractate Baba Bathra*

This tradition comes from the Jewish Babylonian Talmud. It read,

Our rabbis taught that the order of the Prophets is Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, the twelve (Minor Prophets). ... The order of the Hagiographa is Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Chronicles.⁶

There was some variation in the order or the sequence of the books, but the total number of books accords well with our present canon of the Old Testament. In this listing of the books, combination gave a total of twenty-four

⁴ Prologue to the Wisdom of Ben Sira.

⁵ Quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.26.12–13 (Lake, LCL).

⁶ As quoted in Ellis, “Old Testament Canon,” 660. The Jewish Talmuds seem to have originated in the time period before AD 200.

books: five for the Pentateuch, eight for the Prophets, and eleven for the Writings—or, as the Hebrew has it, the Ketuvim (“Writings”).

IV. *The Discussion at Jamnia*

Following the collapse of the Jewish commonwealth in AD 70 at the hands of the Roman army, the rabbis set up headquarters at Jamnia or Jabneh in western Judea, just south of Tel Aviv and Joppa, under the leadership of Yohanan ben Zakkai. In their view, Jewish life had to be adapted to new situations, especially since the temple had been destroyed and its services discontinued.

One of the discussions these leaders took up was which books of the Jewish people “defiled the hands”—a technical expression that denoted those books that were the product of divine inspiration. One had to wash one’s hands before and after handling the Scriptures, a practice that kept them from handling the Bible casually or in a haphazard way.

In more recent times, the Roman Catholic Church has accepted seven additional books at the Council of Trent (AD 1546), including Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees, treating them as deuterocanonical, that is, with a secondary status in the churches. This church also accepted as part of Scripture additions to the book of Esther, additions to Daniel, and the letter of Jeremiah. The Eastern Orthodox Church also included in addition to the above list, Psalm 151, as well as 3 and 4 Maccabees, but the AD 1548 Council of Trent rejected the apocryphal books of 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh. However, the same thirty-nine books of the Old Testament regarded as canonical by Protestants were also received as authoritative and canonical by the Roman Catholic Church.

One of the most popular pieces of misinformation frequently repeated among a good number of scholars was that the Council of Jamnia, held in AD 90, took a vote on which books should be included in the Old Testament canon. It is true, of course, that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, who escaped the siege of Jerusalem, is supposed to have asked the Roman general for permission to establish a school of Jamnia/Jabneh. However, though this school did not label itself (or even grant to itself the authority usually held) as the Sanhedrin or even a council, it did begin to exercise some of the legal functions as the great law court in Jerusalem had. But it is wrong to say that Jamnia shaped the content of the Old Testament canon; such an incorrect thesis has three flaws in it: none of the deliberations of this discussion group had binding authority; only the book of Ecclesiastes and the Song of

Solomon were discussed; and only the meaning or interpretation of these two books was discussed, not their canonical status. Jack Lewis, who investigated this matter as part of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago, concluded,

It would appear that the frequently made assertion that a binding decision was made at Jabneh covering all Scripture is conjectural at best.⁷

Sid Leiman came to the same conclusion:

The widespread view that the council of Jamnia closed the Biblical canon, or that it canonized any books at all, is not supported by the evidence, and need no longer be seriously maintained.⁸

It would appear that the Hebrew canon had already been recognized before AD 100 and was fully in use.

V. A Recognized Succession of Writing Prophets

My teacher Laird Harris⁹ introduced me to the concept of a chain of verses, or one of passing of the mantle of canonical status of any book from one prophet to another, especially in 2 Chronicles. Here we are provided with the best claims and evidences for the canonicity in the Old Testament, especially during the times of the kings of Israel and Judah.

The writing of the Old Testament, following the claim of Mosaic authorship for the Torah, was under God's prompting (Exod 17:14; 24:4–7; 34:27). Moses, the father in the work of the prophets, strikes us as being of particular interest. But then, just as Moses (Deut 31:26) and Joshua (Josh 24:26) had done, so likewise Samuel, perhaps the first in the line of the prophets, wrote his book and "laid it out before the LORD" (1 Sam 10:25). What seems to follow, then, especially in the books of Chronicles, is a chain of references by a series of prophets that gives us a virtually continuous history of the Israelite kings, particularly those of Judah; these successive prophets sort of passed the torch of divine authority from one to the next.

⁷ Jack P. Lewis, "What Do We Mean by Jabneh?," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 32 (1964): 125–30.

⁸ Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1976), 124.

⁹ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible: An Historical and Exegetical Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), esp. 166–79.

For example, 1 Chronicles 29:29 indicates that the history of David's life and reign was recorded by the prophets Samuel, Nathan, and Gad. Likewise, in 2 Chronicles 9:29, the history of David's son Solomon was recorded by the prophets Nathan, Ahijah, and Iddo. The story continued with Solomon's son Rehoboam in 2 Chronicles 12:15, which was written by the prophets Shemaiah and Iddo. After that, the history of Abijah (2 Chr 13:22) was added. The reign of Jehoshaphat was recorded by Jehu the prophet, son of Hanani (2 Chr 20:34). King Hezekiah's life was covered by Isaiah the prophet (2 Chr 32:22), but King Manasseh's reign was recorded by an unnamed "seer" (2 Chr 33:19). Additional records of the other kings were recorded in the "book of the kings of Israel and Judah" (2 Chr 35:27).

VI. The Appearance of Extra-Biblical Literature

Christians refer to the late Second Temple period as the intertestamental period. It stretched for some four hundred years between Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, until the appearance of the New Testament in the middle of the first Christian century. Some refer to these as the "silent years," yet they were anything but silent. True, Scripture for the moment ceased, but in its place came an avalanche of writings.

During this time, Judah was under the control of the Persians and almost fifty thousand Jewish people were released from Persian control to return to Jerusalem to rebuild it. In the meantime, however, another change had taken place, Alexander the Great, who had conquered Persia just before his death in 323 BC, introduced Hellenism into the cultural and political stream of what had been Jewish culture in the land of Israel. This development led to severe persecution of the Jews, which in turn triggered a revolt by the Maccabees that overthrew the Greek (Seleucid) control of Israel beginning in 166 BC. But the Maccabean era ended in 63 BC as the Roman general Pompey entered Jerusalem and placed the country under Roman rule. The First Jewish Revolt (AD 66–73) ended with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple.

During this time of political and military upheaval and disarray (185 BC to AD 100), an enormous amount of Jewish literature was produced. This literature attempted to answer such questions as, Had the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob failed? What was going to happen to Israel's continued occupation of the land? Was God going to remain faithful to his promises? What was the future for the nation Israel?

This literature is called the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature. The Old Testament Apocryphal (Greek, "concealed, hidden" things) books

(not to be confused with the New Testament Apocrypha) contains fourteen Jewish documents written mostly in Hebrew or Aramaic. Some examples include 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Baruch, Wisdom of Solomon, and the Prayer of Azariah.

The Hebrew Bible did not include these books, but they did appear in the final form of the Greek and Latin versions of the Scriptures, the Septuagint and the Vulgate respectively. Given the dominance of the Septuagint in the Eastern Church and the Vulgate as the standard translation in the Western Church for some 1,000 years, the presence of these books was rarely questioned.

The situation with the Pseudepigrapha, meaning “falsely titled,” was somewhat different. It included a collection of approximately sixty-five documents composed between 250 BC and AD 200. Each book was written under a pseudonym (often a proper name from the canonical Hebrew Bible) in order to gain some credibility for the work! This literature can be grouped into four genres: legendary, as for example, the Book of Jubilees and the Testament of Twelve Patriarchs; apocalyptic, as seen in Enoch and Baruch; poetical, including the Psalms of Solomon; and didactic, including the Magical Book of Moses. Neither the Old nor New Testaments refers explicitly to the apocryphal or pseudepigraphic books. The single allusion that some point to in Jude 14–15 does come from the book of Enoch 1:9. That citation reads, “Enoch the seventh from Adam” and may only be a historical reference to the biblical Enoch in Genesis 5:18–24. However, even if it is an allusion to the pseudepigrapha, it does not follow that Jude viewed that source as inspired, just as the apostle Paul’s citations of the poet Epimenides in Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12 did not imply that this source possessed divine authority or canonical status.

VII. *The Determining Principle of the Old Testament Canon*

Even though there is clear evidence for a fully developed canon already in the second century BC, there is no early evidence outside the books themselves for the origin of the canon. The canon of thirty-nine books was approved by our Lord and the apostles, which is in itself quite a high commendation, but the question as to what the principles in antiquity were for including certain books and excluding others is a much more difficult question.

We know, for example, of a fairly extensive library of books from ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources, as well as a vast literature from the intertestamental era, but none of this literature was included in either of the

biblical canons. Some hoped that part of the task of canonization had been effected by an ecclesiastical council or even the so-called Jewish Council at Jamnia in AD 90. However, as we have seen, such an appeal to a “council” at Jamnia is without any evidence, and none of the early Christian councils took up the matter or provided us with a decision or criteria that could have been used.

The closest to placing this question before the Jewish men of the Great Synagogue is the tractate entitled *Pirke Aboth*, “Sayings of the Fathers.” This tractate did not result from a Jewish council but a conversation among a great generation of rabbis who followed the tradition of the scribe Ezra. These rabbis represented a chain of tradition, perhaps going back all the way to the seventy elders who assisted Moses. What these rabbis attempted was to distinguish between what was authoritative and what was merely advisory.

The key to what was regarded as authoritative, however, was more dependent on who wrote these books and what claim they made for what they wrote. The men who were called by God were also those who could pass the five tests for a prophet (Deut 18:15–27 and 13:1–11) and the men who spoke the word of the Lord. For example, the prophet Jeremiah wrote in just these same terms, for he announced, “What the LORD says, that will I speak” (Jer 26 and 28). The five tests for a prophet were these: he must be Jewish (i.e., “from your own brethren” [Deut 18:15c, 18b]), he had to “speak in my name” (i.e., in the name of the Lord [vv. 19–20]), his near prophetic words had to come to pass and be fulfilled (v. 22), he had to announce signs and wonders (i.e., miracles [Deut 13:1–3]), and his words had to agree and to be in accord with what had been taught and predicted earlier in Scripture (vv. 6–11).

VIII. *The Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical Books*

The Roman Catholic Church since the days of the Council of Trent in AD 1546 has continued to receive the following additional books as deuterocanonical: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach or Ben Sirach), Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees, as well as some additions to the canonical books of Esther and Daniel. Each of these may briefly be investigated before we conclude.

TOBIT is a novella, a literary form that is shorter than a novel, having a compact style and plot. It is set in the days immediately following the deportation of the ten northern tribes of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 BC. The novella begins with Tobit’s acts of charity, especially his burying Jews who had been executed or murdered by the Assyrians. When the Assyrians

learned what he was doing, they seized his property and left him and his family destitute. Tobit then became blind, which forced his wife and son Tobias to support him. If Tobit were going to survive this crisis, he needed to retrieve some money his father had entrusted to him in the city of Ecbatana in Persia, so he commissioned Tobias to make the journey. As Tobias went along, he met with a family that had a daughter named Sarah, who has been plagued by the acts of the demon Asmodeus. This demon had killed seven of her bridegrooms on their wedding nights. An angel, then, was sent to help Sarah as he brought Sarah and Tobias together. The angel Raphael accompanied Tobias, who now went in disguise, to an old man named Azariah, who advised him how to defeat the demon. This defeat would be accomplished by using the odor of a liver and the heart of a fish. Raphael also cured Tobit's blindness, noting his many former deeds of charity. The story ends well, as Jews of the diaspora are told to trust God and pray to God when in danger.

JUDITH is a short story about the heroic actions of a Jewish widow named Judith, who is described in glowing terms as being pious and righteous. This story is full of historical confusions (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar is said to be king over the Assyrians). Judith can act quite coolly in beheading the enemy in order to save her people, and she often lies and murders to save her people. This story was very popular with the Jews during the Hellenistic period.

WISDOM OF SOLOMON is a collection of wisdom sayings and admonitions coming from the Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt, sometime between 30 BC and AD 50.

SIRACH or ECCLESIASTICUS was written by Jesu Ben Sira, a teacher in Jerusalem from 200–180 BC, and he completed his book just before the Maccabean revolt in 168–142 BC. Even though the book is rather jumbled and disjointed, he does frequently emphasize “right speech” and “famous men.” In this time of turmoil over the invading Hellenistic culture, he urged “honorable” action and avoidance of shameful acts.

BARUCH is not the same man who was the prophet Jeremiah's secretary. The book has three unconnected poems: a prose prayer, a wisdom poem, and a poem of consolation.

THE LETTER OF JEREMIAH, using the epistolary form so prevalent in the New Testament, purports to being addressed to the exiles in Babylon. Its principal goal is to warn exiles not to worship foreign gods. This letter has ten warnings against idolatry.

FIRST and SECOND MACCABEES are most useful in reconstructing the history of the Hellenistic period. The tension between the Greeks and Jews started when Antiochus Epiphanes constructed an altar to the Greek god

Zeus and placed it in the temple in Jerusalem, making it the “abomination that makes desolate” (cf. Mark 13:14). This event sparked a revolt led by the priest Mattathias, which began in the village of Modein, northwest of Jerusalem. Mattathias killed the first Jew at Modein who dared to sacrifice to an idol and then led his five sons into the hill country to wage a guerrilla war on the Greek Seleucids. By 165 BC, Mattathias’s son, Judas, had taken over as head and was named the Maccabee (meaning “the hammer”). Judas recaptured the Jerusalem temple in 164 BC. The rededication of the Temple is still remembered today as the feast of Hanukkah.

FIRST ESDRAS is composed of a selection of parallel passages from Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, but taken from a Greek work that has at many points a different version of the biblical material. One unique feature in this book is a debate between three “bodyguards” in chapters 3–4 over the relative strength of wine, kings, and women.

SECOND ESDRAS is the only book in the Apocrypha that is an apocalypse with symbolic visions and revelations concerning the end of time.

THE PRAYER OF MANASSEH is a penitential prayer based on 2 Chronicles 33:10–17 that provides the setting for King Manasseh’s restoration to the throne of Judah.

The ADDITIONS TO DANIEL include the prayer of Azariah and the song of the three Jews. These two pieces are usually inserted between Daniel 3:23 and 3:24 as part of the story about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. The twenty-two verses of the prayer of Azariah constitute a national lament very much like Psalm 44. There is a detailed description of the furnace and its fuel. It finishes with a song of thanksgiving to God for his deliverance.

SUSANNA is found in the Greek version of the book of Daniel as the thirteenth chapter of Daniel. Susanna concerns the false accusation of a beautiful married woman who arouses the sexual desires of two of Israel’s elders who serve as judges in the exilic community of Babylon. They propose that she give herself to them or they will denounce her as an adulteress. Instead, she cries out, and Daniel appears as a fair judge who separates the two judges and sees in their contradictory witness that they are lying and therefore guilty. Absolved, Susanna and her husband give thanks to God for raising such men as Daniel.

BEL AND THE DRAGON is added as chapter 14 in the Greek version of the book of Daniel. It has a more fantastic form of the lion’s den story recounted in Daniel 6. Daniel, in this new version, is denounced by the priests of Bel for not worshiping their god, but Daniel is able to convince the king that the priests of Bel and their families eat meals fed to the god Bel. Daniel kills the

“great dragon” by feeding it a mixture of pitch, fat, and hair. By doing so, Daniel is able once again to prove that the dragon is no god.

Conclusion

The gap that came after the last book of the Old Testament and the arrival of the New Testament writings was partially filled in by the books of the Apocrypha, which in Roman Catholic tradition were called and regarded as deuterocanonical. Since there are various ways of counting these additions (some as individual works and others as additions to books already existing), this collection is said to consist of seven to eighteen books and cover the period from 300–100 BC.

These additions are not found in the Hebrew canon, but they appear in both the Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate versions of Scripture. Accordingly, it is best to limit the Old Testament canon to thirty-nine books and in doing so follow the teaching of Jesus and his disciples in the question, Which books are the authoritative books that should form the canon of the Old Testament?