GLOSSARY

BIBLE REVIEW

Canon

How Books of the Hebrew Bible Were Chosen

The canonical books of the Bible are those books included as opposed to those excluded.

The English word "canon" derives from a Greek word meaning measuring rod. Canon thus refers to the books that "measure up" to being included within a particular literary corpus. By definition it implies a process through which various books are judged, and suggests that certain books were excluded as noncanonical. As a result, books that are included within a canon have much greater prestige and authority than those that are excluded.

Most Jews and Christians have grown up with the notion of canonical scriptures, but the idea is really quite radical within the context of the ancient Near East. To the best of our knowledge, no other ancient Semitic civilization attempted to sort through its literature and relegate part of it to a higher status by deeming it canonical while demoting the status of other literary works by denying their admittance into the canon.

Why did the notion of canon develop specifically in Israel? Unfortunately, the process by which the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible were canonized is not clearly described either in biblical or rabbinic literature. All we can do is reconstruct the process based on hints and clues.

Clearly the canonization of the Hebrew Bible did not occur at a single moment under the auspices of some religious power group. This is obvious from the tripartite structure of the Hebrew Bible: (1) Torah (the Pentateuch—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), (2) Nevi'im (literally, the Prophets, but actually the historical books of Joshua through Kings—called in Jewish tradition the Former Prophets—and the prophets Isaiah through Malachi, called in Jewish tradition the Latter Prophets) and (3) Kethubim (Writings; that is, sundry material). This order is probably reflected in Luke 24:44, which refers to "the law of Moses [Torah] and the prophets [Nevi'im] and the psalms" meaning Kethubim, here called after the first and largest book in the collection of writings.

Certain books in the Hebrew canon do not seem to fit the category to which they are assigned. The Kethubim include Daniel, which is really a prophetic book, and Chronicles, which parallels the historical books of Samuel and Kings in the Nevi'im section. Had the Bible been canonized at a single moment, Daniel would have been placed adjacent to a prophetic book such as Ezekiel and Chronicles would have been next to Kings, since this is where they belong thematically. (In most English Bibles, which follow the order in the Greek translation of the Bible known as the Septuagint, that is where these books appear). Since Chronicles and Daniel are late books (probably from the fourth and second century B.C.E.,* respectively), the best explanation for why they were not incorporated into Nevi'im is that the Nevi'im section of the canon was closed by the time they were composed. This inconsistent ordering suggests that Nevi'im was canonized before Kethubim. More generally, we deduce that the Torah was canonized first, then the Nevi'im and finally the Kethubim.

It is difficult to assign dates to each stage of this process. According to some scholars, the texts now incorporated in the Torah were completed before the Babylonian Exile of 587/586 B.C.E., while others claim that the latest Torah texts were composed during the Babylonian Exile or after the return to Zion in 538 B.C.E. It is likely that either the experience of being exiled, or of trying to live through the Exile, or of trying to reconstitute a community in the land of Israel after the return to Zion would have involved religious consolidation. This would have included asking which legal and historical traditions are authoritative or central. Discovering the "correct" legal traditions was probably an especially pressing issue for the exilic community, since several prophets had predicted that destruction or exile would result from abrogation of the law (see, for example, Amos 2:4-5). Therefore, to end the catastrophe of Exile, or to rebuild a successful community in Israel, it was necessary to choose those texts that incorporated the laws that must be observed. These had to be chosen from a multiplicity of legal and historical traditions that different groups in ancient Israel claimed to be authoritative, divine revelation. Several were chosen and ultimately became canonized as Torah, "(the) teaching" that served as the legal yardstick for this community in crisis.

Although canonization involved rejection of certain traditions which were ultimately forgotten, it did not produce a uniform, monolithic work. Different conceptions of creation exist side-by-side in Genesis 1-2; different slave laws are legislated in Exodus 21, Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15; and different celebrations of the fall ingathering festival, *Sukkot*, are posited in Exodus 23:16 (compare 34:22), Leviticus 23:23-43 and Deuteronomy 16:13-15. This suggests that canonization was an inclusive process, aimed at including or enfranchising several different groups within ancient Israel. At the

* B.C.E. and C.E. are the scholarly, religiously neutral designations corresponding to B.C. and A.D. They stand for "Before the Common Era" and "Common Era."

point of canonization, no group had enough power to foist its texts on others as the only legal teaching. The final result was a diverse and sometimes contradictory work, incorporating texts and traditions central to different groups.

A similar process must have transpired with Nevi'im (Prophets). Ancient Israel certainly had more than the 15 prophets who have their own books in the Bible (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve "Minor" Prophets). The biblical text itself refers to some of these other prophets and their prophecies; for example, Jeremiah 28 mentions a prophet named Hananiah, son of Azzur. At some point, a selection had to be made from among the works and oracles of these prophets. Given that the Torah was already canonized, the criterion of Deuteronomy 18:22, that a true prophet may be recognized by the fulfillment of his oracle, was probably central in deciding what prophetic works would be included in the canon. Prophets whose prophesies were not validated were excluded from the canon. This process probably occurred some time between the fifth century B.C.E. (the date of Malachi, the latest of the prophetic books) and the second century B.C.E. (the accepted scholarly date of Daniel, whose prophetic book is not included among the Hebrew canon of Nevi'im). The canonization of the Nevi'im involved the same type of compromises described in the canonization of the Torah; Nevi'im incorporated diverse depictions of God and a variety of different theological notions concerning such basic issues as theodicy (the problem of unexplained evil in a world created by a just God), retribution and repentance.

It is difficult to know precisely when the section Kethubim (Writings) was completed. The latest book within the division is probably Daniel, which can be dated to the mid- to late-second century B.C.E. The earliest mention of 24 books as comprising the entire Bible is from the apocryphal book known as the Fourth Book of Ezra, which dates to the late first century C.E. (This number counts Samuel, Kings, the 12 minor prophets, Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles each as one book.) The late first-century C.E. Jewish historian Josephus seems to corroborate this. Josephus claims that the Bible contains 22 books; he probably counts Ruth and Judges as a single book and Jeremiah and Lamentations (traditionally believed to be written by Jeremiah) as a single book; thus his 22 books are the same as Fourth Ezra's 24. This suggests that the Hebrew Bible as a whole, and therefore Kethubim, was canonized sometime between the second century B.C.E. and the first century C.E.

The Kethubim section reflects the same diversity seen in the Torah and Nevi'im. Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes present radically different views of how God rules the world. Psalms and Song of Songs, both beautiful and poetic, set forth different notions about the relationships central to human existence. These multiple perspectives were incorporated because they were important to different groups.

Although the evidence allows for canonization of the entire Hebrew Bible between the late second century B.C.E. (when Daniel was written) and the late first century C.E. (when Fourth Ezra and Josephus mention the complete canon), most scholars used to claim that the final canonization took place in the first century C.E. at the "Council of Jamnia (or Jabneh)." However, no such council was ever convened to discuss the canonicity of biblical texts. Its existence is based on an erroneous understanding of several second-century C.E. rabbinic texts, which discuss whether particular biblical texts, such as Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, "defile the hands" (with ritual impurity). However, the phrase "to defile the hands" refers to whether a book is divinely inspired and not to its canonical status. These rabbinic debates concern inspiration, not canonicity. There are also several discussions about "hiding away" the books of Ezekiel, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. However, these are theoretical academic discussions reflecting the theological problems raised by these biblical books; they were so problematic that one could *imagine* decanonizing them. These rabbinic discussions are not full-fledged debates; no one would really think of removing Ezekiel or Proverbs from the canon. Thus, these rabbinic texts do not prove that the Hebrew Bible was canonized only in the first century C.E. by a group of rabbis. More likely, the Hebrew Bible was already canonical, that is, authoritative, before the late first century C.E. Furthermore, the canon reflects the judgment of popular rather than rabbinic groups concerning which texts should be regarded as central.

A particular work might be excluded from the canon for various reasons: it did not reflect the legal practices of a predominant social group, its prophecies were not verified or it was written in the too recent past. This last factor, that books of recent vintage were not typically canonized, precipitated the rise of pseudepigrapha, or "false writings"—books which claimed to be written much earlier than they actually were by attributing their authorship to an important biblical personality. This fiction began during the biblical period. For example, clear linguistic and historical evidence suggests that Daniel was written in the second century B.C.E., yet the text itself implies that it was written three centuries earlier. The author of Daniel made this false claim so his book would become an instant, ancient classic—and he succeeded! Other books from the second century B.C.E., such as the Wisdom of Ben Sirah, made no attempt to falsify their date or origin, and subsequently were not canonized within the Hebrew Bible. Several of these (the Wisdom of Solomon as well as the Wisdom of Ben Sirah), however, are considered canonical within the Catholic Church and may be found in Catholic Bibles. These texts, which are preserved in the early church canon but not in the rabbinic canon, are called the Apocrypha.

What was the fate of books that at each stage failed to make it into the canon? Neither burned nor forcibly removed from circulation, rejected books were often forgotten and abandoned. However, some works written in the late first millennium B.C.E. and in the early first millennium C.E. escaped oblivion by being preserved as apocrypha and pseudepigrapha.

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