

## The Old Testament Canon and the “Council of Jamnia”

Many popular myths are believed simply because people *want* to believe them—not because they are true. Wishful thinking is a poor substitute for truth. It is always preferable for one to dig deep and discover the facts and not just believe things because one *wants* them to be true.

In order to reject the Catholic Bible, it is popular in some Protestant circles to claim that the Jews had a closed canon of Scripture in the first century and that the early Christians accepted this final Jewish collection of inspired writings as final and binding upon the Church. The Council of Jamnia is usually assumed as the “proof” for this assertion. At the “Council of Jamnia” you see, the Jewish rabbis supposedly got together—something like an Ecumenical Council in the Catholic Church—to lay down specific criteria for inspired Scripture and to finally define and close the Old Testament canon.

Is this true? *First*, we will look at how various authors defend the Protestant exclusion of seven books based on a flawed understanding of the so-called “Council of Jamnia”. *Second*, did this “council” actually discuss the limit of the Old Testament canon, and *third*, if so, did they have the authority to close the canon? *Fourth*, did they actually compile a final list of accepted writings and *fifth*, and very importantly, if such a decision *had been* made, would the Christian be bound by that decision? We will conclude with the teaching of the Catholic Church and why we can so securely trust it.

First, let’s clarify a few terms. The canon of Scripture refers to the final collection of inspired books included in the Bible. The Catholic Bible contains seven books that do not appear in Protestant Old Testament. These seven writings are called the *deutero-canonicals*, or the Second Law. Protestants usually call these writings the *Apocrypha* (meaning “hidden”)—books they consider outside the canon. These seven writings include *1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, Sirach, Wisdom, Baruch* along with additional passages in *Daniel* and *Esther*. Before the time of Christ, these writings were included in the Jewish Greek Septuagint (LXX)—the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures, but they were not included in the Hebrew Masoretic text.

The vast majority of Jews in the first century BC and AD lived outside of Israel. They were called the Diaspora, those dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. Many had become Hellenized, that is, they had taken on the Greco-Roman culture including the Greek language. The Septuagint containing the Deutero-canonical books was the main Bible used by these Jews of the diaspora.

The non-Christian Jews of the first century generally consider the Church to be a heretical and misinformed Jewish cult, probably similar to way Christians look at the Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses of today. In the first century, several decades after the life of Christ, the early Christians were mainly Gentiles and they used the Greek Septuagint as their Old Testament, following the example of the Greek-speaking Jews, Jesus and the Apostles.<sup>1</sup> When the

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<sup>1</sup> “*The Septuagint was the standard Old Testament text used by the early Christian church. The expanding Gentile church needed a translation in the common language of the time—Greek. By the time of Christ, even among the Jews, a majority of the people spoke Aramaic and Greek, not Hebrew. The New Testament writers evidence their inclination to the Septuagint by using it when quoting the Old Testament*” (Mark R. Norton, editor of the Bible

Christians began to use this Greek translation to convert Jews to the faith, the Jews began to detest it.<sup>2</sup> Does it surprise anyone that they would condemn the canon and translation the Christians used, even if it was originally translated, approved of, and put into circulation by the Jews themselves three hundred and fifty years earlier (about 250 BC)?

The early Church made wide use the Greek Septuagint, from which St. Paul took most of his Old Testament quotations. The early Church, following the Septuagint and the apostles' extensive use of it, accepted the Deutero-canonical books. When the canon was finally closed by the councils of the Catholic Church, these books were included in the final collection. The so-called "Council of Jamnia" was a group of Jewish scholars around AD 90 who were granted permission by Rome to meet in Palestine, near the Mediterranean Sea in Jamnia (or Jabneh). Here they established a non-authoritative, "reconstituted" Sanhedrin.<sup>3</sup> Among the many things they discussed was the status of several questioned writings in their Jewish Bible. They also rejected the Christian writings and made a new translation of the Greek Septuagint.

Since many Protestant authors have appealed to the "Council of Jamnia" in their case against the Deutero-canonical books contained in the Catholic Bible, it will serve us well to look at a few examples. In his popular book *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*,<sup>4</sup> Norman Geisler, dean of Southern Evangelical Seminary, seems quite confident in denying the Catholic canon of the Old Testament, claiming that the Jewish rabbis at Jamnia excluded the deutero-canonical books received by Catholics and that the canon was fixed (meaning finalized) at Jamnia. It is disappointing in light of the facts.

Geisler writes: "The Jewish scholars at Jamnia (c. A.D. 90) did not accept the Apocrypha as part of the divinely inspired Jewish canon (see Beckwith, 276–77) Since the New Testament explicitly states that Israel was entrusted with the oracles of God and was the recipient of the covenants and the Law (Rom. 3:2), the Jews should be considered the custodians of the limits of their own canon. And they have always rejected the Apocrypha" (Geisler, Norman L., and Ralph E. MacKenzie. *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals : Agreements and Differences* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995], 169).

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Department at William Tyndale Publishers, *The Origin of the Bible*, ed. by Philip W. Comfort [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publ., 1992], 165).

2 F. F. Bruce writes, "'Greek Judaism', it has been said, 'with the Septuagint had ploughed the furrows for the gospel seed in the Western world; but it was the Christian preachers who sowed the seed. So thoroughly, indeed, did Christians appropriate the Septuagint as their version of the scriptures that the Jews became increasingly disenchanted with it. The time came when one rabbi compared 'the accursed day on which the seventy elders wrote the Law in Greek for the king' to the day on which Israel made the golden calf. New Greek versions of the Old Testament were produced for Jewish use" (F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988], 50).

3 "When the destruction of the city and temple was imminent, a great rabbi belonging to the school of Hillel in the Pharisaic party—Yochanan ben Zakkai, by name—obtained permission from the Romans to reconstitute the Sanhedrin on a purely spiritual basis at Jabneh or Jamnia, between Joppa and Azotus (Ashdod). Some of the discussions which went on at Jamnia were handed down by oral transmission and ultimately recorded in the rabbinical writings" (F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1950, 1984], 88). If one wants to base their confidence in the Protestant Old Testament canon upon the discussions in Jamnia, isn't it interesting that they are placing their trust in oral tradition passed down from anti-Christian Jewish rabbis?

4 Norman Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995).

And though he seems to deny the authority of the rabbis at Jamnia in one place in his *A General Introduction to the Bible*, he later relays in a chart: “Council of Jamnia (A.D. 90), Old Testament Canon fixed” (Geisler, N. L., & Nix, W. E. [Chicago: Moody Press, 1996, c1986], 286).

Geisler is not alone in his assertion that the Apocrypha was rejected and the final Old Testament canon was fixed at Jamnia. It seems to be a common legend that is used as “proof” to bolster up a unhistorical and incorrect assumption. Before we take a look at the myth, we will demonstrate how it is often appealed to. A few other quick examples of this false reliance on the “Council of Jamnia” will suffice:

“At the end of the first Christian century, the Jewish rabbis, at the Council of Gamnia [Jamnia], closed the canon of the Hebrew book (those considered authoritative)” (Swaggart, *Catholicism & Christianity* [Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, 1986], 129).

“After Jerusalem’s destruction, Jamnia became the home of the Great Sanhedrin. Around 100, a council of rabbis there established the final canon of the OT” (Ed. Martin, Ralph P., and Peter H. Davids. *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1997], 185).

Though many are now recognizing that Jamnia did not exclude the Deutero-canonical books or authoritatively close the Old Testament canon, there are still plenty of sources that claim and assume it did.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, the “council” in Jamnia in AD 100 AD was not even an “official” council with binding authority to *make* such a decision.

“After the fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D.), an assembly of religious teachers was established at Jamnia; this body was regarded as to some extent replacing the Sanhedrin, *though it did not possess the same representative character or national authority*. It appears that one of the subjects discussed among the rabbis was the status of certain Biblical books (e.g. Eccles. and Song of Solomon) *whose canonicity was still open to question in the 1st century A.D.* The suggestion that a particular synod of Jamnia, held c. 100 A.D., finally settling the limits of the Old Testament canon, was made by H. E. Ryle; though it has had a wide currency, *there is no evidence to substantiate it*” (ed. by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston [New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press]), 861 (italics mine).

Isn’t it interesting that the Jews did not have a “closed canon” of Scripture during the time of Christ, before 100 AD, or even after Jamnia? Even during the time of Christ there were competing opinions on what books actually belonged in the Jewish Bible. There were various collections in existence. Sadducees and Samaritans only accepted the Pentateuch, the first five books, whereas the Pharisees accepted a fuller canon including Psalms and the Prophets. The Masoretic text did not contain the Deutero-canonicals whereas the widely used Greek Septuagint (generally appropriated by Paul and the Church) did.

This uncertainty continued well past the time of Christ, past the “Council of Jamnia and well into

the next century. The discussion over the books of the canon of the Old Testament continued among the Jews long after Jamnia, which demonstrates that the canon was still under discussion until well into the third century AD—well beyond the apostolic period. The challenges to canonicity at Jamnia involved only Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, but the debate over the canon continued past Jamnia, even into the second and third centuries. Even the Hebrew canon accepted by Protestants today was disputed by the Jews for two hundred years *after* Christ.

Why then does Geisler and others overstate their case when they claim that Jamnia fixed the Old Testament canon? Simply, I think some read back into history what they want to believe and what they wished they *had* believed. Or, then again they may just be misinformed. But in either case, there is no evidence to support their assertions and plenty to refute it.

The Jerome Biblical Commentary informs us of the situation: “Four points of caution should be noted: (1) Although Christian authors seem to think in terms of a formal church council at Jamnia, there was no “council of Jamnia.” At Jamnia there was a school for studying the Law, and the Jamnia rabbis exercised legal functions in the Jewish community. (2) There is no evidence that any list of books was drawn up at Jamnia. The rabbis, of course, recognized that certain books were uniquely sacred and “soiled the hands,” so that purification was necessary after using them (Mishnah, *Yadaim* 3:2). But this attitude may represent the popular acceptance of 22 or 24 books that we saw in Josephus and in *4 Ezra* at roughly the same period. It is no proof that a definite list had been drawn up. (3) A specific discussion of acceptance at Jamnia is attested only for Eccl and Canticles, and even in these instances arguments persisted in Judaism decades after the Jamnia period. There were also subsequent debates about Est. (4) We know of no books that were excluded at Jamnia. A book like Sir, which did not eventually become part of the standard Hebrew Bible (based on the putative Jamnia canon), was read and copied by Jews after the Jamnia period. Tosephta, *Yadaim* 2:13, records that Sir was declared as not soiling the hands, but does not say where or when this was decided” (Brown, Raymond Edward, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland Edmund Murphy. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Englewood Cliffs, [N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996, c1968], Vol. 2, Pg. 522).

Even if the Jamnian rabbis *had* closed the canon, and *did* have the authority to make such a canonical determination (to close the Old Testament canon), who says they had the authority from *God* to make such a binding determination? Why should Christians accept their determination? In 100 AD were they still God’s mouthpiece, still his prophetic people? God had already debunked the Jews as His “prophetic voice” thirty years earlier when Jerusalem was destroyed and razed by fire. God judged them and rejected their old wineskins. The old wine and wineskin (Judaism) was now replaced by new wine (the Gospel) and new wineskins (the Church). Why accept the defrocked, unauthoritative rabbis’ determination, instead of the Church’s?

For further reason we should not rely on the first century AD Jews for their determination of the canon, even if the *had* made such a determination. The rabbis of Jamnia eventually provided a new translation in Greek to replace their previous translation of the Septuagint? Why? Because the Gentile Christians had appropriated the Septuagint as their own (along with the “apocrypha” which it contained), and were using it for apologetic and evangelistic purposes—they were converting the Jews using their own Greek Scriptures. For example they were using it to prove

the virginal birth of Jesus. In the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah 7:14 is rendered, “*A young woman shall conceive and bear a son*”, whereas the Greek Septuagint, quoted by Matthew (Mt 1:23), renders it, “*A virgin shall be with child and bear a son.*”<sup>5</sup> So, the rabbis that supposedly “determined” the final Protestant canon, also authorized a new Greek translation to correct specifically to hinder the Gospel. Aquila, the Jewish translator of the new version, denied the Virgin Birth and changed the Greek word from *virgin* to *young woman*.

One of the key issues regarding the canon in the first-century Jewish mind, was not necessarily inspiration, but resisting the Christian evangelization of the Jews and Gentiles. It was an issue of Jew versus the new Christian teaching, and the Christians use of the Jewish Greek Scriptures. It would seem rather strange for a Protestant to choose the truncated canon chosen by the very Jews and by so doing fall on the side of the anti-Christian, disenfranchised Jew in this matter.<sup>6</sup>

We do not know much about the deliberations at Jamnia, but we do know that they mentioned the Gospels of the New Testament. They specifically mentioned them in order to specifically reject them. F. F. Bruce writes, “Some disputants also asked whether the Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sira (Ecclesiasticus), and the gilyonim (Aramaic Gospel writings) and other books of the minim (heretics, including Jewish Christians), should be admitted, but here the answer was uncompromisingly negative” (*The Books and the Parchments* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984], 88).

Why accept these Jamnian Jews as “God’s mouthpiece” in determining the final Old Testament canon especially when they specifically mention the Gospels in order to reject them. They had been “de-throned” as the keepers of the oracles. In their opposition to the Catholic Church, many Protestants will accept the Jewish opposition to the *their* “determination” because it supports you in your anti-Catholicism. I, on the other hand, have accepted the determination and canon of the *new* covenant people of God, those who are the new priesthood (1 Pet 2:9), the new wineskin. Geisler comments, as we noticed earlier that, “Since the New Testament explicitly states that Israel was entrusted with the oracles of God and was the recipient of the covenants and the Law, the Jews should be considered the custodians of the limits for their own canon.”<sup>7</sup> Their canon, as the Septuagint displays, *did* contain the “apocrypha”, and only thirty years *after* the destruction of Jerusalem for disobeying Him and rejecting his Messiah—did they come to this unconfirmed decision about their canon. Am I supposed to accept the alleged determination as authoritative and binding upon my soul, when the mantle of authority had been taken from their backs and gloriously passed on to the Church by an act of the Holy Spirit? Does Geisler give his readers this historical information and time-line, reminding them that God had scattered

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5 Isn’t it interesting that Matthew, a Jew, who’s intended audience was the Jewish people, did not defend the doctrine of Christ’s virgin birth from the Hebrew Bible, but instead quoted from the Greek Septuagint? This was the text used by the early Church.

6 F. F. Bruce writes, “‘Greek Judaism’, it has been said, ‘with the Septuagint had ploughed the furrows for the gospel seed in the Western world; but it was the Christian preachers who sowed the seed. So thoroughly, indeed, did Christians appropriate the Septuagint as their version of the scriptures that the Jews became increasingly disenchanted with it. The time came when one rabbi compared ‘the accursed day on which the seventy elders wrote the Law in Greek for the king’ to the day on which Israel made the golden calf. New Greek versions of the Old Testament were produced for Jewish use” (F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988], 50).

7 Geisler, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*, 169.

the Jews and destroyed their temple before their unauthoritative “council” rejected the Gospels and the “whole Christian canon” including the New Testament?

The Jews had no “closed canon” prior to 100 AD and they “built a wall around it” to keep the Christians out. Why collaborate with them? I accept the canon of the apostles and the early Church, which was determined by the bishops of the Church; and like them, I disregard the canon of the anti-Christian Jew and accept the canon of the Christian community.<sup>8</sup>

The canon of the Old Testament was not closed at Jamnia, nor were the Deutero-canonicals excluded from the Old Testament there. Is it the Jews have the final say on the content and extent of Scripture or the Church? Who does have the authority from God to determine and close the canon of Scripture? Simply put, the Church. The Jewish hierarchy during the time of Christ claimed authority to bind and loose, which were very clearly understood and technical term, but Jesus specifically appointed a new hierarchy over the “new Israel”—the Church—and transferred to this new magisterium the power to bind and loose (Mt 16:19; 18:18). The Church was thus appointed to speak for God and the final canon of Scripture would thus fall under her authority.

With the exception of a few early Fathers, on the whole, Protestant author Paul Achtemeier tells us, “Eastern and Roman Catholic tradition generally considered the Old Testament ‘apocryphal’ books to be canonical. It was not until the Protestant Reformation that these books were clearly denied canonical status (in Protestant circles). The Roman church, however, continues to affirm their place in the canon of Scripture” (Harper’s Bible dictionary / general editor, Paul J. Achtemeier; associate editors, Roger S. Boraas ... et al. with the Society of Biblical Literature.—1st ed.—San Francisco : Harper & Row, c1985.).

At the Council of Trent the Church put the matter to rest by definitively listing the accepted books, which included the Deutero-canonicals, and the Catechism affirms this list (CCC 120). This is the Catholic Bible we have today.

Isn’t it interesting that Martin Luther acknowledged the Catholic Church as the custodian of sacred Scripture when he wrote, “We concede—as we must—that so much of what they [the Catholic Church] say is true: that the papacy has God’s word and the office of the apostles, and that we have received Holy Scriptures, Baptism, the Sacrament, and the pulpit from them. What would we know of these if it were not for them?” (*Sermons on the Gospel of John, Chap. 14-16* (1537), in vol. 24 of *Luther’s Works* [St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publ. House, 1961], 304).

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<sup>8</sup> Yes, several Fathers accepted the Jewish Masoretic canon (e.g. Jerome) and if you will read the enclosures I have sent, you will get a full historical perspective on that matter. It was never an individual Father that made binding decisions for the Church, it was only the councils that could do so.