

Gary Michuta asked me to provide a few comments on the recent debate on the Inspiration of the Deutero-Canonical Books of the Old Testament and I am happy to do so. In the interest of time, I would like to focus specifically on a couple of technical points that I thought were, unfortunately, somewhat obscured in the course of the debate.

In order to understand the debate it is necessary to keep in mind the distinction between canonicity and inspiration. It was a distinction that Michuta made in his opening statement and several other times throughout the debate, but my impression is that it was lost on James White and perhaps on others who attended. Without this distinction, some of what the early Fathers and medieval scholars say about the deutero-canonical books remains not just puzzling but downright incoherent, whereas with this distinction the picture becomes clear.

As Michuta stated during the debate, it became a matter of interest to early Christians to find out exactly which books were considered to be Scripture for the Jews, with whom they were actively debating. He pointed out that such early Christians as Origen and Melito of Sardis went to the Jews to plumb the limits of the Jewish Old Testament, not because these churchmen did not know what books were read in their own local churches, but because when debating with the Jews they wanted to use only those books accepted by the Jews. Origen states this explicitly in his letter to Julius Africanus. But in the same context he acknowledges that he knows perfectly well that the Church accepts as inspired more books than the Jews. This is a critical point.

It came to be conventional in the early Church to speak of the "canonical" books as those which were accepted *by the Jews*. The modern Protestant, who is accustomed to equating canonicity with inspiration, concludes from this that, for these early Christians, only those "canonical" books are Scripture and "non-canonical" books must not be Scripture, i.e. are not inspired. But this conclusion simply does not follow; it involves reading back later precise categories and terminology onto an early age. How do we know? Because the very same men who speak of the "canonical" book as only those which the Jews accepted will, in other parts of their writings, cite the deutero-canonical books of the Old Testament *as inspired Scripture*. So, for example, Origen cites Tobit, Sirach, 2 Maccabees, and Wisdom as inspired Scripture, even though elsewhere he will speak of the "canonical books" of the OT as being those twenty two which "the Hebrews have handed down" (preserved in Eusebius, EH 6:25; NPNF2 1:272). Protestants are often quick to accuse Catholic apologists of reading the Fathers out of context, but in this case the charge clearly swings back on them.

It is fair to say, however, that this distinction between "canonical" and "non-canonical" has created a significant amount of confusion in subsequent centuries. The confusion is cleared if one remembers this simple principle: for the Fathers, canonical always means inspired, but *non-canonical does not necessarily mean uninspired*. To put it another way, just as we speak of proto-canonical and deutero-canonical books of both Old and New Testaments, without denying the inspiration of the deutero-canonical books, so the early Fathers could speak of books of the Old Testament as "canonical" and "non-canonical" without denying the inspiration of those they dubbed non-canonical. Again, the proof of

this is that they continue to cite "non-canonical" books *as inspired Scripture*. St. Athanasius, for example, speaks of three classes of books: canonical, non-canonical, and apocryphal. He places what we would call deuterocanonical books of the OT in the second category, but we know that he did not thereby deny their inspiration since he himself cites various deuterocanonical books of the OT (including Baruch, Wisdom, Tobit, Sirach, and the deuterocanonical portions of Daniel) as inspired Scripture. It is only those books he calls "apocryphal" that he rejects outright as uninspired.

I think that this explanation also clears up most of the puzzlements in the medieval era that White cited—I wish that in the debate this distinction could have helped the audience better understand how various authors could, even on the eve of the Council of Trent, speak of certain books as "non-canonical" without ultimately running afoul of Trent's definition of the inspired books of the OT.

Interestingly enough, certain modern Eastern Orthodox scholars continue to use the words "canonical" and "non-canonical" according to the ancient usage, while still not denying that the "non-canonical" books of the Old Testament are inspired Scripture. Here's an example:

"Besides the canonical books, a part of the Old Testament is composed of non-canonical books, sometimes called Apocrypha among non-Orthodox. These are books which the Jews lost and which are not in the contemporary Hebrew text of the Old Testament. They are found in the Greek translations of the Old Testament, made by the 70 translators of the Septuagint three centuries before the birth of Christ (271 B.C.). These books have been included in the Bible from ancient times and are considered by the Church to be sacred Scripture" (Archpriest Seraphim Slobodskoy, *The Law Of God: For Study at Home and School*—Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1996, p. 423.)

This is further proof that this distinction is no figment of an overactive Catholic imagination, but rather is a correct reading of the Fathers. Again, this ancient usage is essentially equivalent to the modern descriptions "proto-canonical" and "deuterocanonical". As soon as one understands that, for the Fathers, "non-canonical" does not mean "uninspired", any difficulty posed by the term disappears.

Another dynamic I would like to note briefly concerns the knowledge of the canon. During the debate, White placed great stock in Rom 3:1-2 as proof that the Jews knew with certainty what were the limits of the OT canon. As is so often the case, this was great rhetoric, but his conclusion just does not follow. Although we can all agree that God gives sufficient knowledge of the canon to His people (the means by which He does this were not adequately addressed by White, however), it does not follow that at any given point in history there will be practical certainty about the canonicity of certain books. The most obvious proof of this is the history of the early Church. Certainly White would agree that the New Testament "oracles of God" were entrusted to the Church. And yet this fact did not prevent there being confusion and uncertainty concerning the inspiration/canonicity of certain books of the New Testament. Remember, there is a proto-canon and deuterocanon of the New Testament too. The fact

that there was uncertainty about the deuterocanon of the NT in the early Church does not change the fact that she was entrusted with the New Covenant oracles of God; therefore the fact that the Jews were entrusted with the Old Covenant oracles of God in no way lifts all uncertainty concerning which books belong in the OT.

And uncertainty there was. White breezed over it way too lightly, but fatal to his case was Michuta's very fine presentation showing that it was Rabbi Akiba, in the mid-second century A.D., who essentially closed the canon for the Jews. He did so precisely because the deuterocanonical OT books were being used to great effect in Jewish-Christian apologetics. Thus, it was one hundred years after the foundation of Christendom that the deuterocanonical OT books were officially rejected by Judaism. By this time, though, they obviously were no longer the appointed guardians of the "oracles of God" and so their ruling is worthless for Christians. White's insistence that Rabbi Akiba's ruling did not necessarily mean that there were Jews that considered the deuterocanonical books of the OT to be inspired is completely unconvincing. Akiba's ruling was precisely *for the Jews*. It was not directed to Christians at all and Akiba would only be forced to make such a ruling if there were a significant number of Jews who considered those books to be inspired. It is a shame that this could not have been more fully vetted in the course of the debate because this is precisely the kind of positive evidence that White claimed that Michuta did not and could not provide.

The long and the short of it is this: The Christians of the first centuries, spread over an enormous geographical area, considered the deuterocanonical books of the OT to be inspired Scripture. This is proven by numerous citations of these books using the standard formulae used to introduce Scriptural passages. Now such a belief did not just appear out of nowhere and come suddenly to be embraced by the entire Christian world. It clearly has its origins in the very earliest years of Christendom and therefore this understanding could only have come from the Jews, or from Christ and His Apostles (or from both, of course, as these are not necessarily mutually exclusive.) I believe that Michuta successfully showed that it was from both the Jews *and* the Apostles that the very earliest Christians came to consider the deuterocanonical books of the OT as inspired Scripture and that it was only post-apostolic Judaism that came formally to reject them as such. He also showed that this continued to be the Church's faith right up to the time of the Protestant revolt and indeed that even the earliest Protestants affirmed the inspired status of these books. Therefore, as Michuta argued, the thesis of the debate stands as established, as attested by the continuous witness of the Bride of Christ from her founding to the present day.