

## JOSEPHUS AND THE TWENTY-TWO-BOOK CANON OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

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In rabbinic tradition the canon of the Hebrew Bible is generally presented as consisting of twenty-four books divided into three categories: the Torah (five books), the Former and Latter Prophets (eight books), and the Writings (eleven books). But this particular tradition was still not established unequivocally among the Jews in the time of Jerome (c. A.D. 380), who mentions that "certain of the Rabbins of that day" place Ruth and Lamentations among the Writings rather than uniting them with Judges and Jeremiah, as he does, to have a canon of twenty-two books.<sup>1</sup> The implication is clear: Among the rabbis there were some who agreed with Jerome's canonical arrangement of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The tradition of a canon of twenty-two books was clearly present in both Jewish and Christian circles during the first four centuries of the common era. The earliest, and by far the most important, description of this twenty-two-book canon is that of the Jewish historian Josephus (b. A.D. 37), which has been rendered by Moses Stuart as follows:

We have not a countless number of books, discordant and arrayed against each other; but only *two and twenty books*, . . . and of these, five belong to Moses, which contain both the laws and the history of the generations of men until his death. . . . From the death of Moses, moreover, until the reign of Artaxerxes king of the Persians after Xerxes, the prophets who followed Moses have described the things which were done during the age of each one respectively, in thirteen books. The remaining four contain hymns to God, and rules of life for men.<sup>2</sup>

After Josephus, the earliest witness to this twenty-two-book canon is apparently Audet's Hebrew-Aramaic list (c. A.D. 150), at least according to the interpretation of Peter Katz.<sup>3</sup> Later prominent witnesses to the twenty-two-book canon include Origen (c. 250), Hilary of Poitiers (c. 254), Eusebius (c. 320),

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<sup>1</sup>See M. Stuart, *Critical History and Defence of the Old Testament Canon* (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1872) 255. The book known as 4 Esdras provides evidence for a canon of twenty-four books as early as the first century A.D. See G. Wildeboer, *The Origin of the Canon of the Old Testament* (London: Luzac, 1895) 40-42.

<sup>2</sup>In *Ag. Ap.* 1.8 (italics his). For a more recent translation and discussion of this passage see S. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1976) 31-32.

<sup>3</sup>P. Katz, "The Old Testament Canon in Palestine and Alexandria," *ZNW* 47 (1956) 196.

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 350), Athanasius (c. 360), the Council of Laodicea (360–364), Epiphanius (c. 368), Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 370), Jerome (c. 380) and Rufinus (c. 390).<sup>4</sup> From the time of Origen the number twenty-two has been explained in terms of the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Epiphanius also called attention to the fact that “there are twenty-two works of God during the six days of creation, twenty-two generations from Adam to Jacob, . . . and a like number of sextarii in a modius” to explain the number twenty-two.<sup>5</sup>

Though the number twenty-two is clearly established in early Jewish and Christian tradition, it is not at all clear exactly how the various books of the Hebrew Bible are to be arranged to arrive at this number. As Stuart noted after a lengthy discussion of the evidence,

I have now given the reader a fair specimen of the leading arrangements of the Hebrew Scriptures in ancient times, as it respects the Prophets and the Kethubim. *No two are alike.* Even the Masorites and the Talmudists differ from each other; Jerome differs from both, and Origen from him. And so, if we compare Melito, the Laodicean Council, the Apostolic Canons, Cyrill, Gregory Nazianzen, Athanasius, Hilary, Epiphanius, the Council of Hippo, Jerome, Rufinus, &c., scarcely any two of them are alike throughout. And this is almost the case even with MSS. and editions in later times.<sup>6</sup>

Having made this observation, Stuart marshaled his evidence to reach a related conclusion of great significance for our purposes:

With good reason, then, do we take the position, that *the son of Sirach, Philo, the New Testament, Josephus, and all the earlier Christian writers, down to the middle of the fourth century, testify in favour of an arrangement of the Hebrew Scriptures, which classes FOUR BOOKS together that are of like composition and matter in some important respects, and regards ONLY THESE as belonging to the Hagiography.*<sup>7</sup>

For Stuart the original category of the Writings in the Hebrew canon included Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.<sup>8</sup> But his reasons for classifying Job among the prophets are less than convincing.

The Masoretes clearly grouped Psalms, Job and Proverbs together as “poetical books” to be distinguished from “the twenty-one” so-called prose books in their use of two distinct systems of accentuation. But the question then remains as to the identity of the fourth book to be added to this group. Most scholars would add Ecclesiastes to the list, but such a conclusion poses problems

<sup>4</sup>See Stuart, *Critical* 395–422, for a convenient collection of these texts with English translations. Cf. also A. Sundberg, *The Old Testament of the Early Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1964) 134–155.

<sup>5</sup>Sundberg, *Old Testament* 43.

<sup>6</sup>Stuart, *Critical* 258 (italics mine).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 271 (italics his).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 245. Most scholars have followed Stuart in this matter; but see Leiman, *Canonization* 33 and 152 n. 155. Leiman notes that H. Graetz places Job and Lamentations in Josephus' third division, and S. Zeitlin lists Ruth and Lamentations there.

with respect to the Song of Songs. As Marvin Pope has noted, "it is more likely that the Song was somehow included among the four books described as consisting of hymns to God and precepts for men."<sup>9</sup> This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that Pope's observation is correct and to offer an alternate interpretation in regards to the structure of the canon of Josephus.

Three conclusions can be established concerning the structure of the canon by the time of Josephus: (1) The tripartite division of the canon into the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings appears to be earlier than the time of Ben Sira (c. 180 B.C.); (2) the twenty-two-book canon is prior to the twenty-four-book canon of rabbinic Judaism and may also predate Ben Sira; and (3) the place of Esther in this schema seems to be the origin of the confusion among the early witnesses in regards to the structure of the Writings as a canonical category.

The arguments of Stuart, advanced more than a hundred years ago, concerning the interpretation of the passage in Ben Sira on "the Law, and the Prophets, and the other [books] which follow in the same spirit" remain valid.<sup>10</sup> Though the third division of the Hebrew canon was apparently not yet known by the technical name *Kētûbîm* ("Writings") it was apparently present as a category by the time of Ben Sira, who makes reference to "the Law, the Prophets, and the rest of the books."<sup>11</sup> The presence of the three canonical divisions is certainly reflected in the work of Philo.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the actual term *Kētûbîm* may even have been applied to this division of the canon by the time of Akiba as witnessed by his celebrated defense of the Song of Songs in response to Rabbi Jose who denied its canonicity:<sup>13</sup>

Perish the thought! No man of Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs, that it did not defile the hands. The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures [*Kētûbîm*] are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies; if they disagreed, it was only about Qohelet that they disagreed.

The fact that the exact names, number and order of the Jewish Scriptures was a matter of dispute by the second century A.D. is clearly evident in the tradition of Melito, who traveled to Palestine in order to ascertain "the exact truth" on the matter.<sup>14</sup> Though the concept of a twenty-two-book canon was well known, there was no agreement concerning its actual structure. It is interesting to note that Melito omits the book of Esther in his curious list, which does not arrange the books into a canon of twenty-two. This fact is all the more

<sup>9</sup>M. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB7C; Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 91.

<sup>10</sup>Stuart, *Critical* 229.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>See Leiman, *Canonization* 31 and 152 n. 151, who cites H. Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge, 1947), 1. 117.

<sup>13</sup>Pope, *Song* 19.

<sup>14</sup>Stuart, *Critical* 240.

striking in light of Melito's very words as addressed to "Onesimus his brother".<sup>15</sup>

Since you have often requested, through the earnest desire that you cherish for the word [of God], that you might have a selection made for you from the Law and the Prophets, which has respect to our Saviour and the whole of our faith; and since moreover you have been desirous to obtain an accurate account of the ancient books, both as to their number and their order; I have taken pains to accomplish this, . . . making a journey therefore into the east [Palestine], and having arrived at the place where these things [i.e. scriptural events] were proclaimed and transacted, I there learned accurately the books of the Old Testament, which I here arrange and transmit to you.

Not only does his list apparently ignore the twenty-two-book structure of the canon, but it also seems to be a curious combination of the order as reflected in the Hebrew Bible and the LXX. And, perhaps most important of all, it omits Esther. The list is as follows:<sup>16</sup>

- I. The five books of Moses
- II. The second group:
  - Joshua of Nun
  - Judges
  - Ruth
  - 4 books of Kings
  - 2 books of Chronicles
- III. The third group:
  - The Psalms of David
  - The Proverbs of Solomon (also called Wisdom)
  - Ecclesiastes
  - The Song of Songs
  - Job
- IV. The Prophets:
  - Isaiah
  - Jeremiah
  - The Twelve in one book
  - Daniel
  - Ezekiel
  - Ezra

A number of observations are in order, the most notable being the omission of Esther, Lamentations and Nehemiah. It is probable that Nehemiah is included in Ezra as these two books comprise a single category in most of the early lists. Lamentations is also frequently included with Jeremiah as a single item; but such is also generally the case for Judges and Ruth, which Melito

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 403.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

has clearly separated. The inclusion of Daniel and Ezra among the Prophets is also of interest. The four categories of Melito's list may correspond to the familiar Masoretic division into the Torah, Former Prophets, Latter Prophets and Writings. But if so, the inclusion of the two books of chronicles among the Former Prophets is worthy of comment. If the four books of Kings and the two books of Chronicles are each taken as single categories in Melito's list the total number of books would be twenty-one, suggesting the possibility that the omission of Esther may be accidental. Origen makes explicit reference to a canon of twenty-two books for the Hebrew Scriptures and then proceeds to list only twenty-one, omitting the book of the Twelve so-called minor prophets. But that omission is clearly an error in the transmission of Origen's testimony as witnessed by the fact that Rufinus, in his translation of Origen, includes the prophets in question.<sup>17</sup> The restoration of Esther to Melito's list would produce a list of twenty-two books. Inclusion of Esther within his second category along with Ruth would result in a curious symmetry in the arrangement: 5 + 6//5 + 6. But the same result could also be achieved with the omission of Esther by dividing his category of the "four books of Kings" into the more familiar canonical categories of the books of Samuel and Kings, which is more likely. Melito is apparently not concerned with the number twenty-two as an organizing principle for the canon of Hebrew Scripture. And though his four categories may reflect the fourfold arrangement of Masoretic tradition, his distribution of Ruth, Chronicles, Daniel and Ezra among the Prophets suggests another conclusion. The Writings as a division of the canon of Hebrew Scripture was in flux. The reason for this state of affairs may be the book of Esther.

The omission of Esther on the part of Melito is not the only instance of difficulties for this particular book within early canonical lists. Origen places Esther at the very end of his list:<sup>18</sup>

1. Genesis
2. Exodus
3. Leviticus
4. Numbers
5. Deuteronomy
6. Joshua the son of Nun
7. Judges, Ruth with them in one
8. Kings first and second, among them one, Samuel
9. Kings third and fourth, in one
10. Chronicles first and second, in one
11. Ezra first and second, in one
12. The book of Psalms
13. The Proverbs of Solomon
14. Ecclesiastes
15. The Song of Songs
16. The Twelve Minor Prophets [restored from Hilary]
17. Isaiah
18. Jeremiah with Lamentations and the epistle

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 405.

19. Daniel
20. Ezekiel
21. Job
22. Esther

As Origen put it: "One must not be ignorant, that there are twenty-two books of the covenant, as the Hebrews reckon them; which is the number of letters in their alphabet."<sup>19</sup> The order of the books reflects the fourfold Masoretic division into Law, Former Prophets, Latter Prophets and Writings, with the distribution of Chronicles and Ezra among the Former Prophets and Daniel among the Latter Prophets. The placement of Job and Esther at the very end of his list is notable and is followed by Hilary (c. 254).<sup>20</sup>

The canonical list as made out by the Council of Laodicea (c. 360–364) is similar to that of Origen except for the placement of Esther after Judges/Ruth and Job after the Song of Songs.<sup>21</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem places Esther twelfth in his list of twenty-two books, after Chronicles and the first and second books of Ezra (Ezra, Nehemiah).<sup>22</sup> Athanasius (c. 326) omits Esther from his list of twenty-two canonical books, separating Judges and Ruth.<sup>23</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 370) also separates Judges and Ruth, omitting Esther.<sup>24</sup> The anonymous writer of the *Synopsis Scripturae Sacrae*, contemporary with Athanasius, omits Esther from the list of twenty-two canonical books and places it among "other books of the Old Testament, which are not canonical," along with Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira, Judith and Tobit.<sup>25</sup> Epiphanius (c. 368) presents a curious version of twenty-two canonical books, which he expands to twenty-seven with the following remark: "The Hebrews have twenty-two letters; according to these they number their books, although they are in reality twenty-seven. But since with them five letters are double, making in fact twenty-seven, they contract them into twenty-two; and so the books which are twenty-seven are contracted into twenty-two."<sup>26</sup> Esther appears at the end of his list, with Job after Joshua and the Psalter after Judges/Ruth. Rufinus (c. 390) placed Esther after Ezra in a list that may reflect the threefold canonical division of the Masoretes—namely, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 404.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 421.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 407–408.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 409.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 412.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 410.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 414.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 415.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 416.

## I. Pentateuch

## II. Prophets

Joshua  
 Judges/Ruth  
 1 and 2 Samuel in one book  
 1 and 2 Kings in one book  
 Chronicles, comprising two books  
 Ezra [Ezra and Nehemiah]  
 Esther  
 Isaiah  
 Jeremiah  
 Ezekiel  
 Daniel  
 Twelve Prophets

## III. Writings

Job  
 Psalms  
 Solomon, three books  
     Proverbs  
     Ecclesiastes  
     Canticles

In spite of the great diversity observed in the various canonical lists, two observations of note may be made. First, the concept of a canon of twenty-two books in the Hebrew Bible is attested early and remains pervasive. Second, the book of Esther poses a peculiar problem, with no fixed place in the tradition. Moreover, its very canonicity is frequently denied. One way to explain this situation is to posit the formation of a twenty-two-book canon of the Hebrew Bible prior to the inclusion of Esther. It is the subsequent addition of Esther to this canon that ultimately produced the alternate twenty-four-book canon of Talmudic tradition.

As Stuart has noted, one should distinguish between Talmudic and Masoretic tradition with respect to the structure of the canon. In this regard it is useful to examine more closely the canon of Jerome: a twenty-two-book canon arranged in a tripartite structure—the Law, the Prophets and the Hagiographa. Jerome has only nine books in the Writings as opposed to the Talmudists, who have eleven. As he put it,

some [of the Rabbins] enrol Ruth and Lamentations among the Hagiography, [instead of uniting them with Judges and Jeremiah as Jerome does,] and think that they should be reckoned among their number, and thus the books of the Old Testament would amount to *twenty-four*.<sup>28</sup>

Jerome's list of the Writings is curiously similar to the tradition of the Masoretes, with one important exception: He has chosen to distribute Ruth and Lamentations among the Prophets and has appended Esther at the end of

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 255 (italics his).

the Hagiographa. This decision is apparently motivated by the desire to preserve a list of twenty-two books, with Esther included.

Another way to explain the situation is to take a closer look at both the canon of Josephus and the order of the books as preserved in the Masoretic tradition. Stuart is correct in his conclusion that the Hagiographa of Josephus consisted of four books, but he was not correct in his identification of the books in question. For Stuart the four books of the original Hagiographa were Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.<sup>29</sup> But Job must also belong to this group. As Gregory of Nazianzus put it, there are "five books in metre"—namely, Job, Psalms, and three books of Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs).<sup>30</sup> But how can these five books be counted as four? The answer is rather simple when one takes a close look at the order of the books within the Masoretic tradition. It is not a matter of eliminating one but rather of adding two more—namely, Ruth and Lamentations—to form a predecessor to the festal scrolls, an early form of the Megilloth. The Masoretes effectively retain the number twenty-two in their structure of the canon by incorporating the book of Esther as a fifth scroll within the Megilloth. The acceptance of the book of Esther as part of the canon was apparently not without dispute, such that the very concept of the Megilloth as a canonical category dropped out of sight. The book of Esther was eventually incorporated into the canon, but the very structure of the canon itself was transformed in the process from one of twenty-two to that of twenty-four books. In that process other changes apparently took place, making it somewhat risky to reconstruct the original canon of twenty-two books.

Josephus posited a twenty-two-book canon consisting of five books of Moses, thirteen Prophets and four books in the Hagiographa. One way to explain this arrangement is to take the books as they appear in the Masoretic tradition, with the exception of Esther, and to arrange them as follows:

|          |              |             |            |           |
|----------|--------------|-------------|------------|-----------|
| Genesis  | Leviticus    | Deuteronomy | Joshua     | Samuel    |
| Exodus   | Numbers      |             | Judges     | Kings     |
|          | Isaiah       | Daniel      | Ezekiel    |           |
|          | Jeremiah     |             | The Twelve |           |
| Ezra     | 1 Chronicles |             | Psalms     | Job       |
| Nehemiah | 2 Chronicles |             | Proverbs   | Megilloth |

In this canonical structure, the book of Deuteronomy stands as a bridge connecting the so-called Tetrateuch and the Former Prophets (the Deuteronomic history). The Latter Prophets constitute the center of the canonical structure and are arranged in a chiasmic pattern with Jeremiah//Ezekiel set over against Isaiah//the Twelve. Among the Writings, Daniel serves as a bridge between the work of the Chronicler and the four books that Josephus describes as containing hymns to God and precepts for human life, which are also ar-

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 410.

ranged in chiastic fashion with Proverbs//Job set over against Psalms//Megilloth. The fivefold division of the Psalter that eventually emerges may thus be explained as more than a mere reflection of the five divisions of the Pentateuch. It also corresponds to the Megilloth, the five festal scrolls of Jewish tradition, following the addition of Esther.

The festal scrolls (Megilloth), without the book of Esther, may have been structured as follows:

|               |              |
|---------------|--------------|
| Song of Songs | Lamentations |
| Ruth          | Ecclesiastes |

The outside pair in this structure, Song of Songs//Ecclesiastes, are both associated with Solomon. The inside pair, Ruth//Lamentations, are associated with the beginning and end of the kingdom of David. Together these four festal scrolls constitute a single canonical category comparable to the Book of the Twelve within the second level of the canon, the Latter Prophets.

A simpler version of the canon may stand behind this twenty-two-book structure, one based on the number seventeen, which C. Labuschagne has shown to be of great significance within the canonical process. Such a structure may be diagrammed as follows:<sup>31</sup>

|          |            |             |          |           |
|----------|------------|-------------|----------|-----------|
| Genesis  | Leviticus  | Deuteronomy | Joshua   | Samuel    |
| Exodus   | Numbers    |             | Judges   | Kings     |
| Isaiah   | Ezekiel    |             | Psalms   | Job       |
| Jeremiah | The Twelve |             | Proverbs | Megilloth |

Such a structure may reflect the canon of postexilic Judaism in the Persian period. Deuteronomy would have been the center of this canonical activity, serving as a bridge between the four categories of subsequent Masoretic tradition arranged in chiastic fashion. The Torah is set over against the Hagio-grapha of Josephus, with the Former Prophets set over against the Latter Prophets.

That the number seventeen is significant in early canonical activity is evident from the following chart of the age of the patriarchs at the time of their death in Genesis:<sup>32</sup>

| <i>Patriarch</i> | <i>Age at Death</i>      | <i>Sum of Digits</i> |
|------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Abraham          | 175 = 7 × 5 <sup>2</sup> | 7 + 5 + 5 = 17       |
| Isaac            | 180 = 5 × 6 <sup>2</sup> | 5 + 6 + 6 = 17       |
| Jacob            | 147 = 3 × 7 <sup>2</sup> | 3 + 7 + 7 = 17       |

<sup>31</sup>C. Labuschagne, "The Literary and Theological Function of Divine Speech in the Pentateuch," VTSup 36 (1985) 154-173.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 171. See also my discussion in "Job and the Age of the Patriarchs in Old Testament Narrative," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13 (1986); "Did People Live to Be Hundreds of Years Old Before the Flood?", in *The Genesis Debate: Persistent Questions about Creation and the Flood* (ed. R. Youngblood; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, forthcoming).

The age of Joseph, the ideal age in Egyptian tradition,<sup>33</sup> may have been the starting point in this curious mathematical game, since  $110 = 5^2 + 6^2 + 7^2$ .

At a later point in time the fourfold division of the canon was simplified into three major parts: the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. The original four books of the Hagiographa were expanded with the addition of Esther, Daniel and the work of the Chronicler (Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles). The Masoretic order in regards to the work of the Chronicler thus finds objective support with the repetition of the decree of Cyrus forming an envelope around the work as a whole, which is arranged chiastically.

In short, the canon of Josephus is essentially that of the Masoretic tradition with one important modification. The festal scrolls, or at least an earlier form of them that did not include Esther, constituted a single canonical category within a collection of twenty-two books. By choosing the number of letters of the Hebrew alphabet as a structuring principle, those early scribes also effectively closed their canon. The only way for later works to make it into the collection was for them to be incorporated within existing canonical categories or to transform the very structure of the canon itself. This transformation apparently was accomplished first with the inclusion of Esther to form the Talmudic canon of twenty-four books, and again within the Christian community by the addition of the NT.

<sup>33</sup>N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 226, 231 (nn. 107, 108), who cites twenty-seven such references in Egyptian literature. I am grateful to Ronald Youngblood for this reference.