

The Canon of the Old Testament

We read in Ezra 7.10 that “Ezra prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD and to do it and to teach in Israel the statutes and judgments.” Jewish literature accounts of the “Great Synagogue” which is traditionally associated with the returned exiles and the second temple and by implication with Ezra.

- (1) The “*Great Synagogue*” (founded somewhere circa 458-444 B.C.) is referred to in a document of Hebrew literature called the *Babylonian Gemara* which credits the writing of earlier books to Moses Joshua Samuel David Jeremiah and Hezekiah and his friends (to whom the writing of Isaiah Proverbs Canticles and Ecclesiastes is attributed). According to the *Gemara* the later books were traceable to Ezekiel, the twelve, Daniel Esther Ezra and Nehemiah whilst the “writing” or copying of Chronicles also being attributed to Ezra.
- (2) In *Pirke Aboth* (*Fragments of the Fathers*) we are told that “Moses gave the Torah to the elders who in turn gave it to the prophets who gave it to the men of the great synagogue.” This is a statement about the transmission of scripture. The earliest writings are recorded as having been laid up in the side of the ark. The first five books with Joshua and later Samuel were preserved in this manner. (Deut 31.26, 1Samuel 10.25)
- (3) An interesting testimony remains to us in the prophecy of *Daniel* (606B.C.-540B.C.) where the prophet says, “I understood by *the books* the number of years of the captivity”. Even then a considerable O.T. Canon was extant.
- (4) A letter in 2 Maccabees (circa 165B.C.) offers to Jews in Egypt a copy of the canon which was in the possession of the Maccabean family. 2Maccabees 2 13-15 reads “In the annals and memoirs concerning *Nehemiah we are told the same-how making a library*, he gathered together the books about the kings and (the books) of the prophets and (the writings) of David, and letters from the kings concerning votive offerings. *Likewise Judas collected everything that had been scattered by the war that came over us*, and we are in possession of this collection; so if you are in want of them send men to carry them to you.”
- (5) *Ben Sira* (100 B.C. or earlier) who translated Ecclesiasticus into Greek speaks of his grandfather as an avid reader of “the law the prophets and other writings”
- (6) *The 4th book of Esdras* (again from the end of the first century B.C.) has a salient testimony which reads “Ezra by divine command and by divine aid caused 94 books to be composed by 3 men in 40 days *seventy* of which in which is a vein of understanding, a fount of wisdom and stream of knowledge were given to the wise of the people and the rest were made public.” That remainder was **24 books**-namely Genesis-Deuteronomy with Joshua Judges Samuel Kings Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve Psalms Job Proverbs Ruth Canticles Ecclesiastes Lamentations Esther Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah(taken together) and Chronicles.
- (7) *Josephus Contra Apion i.8* registers **22 books** which we may catalogue as follows: - The five books of Moses-then the thirteen books that record the transition of Jewish history to Artaxerxes 1(Ezra’s day) namely Joshua Judges-Ruth Samuel Kings Isaiah Jeremiah-Lamentations Ezekiel The Twelve Esther Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah Ecclesiastes and Chronicles with the four books of hymns of praise-notably Psalms, Proverbs, Canticles and Job. Josephus’

- evidence is vital giving as it does the formal canon of the Old Testament accepted by the Pharisees and priests and our Lord Himself. (cf Luke 24.44).
- (8) **The LXX** sets Daniel among the “Prophets” and that represents the earlier tradition. The Talmud attempted an alteration because the original “holy writings” were poetic and adapted for praise.
 - (9) The Jewish canon of 24 books equivalent to our 39 was accepted by the **Alexandrian Jews Ben Sirach and Philo** (who added other non-canonical books to his selection). It was also received at Jamnia (A.D.90) and later affirmed by **Melito of Sardis** (2nd cent.A.D.), **Jerome, Eusebius and Origen**. It was only ever Rabbi Shammai who questioned the canonicity of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs but was overruled by the Sanhedrin. The Apocrypha owes its continuance to the Synods of Hippo(A.D.393) and Carthage (A.D. 397) and the overwhelming influence of **Augustine** though in later days he came to see the lesser value of the “LXX Plus grouping” we call the Apocrypha. Since those days only Luther posed a query about the inclusion of the book of Esther in the canon.
 - (10) In the Talmud tract **Baba Bathra** the Old Testament books are catalogued with the following information: “Moses wrote his own books and Bileam and Job; Joshua wrote his book and 8 verses of the law. Samuel wrote his own book and Judges and Ruth; David wrote the Psalms with others as Heman Juduthan Asaph and the Sons of Korah. Jeremiah wrote his own book and the book of Kings and Lamentations. Hezekiah and his friends wrote (Isaiah The Song of Songs Proverbs and Ecclesiastes-books grouped and signified by their first Hebrew Letter qmvy The men of the “Great Synagogue” wrote Ezekiel The twelve Daniel and Megilloth Esther – grouped and signified by the Hebrew gdnq **Ezra wrote his own book and the genealogies of Chronicles** and Nehemiah wrote the remainder.”

In this development the purpose of heart of Ezra is the most outstanding factor-for it promoted the first gathering together of the whole library of scripture since the days of Moses and Samuel where the task was of a lesser sort. Though he is famous for “preaching from a pulpit of wood” Ezra’s great achievement was to have the full canon of the Old Testament copied through the scribal network he established. Nehemiah is credited with getting the texts together. This duo of men left us a legacy which has influenced all future history for the better and set before us and the church of God the holy purpose of God for mankind in concert with His continuing plan for the Jewish people.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF ALEXANDER WHYTE

Let me add some valuable remarks from Alexander Whyte’s 1899 “Bible Characters” on this outstanding son of Aaron.

- (1) Dr. Whyte tells us Ezra was the first scribe in Israel and the first scriptural preacher. He offers us his reading of the letter of Artaxerxes I to Ezra as the rescript of a king to his viceroy in whom the king displayed the utmost confidence.
- (2) Alexander Whyte affirms us in the belief that from Ezra on spiritual life on earth was not to be governed by a building but by a book.
- (3) The deeply insightful Whyte traces the altar – fire in the heart of Ezra back to that day in Babylon when he began to prepare his heart to seek God. That ability to take like a mediator the huge burden of national perfidious conduct upon his

heart and seek God in prayer till the light shone through and others shared his concern demonstrates a man exercised in godliness.

(4) Whyte paints the picture of Ezra expounding the word of God from his pulpit of wood with six elders on one side and seven on the other. He goes on to say that Chrysostom Augustine Calvin Matthew Henry and Thomas Goodwin “all laid out their pulpit life on Ezra’s exact plan – no hackneyed sermons but consecutive preaching-giving the sense and causing the people to understand.”