

“The ‘Council’ of Jamnia”

Objection- “At the end of the first century, the Jews gathered together at the Council at Jamnia (also known as Jabneh or Yabneh) to discuss the canon of Scripture. From this Council, the rabbis drew up an authoritative list of sacred books which is identical to the Jewish / Protestant canon.”

Answer: Unfortunately, this short objection suffers from so many inaccuracies and overstatements that the best way to respond is to provide here a description of the real “council” of Jamnia.

After the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 AD, Rabban Jonathan ben Zakkai asked the Roman General Vespasian, who was well disposed to the Rabbi since it was known that he supported peace with the Romans, to spare the city of Jamnia and its rabbinical scholars.¹ Permission was granted and the school set up in the “vineyards of Jamnia.”² The problems that faced the new school were serious. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem made it impossible to continue the prescribed sacrifices required in the Old Testament. Judaism needed to make a radical change from a cultic (sacrifice and Temple centered) religion to a “religion of the Book.” This change, combined with the growth of Christianity (especially its use of the Jewish Greek Old Testament for evangelism) provided Judaism with the occasion to address the question of the canon of Scripture.³ The information that has come down to us about this canonical activity is fragmentary and certainly open to conjecture.

Note that our objector called this body the *council* of Jamnia. Jamnia was not a *council*, in the sense of the *Council of Trent* or the *Council of Nicaea*, it was rather was an on-going rabbinical school. The idea of a “council” crept into everyone’s vocabulary via the writings of the famous Jewish historian H. Graetz who was the first to call Jamnia a “synode.”⁴ Christians interpreted Graetz’s *synode* to mean *council*. However, the word *council* implies quite a few features that Jamnia did not possess. For example, unlike a Christian council, there were no ballots cast, nor did this body promulgate formal decrees. Rather, Jamnia lasted for a number of years, and its significant opinions is persevered in piecemeal fashion in later Jewish writings. It is difficult to ascertain exactly what Jamnia had for Judaism as a whole. In some ways it acts much like the authoritative body of the Sanhedrin although it never took for itself that name.⁵ Therefore, it is inaccurate to speak about *the* council of Jamnia. It is more accurate description would be a rabbinical *school*.⁶

Jamnia never published or promulgated a list the list of books of the canon nor did it discuss the canon as a whole. Most of the debates surrounded the Book of Ecclesiastes and possibly the Song of Songs.⁷ Even so, there is no evidence that the decisions of this school were binding upon the Jewish popular at large.⁸ In fact, rabbinical disputes over the inspiration of certain books (e.g. the fringe books and Sirach) persisted throughout the first three Christian centuries. For this reason, the Protestant scholar F.F. Bruce wisely warns against stating that the assembly at Jamnia “laid down the limits” of the Old Testament canon.⁹

¹ See *The Encyclopedia of Talmudic Sages*, Gershom Bader ed., Translated by Solomon Katz, (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc.), 152-154 for various rabbinical accounts of Rabban Johnathan ben Zakkai’s escape from the siege of Jerusalem and his role in beginning the school at Jamnia.

² There is some question as to whether the “vineyards of Jamnia” refer to the meeting place of the school (i.e. the met in a vineyard) or that the school of was organized like a vine with grapes. The school began under rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai (70 AD) until the time of the second Jewish Revolt under rabbi Akiba ben Joseph (132 AD). After the Second Revolt, the school of reconstituted at Usha.

³ W.O.E. Oesterley, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha* (London: SPCK, 1958), 122-123

⁴ A.C. Sundberg, “The Old Testament of the Early Church Revisited,” – Graetz may have borrowed this terminology from Jewish Philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s comment about the “concilium Pharisaeorum.”

⁵ Lieman, 121.

⁶ See *ABD*, 1.841.

⁷ Cox, 44; See M. Yadayim, 3:5.

⁸ cf. *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Coronet Books, reprint 1994) 6.1147.

⁹ Bruce, 34.

Like the two-canon theory, the Jamnia theory has fallen on hard times. As the Jewish scholar Sid Leiman concludes:

“The widespread view that the Council of Jamnia closed the biblical canon, or that it canonized any books at all, is not supported by the evidence and need no longer be seriously maintained.”¹⁰

If there were a candidate for an authoritative closing of the Old Testament canon in the first century AD, Jamnia would probably be it. However, there is no evidence that such a closing occurred this early in the life of this school.

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¹⁰ Lieman, 124. Also see *ABD*, 1.843 – the evidence for a closed canon prior to the end of the first Christian century is “at best weak and unconvincing.”