

## The Palestinian / Alexandrian Canon Theory

*Objection - The Jews in Palestine spoke Hebrew. The readings given in their synagogues were only from the Hebrew Bible and as a result they accepted only those Scriptures that were composed in Hebrew. Hence, the Jews in Palestine accepted the shorter canon. The Jews in Alexandria held a different perspective. They were a Greek-speaking people and were quite comfortable with the Greek Septuagint. These Jews freely accepted Greek writings into their canon, which was larger than that of Palestine. The New Testament writers used the Greek Septuagint, not because it was their Bible, but because it was the commonly accepted text of the Jews of the Diaspora, which was their missionary field. Eventually Christianity became predominantly gentile and many accepted uncritically the whole of the Septuagint as Scripture. Meanwhile, the Jewish rabbis continued to use the Hebrew Bible that Jesus and the apostles used. The Protestant Bible, therefore, reflects the original and authentic Palestinian canon.*

Answer: The Palestinian / Alexandrian theory was first proposed by Protestants in the first decades of the eighteenth century as a possible explanation as to why Christians and Jews held two different canons.<sup>1</sup> And given the amount that was known about Judaism at the time of Christ, this theory seemed quite reasonable. So much so, that not a few Catholic scholars also adopted the Alexandrian canon theory as their own. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other findings, this theory can no longer since many of its premises have been demonstrated to be inaccurate, implausible or not historical. Credit for the eventual demise of this theory goes to the Harvard biblical scholar A.C. Sundberg whose doctoral thesis on this subject exposed several of the theory's unsubstantiated assumptions. For example:

- 1) The Alexandrian theory had assumed that all the disputed books were originally written in Greek so that the Hebrew speaking Palestinian Jews would not accept them. It has been demonstrated that all of the disputed books, except Wisdom and Second Maccabees, were originally written in Hebrew. Therefore, they likely originated in Palestine and not in Alexandria.
- 2) The strict separation of Hebrew speaking Palestine and Greek speaking Alexandria has been demonstrated to be false. Archeology has revealed that the Holy Land, and particularly Jerusalem, in the first Christian century was quite Hellenized and a large number of Jew residing in Palestine spoke Greek. Some scholars have speculated that the Septuagint may have also been read in some of the Palestinian synagogues of this period.<sup>2</sup> Palestinian Jews were a bilingual people speaking Aramaic (Hebrew) and Greek.
- 3) The Alexandrian theory also assumes that the Greek Septuagint was the Bible of Alexandrian Jews and not those in Palestine. However, the Septuagint is known to have circulated throughout Palestine in the first century. Fragments of the Septuagint (including fragments of Tobit and Sirach) have been found at Qumran and Massada. While no definite determination can be made as to whether these fragments were used as Scripture, their presence does demonstrate that the Septuagint was known and used in and around Palestine during first century. Therefore, the New Testament writers may not have selected the LXX because it was accepted throughout the Diaspora, but perhaps because it was the text currently accepted in Palestine at that time.
- 4) Another piece of evidence that deserves mention is the so-called Kaige Recension. The Kaige Recension is a Greek copy of Scripture that was produced by the Pharisees in the first century BC. The text was adjusted to fit a recension of Scripture that existed prior to the fixed Hebrew text of later Rabbinical Judaism. Despite its Pharisaic origin, the Kaige Recension included the disputed Book of Baruch as well as the disputed portions of the Book of Daniel. This indicates, according to Sundberg,

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<sup>1</sup> Sundberg identifies John Salomo Semler (1771), J.E. Grabe (1884) and T. Lews (1715) to be among the first to propose that the Jews of Alexandria possessed a different canon than Palestine. "The Old Testament: A Christian Canon." *CBQ* 30 (1968) 144

<sup>2</sup> Hengel, 108.

that the Old Testament canon (even of the Pharisees) was not fixed by the beginning of the first century.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, is it no longer possible to postulate two well-defined, separate and distinct canons (Palestine / Alexandria). The Septuagint (perhaps with the disputed books) is therefore no longer seen as the sole property of the Jews of the dispersion. The Jews in Palestine may have used it as well.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Septuagint seems to have resided in Palestine long enough to undergo a distinctive Palestinian Recension.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> cf. Sundberg, Albert C. Jr., "Old Testament in the Early Church: Revisited," the *Festschrift in Honor of Charles Speel*, edited by Thomas J. Sienkewicz and James E. Betts (Monmouth College, Illinois) 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. McDonald, 91.

<sup>5</sup> Sundberg, *ibid.*