

Arguments From The New Testament

“The New Testament Does Not Quote the Disputed Books”

Objection #1 – “The extensive use of quotations from the Old Testament by the New Testament writers reveals the extant of the canon for the early Church. Clearly, all the books of the Old Testament are quoted; often with the formal appellation: ‘Thus saith the Lord’ and ‘It is written.’ The disputed books are never quoted in the New Testament, much less with any solemn formula.”

Answer: This objection seriously overstates the use of quotations in the New Testament. For this reason, most Protestant apologists today prefer to use the more carefully qualified Objection #2 given below.

It is not true that every book of the Protestant Old Testament is quoted in the New Testament. In fact, there are several books whose quotations are absent. For example, the New Testament does not quote the books of Judges, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Obadiah, Nahum, Esther, the Song of Songs or from the book of Ecclesiastes.¹ The absence of Esther, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes is of particular interest since Jewish rabbis, well into the first two Christian centuries, had debated their inspired status. For this reason, scholars sometimes refer to them as “fringe” books since they seem to be the last books to definitively make it into the rabbinical canon. In this regard, H.E. Ryle points out:

“The three ‘disputed’ books, Esther, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes, receive the New Testament no support, either by quotation, or *by allusion*, for their place among the canonical Scriptures. On the other hand, it would be rash to infer from their contents not being mentioned or referred to, that writers of the New Testament did not regard of them as canonical.”²

According to Ryle, the lack of a quotation (or even an allusion) to an Old Testament book does not *de facto* rule out the possibility of its inclusion in the canon. Otherwise the books of Esther, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes would be rejected as well.³ Since the New Testament fails to replicate the Protestant canon of the Old Testament, the argument produce in Objection #1 fails.

The fact of the matter is that the lack of quotations does not provide evidence that the New Testament has rejected a given book’s canonical status; just as a quotation does not affirm book’s canonicity.⁴ At best, the use of quotations (or lack of quotations) argues only for probability and as F.F. Bruce notes, “Arguments from probability are weighted differently from different judges.”⁵ Nothing definitive can be concluded from the absence of a quote since it is impossible to determine whether it was deliberately omitted or that the writer simply didn’t find an occasion to include it in his book.

¹ Some may argue that the Twelve Minor Prophets were always considered as a block of writing, therefore the inspired status of Obidah and Nahum are assured by other quotes from the Minor Prophets. The twenty-sixth edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament (Eberhard Nestle et al., eds., Novem Testamentum Graece, 26th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979), 739-75) omits the cited quotations of the books of Judges, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations and Esther. The United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (Kurt Aland, et al., eds., The Greek New Testament, 3rd ed. (New York, London, Edinburgh, Amsterdam, and Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975), 897-900) also included the books of Joshua, Ecclesiastes, Ezra, Nehemiah and the books of Chronicles.

² Herbert Edward Ryle, *The Canon of the Old Testament: An Essay on the Gradual Growth and Formation of the Hebrew Canon of Scripture*, (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1904), 162 (emphasis mine)

³ When we address the positive arguments for the inclusion of the disputed books, we will point out several instances where the disputed books are referenced, alluded to, or perhaps loosely quoted in the New Testament. This is still more substantial reference to the disputed books than what Ryle assigns to the books of Esther, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes!

⁴ See, McDonald, 98-99

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 41

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