

“The Twenty-Four Books of 4th Ezra”

We all have heard of the Book of Ezra, but few are familiar with Fourth Ezra. Don't search your Bible for it because it's not there. Fourth Ezra is an apocryphal document whose author and origin are unknown. The best guess is that it was likely penned somewhere in the East during the last decade of the first Christian century by a Christian. Although it was never part of the Septuagint, it did make its way into the Latin Vulgate.¹ The passage that concerns our objector is Fourth Ezra 14:39-48, which reads:

”Then I opened my mouth, and behold, a full cup was offered to me; it was full of something like water, but its color was like fire. And I took it and drank; and when I had drunk it, my heart poured forth understanding, and wisdom increased in my breast, for my spirit retained its memory; and my mouth was opened, and was no longer closed. And the Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated, in characters which they did not know. They sat forty days, and wrote during the daytime, and ate their bread at night. As for me, I spoke in the daytime and was not silent at night. *So during the forty days ninety-four books were written.* And when the forty days were ended, the Most High spoke to me, saying, *”Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people.* For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge.” And I did so.”

Objection: “Here we have an affirmation that a divinely appointed minister, Ezra, was commissioned to fix the canon of Scripture at twenty-four books. Therefore, the shorter canon was closed prior to Christ.”

Answer: Does *Fourth Ezra* affirm the shorter canon? Certainly, it is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, writing to connect the number twenty-four with the books of the Old Testament. This rather obscure tale does not provide as clear-cut an affirmation of the shorter canon as our objector hopes. According to *Fourth Ezra*, God did inspired Ezra to write *ninety-four* books! It is only when the ninety-four books are divided into two groups that the number twenty-four appears. If this passage teaches anything, it would be that God inspired ninety-four books of which only twenty-four were made public. This is, of course, absurd. Why then did the author make mention of twenty-four books? According to this narrative, Ezra was to make public those books that were written before his time, namely twenty-four books.²

As a historical witness, *Fourth Ezra* is practically worthless. It is an apocryphal story written hundreds of years after Ezra. Had this event actually occurred, it would have found its way into some Jewish writing and debates on the authority of the “fringe books” would not have occurred. As Breen recounts, the activities of Ezra found in this book “are more or less imbued with rabbinical fable. But perhaps, there may be some slight truth in these which has been distorted by the vagaries of the Rabbis, still it is hard to glean it from the composite mass.”³ No scholar today (Jewish, Catholic or Protestant) holds *Fourth Ezra* to be a historically reliable source.

© 2004 by Gary Michuta. All Rights Reserved. This is copyrighted material. No copying, distribution or reproduction (electronic or otherwise) is permitted without express permission from the copyright owner.

¹ Although Fourth Ezra is not a Jewish source, for the sake of continuity, we are going to including it in this chapter.

² Even if the author accepted the larger canon, the narrative necessitates Ezra to make public only twenty-four books since he could not have been commanded to make public those books that were not yet written! The thought of Ezra making public the books of Maccabees would be absurd. Therefore, the number twenty-four is a product of the Ezra narrative and not a witness to a closed canon.

³ Breen, 251.