

Introduction

The following books: Tobit, Judith, Esther (the Greek text), Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, 1 Maccabees, and 2 Maccabees, formed part of the Septuagint Greek text and were interspersed among other books of the Old Testament.

This Greek text was widely used by Jews and was also known by many Gentiles who were attracted to the high moral teachings of the Old Testament, but did not themselves become converts to Judaism. Thus early Christianity, as it spread among Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles, employed this Greek text. The majority of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament are based on this translation.

Precisely when Jewish leadership officially adopted the traditional 39 books of the so-called "Hebrew Canon" is not known; nor is there agreement as to exactly what criteria were used in determining this canon. According to tradition the Hebrew canon was fixed about AD 90, but there is evidence that official agreement on this issue came somewhat later.

Among Christians it was apparently only in the fourth century that the issue of the canonicity of the books mentioned in the first paragraph arose. Jerome denied their canonicity on the grounds that they were not part of the Hebrew Bible, and placed them in a separate section in his Vulgate translation of the Old Testament.

In 1546 at the Council of Trent the Roman Catholic Church officially declared these books to be sacred and canonical.

Martin Luther did not regard these books as Scripture but as "useful and good for reading". In his German translation of the Bible he followed Jerome in placing them at the end of the Old Testament with the superscription "Apocrypha". Protestants generally continued this practice in their translations of the Bible into other languages.

Christians of all traditions, however, recognize the importance of these books in providing much valuable information on Jewish history, life, thought, worship, and religious practice during the centuries immediately before the time of Christ. They make possible a clearer understanding of the historical and cultural situation in which Jesus lived and taught.

Roman Catholics speak of these books as "deuterocanonical" to indicate that their canonical status as Scripture was settled later than that of the protocanonical books. Others usually refer to these books as Apocrypha.