

THE STATE OF THE DEAD
IN THE DEUTEROCANONICAL TEXTS:
EVALUATING AN ADVENTIST CRITICISM

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It stands to reason that the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* is tenable only after the boundaries of Scripture have been recognized and agreed upon. To limit our study to the scriptural material, we must be able to definitively identify that material. Ascertaining the definitive limits of the inspired writings (which books are to be included, and which books are to be excluded) thereby proves a decisive exercise; the addition or subtraction of a single book could have far-reaching consequences.

Adventists believe that only 39 Old Testament and 27 New Testament books constitute inspired Scripture. Strictly employing this collection to define their theology, they thereby condemn many doctrines embraced by ancient Christianity as “unscriptural.” By contrast, ancient Christians accepted a much wider collection of scriptures as inspired. John H. Hayes notes,

The final tripartite Jewish canon... was a product of the second century CE.

When we turn to the Old Testament canon in the Christian church, several general factors should be kept in mind. (1) The early church did not inherit a closed canon of normative scriptures from Judaism. (2) The church did receive from Judaism the Law (the five books of Moses) as authoritative and normative and probably also those works which Judaism designated the Prophets. In addition to these, Christianity was heir to numerous other sacred writings, many of revered and widespread usage. (3) The early church, due to its rapid orientation to the Greco-Roman world, utilized the scriptures in Greek translations as had some Jewish communities for some time. (4) The early church developed its own Old Testament, which was more inclusive than the Hebrew canon and was characterized by a different order for many of the writings.¹ (*An Introduction to Old Testament Study*, 16-44)

¹ Hayes, John H. “The Canon of the Old Testament,” *An Introduction to Old Testament Studies*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1979. 16-44.

Three of the texts received as inspired Scripture by ancient (and modern) Catholics advanced a belief in the intermediate state. Relevant passages from each are reviewed below.

Sirach

Sirach (also referred to as Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of the Son of Sirach) was composed in Hebrew between the years 200 and 175 BCE. Written as a guide for moral instruction, it bears many similarities to the traditional wisdom literature of the Hebrew Old Testament, including a limited knowledge of man's final destiny. The author explicitly states that once dead, man has no hope of returning to the land of the living (38:20-22), apparently excluding the prospect of a resurrection (cf. similar instances of limited perspective in wisdom literature: Ps 88:5; Eccl 9:3). The author also displays a certain ambiguity concerning the present state of the dead. In language reminiscent of the psalms, he compares the abilities of the living to praise the Lord with those of the dead:

Turn again to the Most High and away from sin,
hate intensely what he loathes.
Who in the nether world [grave] can glorify the Most High
in place of the living offer their praise?
No more can the dead give praise than those who have never lived;
they glorify the LORD who are alive and well. (17:21-23)

And yet, though he states that the dead are deprived of the (physical) faculty of praising God, he still believes in some form of existence after death, apparent in his review of the life of Samuel:

Even when he lay buried, his guidance was ought;
he made known to the king his fate,
And from the grave he raised his voice
as a prophet, to put an end to wickedness. (47:20)

Though buried, the writer believes Samuel exists in some limited form, allowing him to (situationally) speak from the realm of the dead (cf. a similar conviction in the author of 1 Samuel 28.)

Similarly, early Christians did not interpret certain verses in the psalms (e.g. those that say the dead are devoid of the faculty of praising God) as categorical rejections of an existence transcending physical death. Embracing Sirach as "holy scripture" (as modern Catholics do), they believed that Samuel still lives in some form, as also their departed brothers and sisters in Christ. And, within the resurrection hope of Christianity, they could confidently anticipate a resurrection of the dead though earlier Old Testament writers did not apprehend the same.

Wisdom

The book of Wisdom, written in Alexandria about the year 100 BCE, was among the most highly regarded works of literature in the early Church. Its second chapter begins by recording the foolish thoughts of evil men, who deny the possibility of resurrection (2:1) or any post-mortem existence (2:2-3). Blinded by their wickedness, they plan to murder a just man (2:12-21), not grasping the true destiny of the righteous (2:21-22) The author asserts that though the just man may appear dead, his soul is at peace in the hands of God:

But the souls of the just are in the hand of God,
and no torment shall touch them.
They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;
and their passing away was thought an affliction
and their going forth from us, utter destruction.
But they are in peace.
For if before men, indeed, they be punished,
yet is their hope full of immortality;

The author then foresees their final reward at “the time of their visitation,” that is, the eschatological judgment (cf. 4:20):

As gold in the furnace, he proved them,
and as sacrificial offerings he took them to himself.
In the time of their visitation they shall shine,
and shall dart about as sparks through stubble;
They shall judge nations and rule over peoples,
and the LORD shall be their King forever. (3:1-4,6-8)

Although no direct reference is made to a physical resurrection at the “time of the visitation,” the author nonetheless acknowledges that it is within divine power to resurrect the dead. (16:13; cf. 2:1)

These insights into the destiny of man after death are reportedly secreted among “the hidden counsels of God” (v.22), here unsealed to encourage the righteous. The didactic nature of the passage (in contrast to the incidental or literary references to death in other Old Testament texts) established it as a definitive source for information regarding the afterlife in those Christian communities who to this day embrace its inspiration.

2 Maccabees

Scholars estimate that the second book of Maccabees was written shortly before the year 100 BCE. It describes the military exploits of the Jews during the Maccabean period. On the eve of a climactic battle

against Nicanor, Judas Maccabeus encourages his troops with by relating a “vision, worthy of belief” (15:11) It concerns two (now deceased) figures of acclaim in the Jewish tradition: Jeremiah the prophet, and Onias the high priest (cf. 3:1-40).

What he saw was this: Onias, the former high priest, a good and virtuous man, modest in appearance, gentle in manners, distinguished in speech, and trained from childhood in every virtuous practice, was praying with outstretched arms for the whole Jewish community. Then in the same way another man appeared, distinguished by his white hair and dignity, and with an air about him of extraordinary, majestic authority. Onias then said of him, “This is God's prophet Jeremiah, who loves his brethren and fervently prays for his people and their holy city.” Stretching out his right hand, Jeremiah presented a gold sword to Judas. As he gave it to him he said, “Accept this holy sword as a gift from God; with it you shall crush your adversaries.” (15:12-16)

This passage is an early expression of trust in the intercession of the saints. The Maccabean soldiers find comfort in the prayers offered by those figures in the intermediate state, who presently anticipate a final resurrection (the promise of which is repeated in 7:9-36; 12:44; 14:46).

Accordingly, a belief in the constant prayers of the departed also encouraged early Christian communities, who framed their theology of the afterlife in accordance with passages they received as sacred scripture. Not surprisingly, their spiritual descendants in the Catholic faith (who also number 2 Maccabees among the inspired writings) preserve these ancient beliefs.

Conclusion

Ancient Christians did not possess a closed, normative and universal collection of the inspired writings. Is it proper, then, to condemn the beliefs of ancient Christians as “unbiblical,” holding them against a later standard (the canon of Protestants) that did not then exist, nor would for another 1,400 years? In actuality, these communities were preeminently “biblical”: constructing their theology from the Scriptures as they recognized them.

Modern Catholics preserve these scriptures and the theology of the ancient Church. If an Adventist would challenge Catholic doctrine as “unbiblical,” he applies a standard with no universal validity. *Sola Scriptura* fails precisely when ambiguity overtakes the word “scriptura.”