

Norm Geisler and the Special Parchment

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While surfing the web and checking the status of the Deuterocanon debate, I noticed that several Protestant websites were making identical (or nearly identical) points against the Deuterocanon, as if they had copied and pasted a text from some common source.

One of the more unusual points made was that scholars believe the Jewish community at Qumran rejected the Deuterocanon as Scripture because the deuterocanonical fragments found weren't copied in a "special script" or written on "special parchment" that was reserved for biblical texts. I've never heard of such a thing. After a little digging, I traced the source of these articles to Dr. Normal Geisler, who makes this point in several of his articles against the Deuterocanon. But what was this special biblical script and parchment?

It has been my impression that Dead Sea Scrolls researchers now believe that the Qumran sect held to a much larger "canon" (if that word can be used at this early date) than the Protestant Bible including such books as Tobit, Sirach, Enoch, and others. A strict demarcation like the use of a special biblical script or special parchment would be, I would think, a silver bullet argument against these theories, yet none of the scholars I've consulted (i.e., Tov, VanderKam, Lim, etc.) ever mention it in their works.

Of course, Dead Sea scroll scholarship is a huge field and it's quite possible that I simply missed something like this. But the issue was important enough to find out more about these supposed biblical indicators.

"SPECIAL" PARCHMENT AND SCRIPT?

My initial search found nothing. Only three types of materials used at Qumran, papyrus, parchment (leather), and copper. Copper is the rarest. It is used only for one scroll and it contains non-biblical material.

As far as biblical texts are concerned, Qumran yielded copies on both papyrus *and* parchment although most biblical texts are written on parchment. Sirach ([2Q18](#)) is written on parchment and Tobit ([4Q197-200](#)) is written on both papyrus and parchment. Therefore, there is nothing here to distinguish the Deuterocanonical fragments from the other biblical fragments. It's possible there could have been different kinds of parchment used, but I was unable to find anything in the sources I consulted.

WHAT ABOUT THE SPECIAL HEBREW SCRIPT?

The Hebrew texts at Qumran are written in either square script or paleo-Hebrew.¹ The Deutero texts and most of the protocanonical texts are written in square. Only a few, [15 to be exact](#), are written with

¹ There also is a special Qumran Hebrew, but this doesn't affect our discussion.

paleo-Hebrew script. Most of these come from the Pentateuch (1Q3, 2Q5, 4Q11, 4Q12, 4Q22, 4Q45, 4Q46, 4Q101, 6Q1, 6Q2, 11Q1) and one from Job (4Q101). There is also a paleo-Hebrew fragment from a work similar to Joshua, 4Q paleo paraJoshua (4Q123), which can best be described as a paraphrase of Joshua 21. Scholars are still debating whether this fragment comes from a re-written book of Joshua known as the *Apocryphon of Joshua*, or a variant of the canonical book of Joshua. The jury is still out as to whether it can be classified as a biblical text. There are three others (4Q124, 4Q125, 11Q22) that have so far eluded identification. Therefore, it is inconclusive whether paleo-Hebrew was exclusively used for biblical texts. But even if paleo-Hebrew were the "special script" mentioned, it could hardly be an indicator of a biblical text since the majority of biblical fragments are in square script, just like the deuterocanonical fragments. There's no clear demarcation here. Where then did Geisler find this information?

FINDING THE SOURCE

Unable to find anything, I turned my attention to Geisler's statements to see if I could find any clues as to what these special biblical features could be. He makes the point several times in his works.

The earliest that I could find is in his book, [Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences](#), co-authored by Ralph MacKenzie (Baker Publishing Group, 1995), which says:

"...But the fact that no commentaries were found on an apocryphal book and that *only canonical books, not the Apocrypha, were found in the special parchment and script indicates that the Qumran community did not view the apocryphal books as canonical.* The noted scholar on the Dead Sea Scrolls, Millar Burroughs (sic), concluded: 'There is no reason to think that any of these works were venerated as Sacred Scripture' (p. 165)(emphasis mine).

Citations to Mansoor and Burrows are included in his footnotes. No clues here.

In Geisler's 1998 work [Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics \(Baker Reference Library\)](#), (Baker Academic, 1998) in an article titled, "Apocrypha, Old and New Testaments" he wrote:

"*Apocryphal Writings at Qumran...*The fact that no commentaries were found for an Apocryphal book, and *only canonical books were found in the special parchment and script indicates that the Apocryphal books were not viewed as canonical by the Qumran community.* Menahem Mansoor lists the following fragments of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha: Tobit, in Hebrew and Aramaic; Enoch in Aramaic; Jubilees in Hebrew; Testament of Levi and Naphtali, in Aramaic; Apocryphal Daniel literature, in Hebrew and Aramaic, and Psalms of Joshua (Mansoor, 203). The noted scholar on the Dead Sea Scrolls, Millar Burroughs (sic), concluded: 'There is no reason to think that any of these works were venerated as Sacred Scripture' (Burroughs (sic), 178)." (Emphasis mine)

In his [The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible](#) co-authored by Joseph Holden (Baker Academic, 2013), Geisler says essentially the same thing in a slightly different fashion:

"Interestingly, there were no commentaries found in the caves at Qumran on any book within the Apocrypha. *Only the canonical books were found, written on special parchment in the sacred script.* Based on the finding at Qumran, the Apocrypha was not viewed as canonical by the Qumran community" (p. 90)(Emphasis mine).

Here Geisler's canonical indicators are described as "special parchment in the sacred script." No sources are cited.

However, in his book [To Understand the Bible Look for Jesus: The Bible Student's Guide to the Bible's Central Theme](#) (Wipf & Stock Pub, Reprint 2002), Geisler gives a little more information in a footnote against the "Apocrypha:"

"Even the Messianic cult at Qumran possessed Apocryphal books but apparently did not esteem them of equal value with the sacred Scriptures. Millar Burrows, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking, 1958), p. 178 says of the Apocrypha, 'There is no reason to think that any of these works were venerated as Sacred Scripture.' *Scholars cite several different lines of evidence for viewing the Apocrypha as noncanonical in Qumran: (1) the absence of any commentaries on the Apocryphal books, (2) the failure to find any Apocryphal books written on the more valuable writing materials like parchment, (3) and even the failure to find any Apocryphal books written in the special (taller) script, as were the canonical books*" (p. 23, FN 1).

Finally, here are some clues! The Burrows quotation (spelled correctly this time) is given followed by a bit more descriptive account of what constitutes the special writing material and script. The "canonical" texts, he says, were "written on the more valuable writing materials like parchment" and the special script is describes as being "taller" (apparently in comparison to a "shorter" script used for profane sources).

The most important clue, however, was the placement of the Burrows quote. Could it be that Geisler got his information from Burrows?

"MORE LIGHT..." ON THE SPECIAL SCRIPT

I quickly jumped on my favor used book website and ordered Burrows' book to see if it could point me in the right direction. When I received it, I immediately became aware of a very serious problem. Burrows' book was past its freshness date and when I say "past its freshness date" I mean "way past its freshness date" even when Geisler quoted it back in the 90s. Burrows' work was completed in 1957 and published in 1958. The scrolls were discovered in 1947 and excavations continued until 1956. This is excavations, not publication. Dead Sea scroll research was still in its infancy when Burrows wrote this! Solid conclusions were still a long time off, as Burrows himself states in the preface:

"The interpretation and even the publication of the [Qumran] texts, it is true, have only begun. No complete account will be possible for many years. Enough progress has been

made, however, to warrant a survey of the present state of the Dead Sea Scroll studies" (p. xi).

His book, therefore, is a survey of the "present state of the Dead Sea Scroll studies" in 1957! Anyone familiar with the history of the publication of the Dead Sea Scroll fragments knows that this is a very serious problem. Moreover, as Burrows noted, it would take many years (read decades) before scholars would be able to sift through all the data, publish theories, and engage in critical peer review and debate before solid explanations and interpretations can be made. Burrows' book comes before any of this takes place. In fact, much of his information comes from second hand knowledge gleaned from those who had access to the fragments at that time.

I immediately turned to page 177 titled "The Apocrypha and Other Post-biblical Works; Languages and Paleography" to see what Burrows has to say about the "Apocrypha" and its biblical status at Qumran. The answer is "not much." After discussing the different languages the Deuterocanon may have been originally written in, he states:

"The Qumran fragments of Sirach and Tobit have not yet been published, and not much information about them has been released. One of the Aramaic copies of Tobit is on papyrus; the other one and the Hebrew copy are on leather. The Ecclesiasticus fragments also are of leather. It may be assumed, in the absence of information to the contrary, that all these manuscripts are non-canonical in format and script" (p. 177).

That's about it. But even in this short paragraph there are several surprising things:

(1) Geisler repeatedly stated in his articles that the "Apocrypha" was not written on special parchment. Indeed, Geisler even states, in the footnote in the "*To Understand the Bible...*" that they did not find any of the Deuterocanon "...written on the more valuable writing materials like parchment" while Burrows even at this early date knew that both Tobit and Sirach *were* found on parchment (leather)!

(2) Burrows states that when he wrote this chapter the fragments of Sirach and Tobit had "not yet been published, and not much information about them has been released." No surprise there since it was written in 1957. But this explains why Burrows has so little to say about the Deuterocanon, there wasn't really any data for him to look at.

(3) Moreover, Burrows' conclusion that the Deuterocanonical fragments were in a "non-canonical" format and script was not a statement of fact, but merely an assumption. He assumed, since he didn't possess any evidence to the contrary, they the "Apocrypha" wasn't found in this special format and leaves this assumption open to future correction.

These three points calls for serious pause as to whether Geisler statements about special parchments and scripts are well-founded.

But the oddest thing about the Burrows quote on the "Apocrypha" is that it does *not* contain the text that Geisler repeatedly makes concerning Qumran and the Deuterocanon. The quote comes, not from

the "Apocrypha" paragraph but on the following page where Burrows' comments are not directed to the deuterocanonical fragments (which he had little information to draw on) but the Pseudepigrapha.

Immediately after the paragraph quoted above, Burrows turns his attention to the "other" manuscripts - the Pseudepigrapha and the sectarian writings - found at Qumran, stating:

"The large number of *other works* represented by scrolls or fragments in the caves of the Wady Qumran is clear from the brief account of them already given (pp. 27-36). *Some of them*, we have seen, were already known in Greek or other translations and *were commonly included among the books called Pseudepigrapha*. *Many others were entirely unknown* until they appeared in the remains of the Qumran library. There is no reason to think that any of these works were venerated as sacred Scripture" (p. 177-178, Emphasis mine, Geisler's quote is underlined).

As you can see, Burrows is not commenting on the Deuterocanon, as Geisler states, but "a large number of *other works*" that were "already known... and were commonly *included among the books of the Pseudepigrapha*" and "many others" that were not known. It seems to me that Geisler's quote is misleading and misrepresents Burrows' tentative view on the Deuterocanon.

COULD THIS BE THE SPECIAL PARCHMENT AND SCRIPT?

The fact that Burrows mentioned a special canonical "format and script" in his paragraph on the "Apocrypha" indicates that he must have discussed these features somewhere in the preceding context. I scanned the previous chapter and sure enough Burrows does indeed discuss Qumran and the biblical canon. After discussing the then current hypotheses as to why no fragment of the book of Esther was found, Burrows states the following:

"New evidence of a distinction between sacred and other literature at Qumran, which affords also a means of determine how each book was regarded, has recently been brought forward."

Again, this "new evidence" was recently brought forward in 1957. But Burrows' discussion about the special script did not concern the Deuterocanon, but the protocanonical book of Daniel, strangely enough. Burrows writes:

"If reliable, this is important, because it indicates that one of the books in the Jewish and Hebrew canon, the book of Daniel, was not regarded as sacred Scripture in the Qumran community. The official publication of the fragments excavated in Cave 1 includes a transcription of the Daniel fragments acquired by Archbishop Samuel in 1948. Commenting on them, Barthelemy remarks that in the other biblical manuscripts of Cave 1 the height of the columns is double the width, whereas the height and width of the columns in these Daniel fragments are approximately equal. Pieces of a copy of Daniel written on papyrus, Barthelemy adds, have been found in Cave 6, whereas the other biblical manuscripts in Hebrew are made of leather" (p. 175-176).

If I didn't know better, I would say that this is the "taller" script and special (leather) parchment mentioned by Geisler in his "*To Understand the Bible...*" footnote. Did Geisler get his "special script" and "special parchment" idea from Burrows? I hope not because that would raise several problems:

(1) Burrow's "new evidence" of a biblical distinction was put forward before the publication and full disclosure of the fragments took place.

(2) Burrows doesn't state that the special format idea was a fact, but only a theory "put forward" by some scholars. Moreover, Burrows qualifies his acceptance of this theory with the words "If reliable...", where Geisler states it as a fact.

(3) Geisler suggests that Qumran accepted the later rabbinical canon (i.e., the Protestant canon), but Burrows' comments suggests that according to the special format idea the protocanonical book of Daniel would have not been considered canonical. Someone could respond by saying, "Well, maybe Daniel was later found in this format. Therefore, it was considered canonical." If so, it would also show that "canonical" books can be in either format, which would considerably weaken Geisler's point and show how shaky his argument from silence really is.

(4) In the following paragraph, Burrows references Frank M Cross Jr., who states that subsequent discoveries (before 1958) had already called into question whether a strict demarcation of "canonical" texts via the use of parchment and script could be made. Burrows wrote:

"Cross points out that since Barthelemy wrote this statement a papyrus manuscript of I-II Kings from Cave 6 has been identified. He agrees, however, that the practice of the Qumran scribes in copying biblical manuscripts was fairly uniform. They usually wrote on leather, usually made the columns twice as high as they were wide, and usually used either the old Hebrew script or the formal "bookhand" of the square script, though a very few biblical scrolls in a cursive script were found in Cave 4. Recognizing therefore that there were exceptions to the standard procedure, Cross notes..." (p. 176).

Where Geisler argues that a fragment not found written in the special "taller" script and parchment was not considered canonical, Burrows states that this is not true in all cases citing Cross who says that biblical manuscripts were "usually" in this format, but there are exceptions. Therefore, even if Geisler did not get this idea solely from Burrows, he should have known (reading Burrows) that these special formats could not be used as a strict rule, which he does in his apologies.

Later, I ran across a more recent book that touches on the special format idea. It is Emmanuel Tov's work *Hebrew Bible, Greek Bible and Qumran: Collected Essays* (Mohr Siebeck, 2008) within a section titled: *Special Procedures for Biblical Texts?* Tov writes:

"...the corpus of texts from the Judean Desert, when taken as a whole, shows that the scribes made little distinction when copying sacred and nonsacred manuscripts, and more specifically biblical and nonbiblical manuscripts. In some circles a limited or even rigid distinction was made between these two types of manuscripts...However, this distinction is not reflected in the Judean Desert texts when taken as a whole." p. 126

Tov continues:

"When reading the instruction in rabbinic literature regarding the writings of sacred texts, the impression is created that these instructions are specific to sacred texts, but from the Qumran text it is now evident that in most instances identical procedures were also applied to nonsacred texts. The only differences between the copying of biblical and nonbiblical texts that are visible in the text from the Judean Deserts are:

- Biblical texts from the Judean Deserts were almost exclusively written on parchment
- Biblical texts were inscribed on only one side of the parchment unlike an undetermined (small) number of nonbiblical opisthographs from the Judean Desert.
- a de luxe format was used especially for biblical scrolls.
- a special stichographic layout was devised for the writing of several poetical sections of many biblical scrolls, as well as one nonbiblical scroll" (p. 127).

As you can see, Tov carefully qualifies these distinctions much like Cross did in the Burrows book. Ironically, Tov's last point indicates that a special format for biblical texts also was used for Sirach. In a later work, Tov writes:

"A stichographic layout is evidenced in 30 Judean Desert texts of two poems in the Torah (Exodus 15; Deuteronomy 32), Psalms (especially Psalm 119), Proverbs, Lamentations, and Job... In the Judean Desert texts, there is a special layout for poetical units that is almost exclusive to biblical texts (including Ben Sira [2QSir and MasSir]), and is not found in any of the non-biblical poetical compositions from the Judean Desert..." (Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible (Fortress Press, 2012), p. 201-202).

So it appears that there is a special format that is "almost exclusively" used for biblical poetical texts and that Sirach is found in this format both at Qumran and Masada. This observation by Tov is a defeater for Geisler's special script argument since there is evidence (not only at Qumran, but also at Masada) of a special biblical script that *affirms* a deuterocanonical book.

WHAT ABOUT THE ABSENCE OF COMMENTARIES?

According to Geisler, scholars believe that the Qumran community did not accept the Deuterocanon because there were no commentaries found for these books.

Besides the fact that this is an argument from silence, something Geisler repeatedly makes through his apologies against the Deuterocanon, it too lacks sufficient foundation.

The commentaries that Geisler refers are also known as *peshar* documents (plural, *pesharim*), in case you'd like to double check this information.

So far there has been discovered *only fifteen pesharim* (continuous commentaries) found at Qumran from only *seven* Old Testament books: five on Isaiah (4Q161, 4Q162, 4Q163, 4Q164, 4Q165); three on the Psalms (1Q16, 4Q171, 4Q173); the remaining seven on 5 of the Minor Prophets (1QpHab on Habakkuk; 1Q14 on Micah; 1Q15 and 4Q170 on Zephaniah; 4Q166 and 4Q167 on Hosea; 4Q169 on Nahum). This leaves 32 protocanonical books (roughly 82% of the Protocanon) without any commentary. Since no *pesharim* were found for a majority of the Protocanon, the absence of a commentary on Tobit and Sirach seems of little consequence.

It also evidences a kind of canonical duplicity on Geisler's part since he proposes a criteria for canonicity (commentaries) that even a majority of Old Testament books in his Protestant Bible can't meet. Apparently, the Protocanon was held to one standard while the Deuterocanon was to be held to a much higher one.

EPILOGUE

Since Giesler's apology against the Deuterocanon seems to be so popular and he is one of the few Protestant authors that I've read that actually proposes a positive case for the Protestant canon, I've decided to write a paper critiquing all of his arguments. I don't know what I will do with it once I'm finished. Maybe I'll turn it into a pdf book.

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