

1st and 2nd Ezekiel?

Description

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You're probably familiar with 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, and maybe even 1st and 2nd Esdras (from the Apocrypha), but how about 1st and 2nd Ezekiel? No? No worries; most have never heard of it. But back in the first century C.E., it was evidently a thing, at least to some. We get this from Josephus. This is what he said:

He [Jeremiah] also left behind him in writing a description of that destruction of our nation which has lately happened in our days, and the taking of Babylon; nor was he the only prophet who delivered such predictions beforehand to the multitude; but so did Ezekiel also, who was the first person that wrote, and left behind him in writing two books, concerning these events. – Antiquities of the Jews 10.79 (Whiston Translation) [brackets added]

So, according to Josephus, Ezekiel left behind two books concerning the destruction of Jerusalem. But what are these two books? Well, there are a few options.

Option 1: The “two books” of Ezekiel are now combined into the one book of Ezekiel in our bibles today.

Option 2: One of the two books is the book of Ezekiel we all know and the other is now lost.

Option 3: The “two books” of Ezekiel that Josephus mentioned are two lost books of Ezekiel.

To be fair, there are other, more complicated options, like the book of Ezekiel in modern bibles being partly composed of one of Josephus' “two books of Ezekiel” while containing additional material as well, and the other book is now lost. There is also at least one text from the Dead Sea Scrolls that seems to be [another “Ezekiel”](#) (sometimes called Pseudo-Ezekiel; sometimes called “4Q Second Ezekiel”). And early church fathers sometimes quoted from [\(yet another?\) “Ezekiel”](#) statements not found in the Ezekiel we know. So perhaps it is the case that even if one of the books Josephus spoke of is lost, it might not be entirely lost – whether preserved in “the bible” or elsewhere.

Unfortunately, right now, we just don't know which option is the right one. There isn't enough to go on to know for sure what Josephus had in mind. So, what is the point of talking about it then? There are actually a lot of reasons! For example, we might be more likely to solve a mystery if we know there is a mystery to solve. But even without solving it, there is something important we can learn from this. What I'm referring to is a lesson we can learn about the biblical canon. The truth is, back when Josephus wrote, there was no “Bible” like we have today. Books (you know, those things with pages bound together on one side) hadn't even been invented yet; everything was hand-written on scrolls. Frequently, you would have just one writing per scroll; like one scroll would have Isaiah on it; another would have Job, etc. Though sometimes, several smaller literary

works were included in a single scroll. It was only natural to view each writing as its own thing and no one had yet thought to collect a bunch of these writings together into one “book” and have it be “the one true authoritative collection.”

Sometimes, people point to Josephus as evidence that there was a fixed biblical canon in his day. But to use his writings in this way can only be accomplished by cherry-picking one quote and ignoring other things he had to say, like this “two books of Ezekiel” thing (also, one would have to ignore a lot of other evidence regarding the development of biblical canons). Here’s the one quote I’m referring to:

(38) For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another [as the Greeks have], but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; (39) and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years; (40) but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life. (41) It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time; (42) and how firmly we have given credit to those books of our own nation, is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them;¹For anyone wondering, this just isn’t true. Most ancient Hebrew books underwent editing; sometimes major editing. Any good study bible should point out some of the significant textual variants. but it becomes natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them. – Against Apion 1.38-42 (Whiston Translation) [brackets original]

So, Josephus said the Jews held 22 books in the highest esteem, believing them to be divine. While he says what some of them are, most of them are left unspecified, so it’s really hard to know for sure which books he had in mind. Furthermore, we have conclusive evidence that there actually wasn’t an official fixed collection among the Jews at this time since Jews continued to debate whether certain books should be in the biblical canon for centuries after this. The debated books included Sirach, Esther, and even Ezekiel. And eventually, the mainstream Jewish community settled on 24 books, not 22! And of course, when Josephus wrote, some Jews (like the [Sadducees](#)) accepted even fewer books than 22, and others, like the [Qumran Essenes](#), accepted many more. And plenty of Jews didn’t think prophecy had ceased. Among these were John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, and many others.

Did Josephus include these two books of Ezekiel in his list of 22 books? If so, what books in what would become the Hebrew Bible did he leave out? Regardless of the exact identity of the 1st and 2nd Ezekiel mentioned by Josephus, his reference to these books is just one of the many facts that let us know that scripture collections were not the same in his day as they are in our day. I’d

say that is important to know.

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