

Lesson 5 – How We Got The Bible - Canonization (Part 1)

October 19, 2022

Review: Over the last few Wednesday nights we have been looking at this very important topic. And up until this point we have looked at the first three steps in bringing the Bible from God to man.

I. REVELATION The communication of divine truth from God to the mind of the prophet.

II. INSPIRATION The transmission of that divine truth from the mind of the prophet to the “paper”.

III. PRESERVATION The supernatural preservation of the inspired text from loss or significant alteration.

New:

IV. CANONIZATION the establishment of the canon of scripture.

Definition: Canonization is the recognition and acceptance of the inspired writings. That is the primary meaning. The secondary meaning would be **the collection, organization and arrangement of the books that make up our Bible into their present format.** So when we talk about the canon of scripture, we mean the 66 books, 39 of the Old Testament and 27 of the New Testament, which comprise our Bible.

What criteria were used for the inclusion of a document into the canon of Scripture?

I. The Elements of Inclusion. There were essentially five tests that a piece of literature had to pass before it was included in the canon.

A. Was it authoritative? Does it claim to be of God? That is, does it give evidence of possessing divine authority? **Exodus 20:1-2; Romans 1:20; Psalm 19:8; Hebrews 4:12–13; Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2.**

B. Was it prophetic? Was it written by a servant of God? This was a very important part of the evaluation. Was it written by a prophet or an apostle? In the New Testament especially, other criteria had to be examined because some of the books which were eventually included were not written by apostles such as **Luke, Acts, James and Jude.**

C. Was it authentic? Did it tell the truth about God and man? Was it consistent with other writing already accepted as canonical? Was it consistent with the oral teaching of the apostles and prophets?

D. Was it dynamic? Did it possess the life transforming power of God? Had it been used by the Holy Spirit in convicting men of sin, etc.?

E. Was it received or accepted by the audience for whom it was written? This and authentic authorship were probably the most important criteria used.

II. THE HISTORY OF CANONIZATION: This is another important factor. How did it happen?

A. The Old Testament:

By the time of Christ, the Old Testament books had already been canonized. The evidence of that rests in the New Testament references to the three-fold division of the Old Testament: **The Law, The Prophets, and The Writings**, or something similar. There is at least one reference by the Lord Jesus Himself in **Luke 24:44.** Though there was some discussion after this about some of the books, few were seriously debated.

Although historically we do not have much information regarding the collection of the O.T. canon,

it is “widely believed that during Ezra's life the canon of the Old Testament was completed and that Ezra himself was the leading figure in this accomplishment. If this is true, since Ezra was himself a prophet who received divine revelation and an author of an inspired book, a great deal of credibility could be attributed to his judgment regarding the selection of books.

Another possible figure, which may be identified with canonical influence, is Nehemiah. One non-biblical but historically reliable source says that Nehemiah “Founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets and the writings of David and the letters of kings...” (2 Maccabees 2:13-2:15) Again Nehemiah's position and obvious prophetic gift would lend great credibility to the Hebrew canon.

The Old testament **antilegomena**, that is, “the disputed books”. Of the 39 books in the Old Testament, only five found themselves in this category. They were:

1. Esther, questioned because it makes no mention of God.

2. Proverbs, questioned because some thought it held contradictions within itself. **Proverbs 26:4-5** “*Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.*” But that’s not a contradiction. “*Do not answer a fool according to his folly*” means, don’t argue, don’t bandy words with him, don’t come down to his level; To “*answer a fool according to his folly*” is to say the right words at the right time, to expose his error to others and to himself. That is, to “*speak the truth in love*”. Neither are there any other contradictions in **Proverbs**, or any other canonical book.

3. Ecclesiastes was questioned because of its evident pessimism. “*Vanity, Vanity, all is vanity.*”

4. Song of Solomon was thought to be excessively sensual.

5. Ezekiel described a temple and system of temple worship that was inconsistent with the Solomonic temple.

However, after all of the evidence was weighed, all of these were eventually included.

The New Testament:

The New Testament canon was a little more complicated. One reason is that for the first 20 years or so, nothing was written down. It seems that in the early part of the first century, the words and acts of Jesus and the teaching of the apostles were just passed down by oral tradition. **1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 2:3; Philippians 4:9**

We have some examples of oral tradition that have been preserved for us. **Acts 20:35** “*In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*” This statement of the Lord Jesus is spoken of as though everyone who would read these words would be familiar with it. Yet it appears nowhere in the inspired records of the life of Christ, the gospels.

Later as the gospel began to spread throughout the Mediterranean world, it became more difficult to communicate truth orally and so by the middle of the first century letters from the apostles and written records of the words and acts of Jesus began to be circulated through the churches. This began the process of canonization, as the churches, without knowing it, by the public reading of these writings were gathering and approving the canon under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

The second step in setting apart those books that would become the canon of the New Testament came in the second and third centuries. There were two additional elements during this time that motivated the early church to establish a Canon.

I. First the need for the canon of the New Testament became evident because of the rise of religious heresies. There were three prominent departures from Biblical truth that affected and influenced the churches during this time.

A. Gnosticism: The Gnostics taught that matter is evil and that only the spiritual world is good. Therefore "the Christ" (who is deity and a spirit being), could not be the man Jesus, (who was a human being and made of matter), but "the Christ" somehow used the body of Jesus and that at the crucifixion, before Jesus died, the Christ removed himself and so the death of Jesus on the Cross is not efficacious to forgive sins.

B. Montanism: This second false teaching arose from a man named Montanus who claimed that apostleship was a perpetual gift to the church and that he himself was a prophet. Montanus was kind of the first Pentecostal, and went so far as to eventually claim to actually be the Holy Spirit.

C. Marcianism: Started by Marcian of Sinope, about 140 A.D. Marcian was anti-Semitic, and so rejected the Old Testament because he hated Jews. As a result he constructed a canon of his own which consisted of the Gospel of Luke, (As far as we know, the only Gentile author of any of the books of the Bible), and ten of Paul's epistles. (Because Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles.) Every other writing he condemned. So an authorized canon was needed so the church might know what should, or should not be read to their congregations.

II. The Second major cause for determining the New Testament canon was political. During the first part of the 1st century, Christianity was thought by the Roman government, to be a sect of Judaism, which was a legal and protected religion. After the middle of the first century, however, with the rise churches in regions that were primarily populated by Gentiles; Christianity came to be identified as a separate (and illegal), religion and so began to suffer political persecution.

That persecution lasted until the Edict of Milan by Emperor Constantine in A.D. 313, a period of almost 300 years. During this period many Christians were executed. What did that have to do with the need for a canon? It became necessary to have a firm conviction about which books were worth dying for. So, for both religious and political reasons, great emphasis was placed on the determination of the New Testament canon, and by the date of the third Council of Carthage (AD 345-419), (A Church Council was a meeting of the recognized leaders of the church of that period), the canons of both the Old and New Testament were endorsed. Along with this statement needs to come an understanding that these religious bodies whether Jewish rabbinical gatherings or ecclesiastical meetings of church leaders, were not by their approval providing canonicity, but simply recognizing the authority these writings already possessed.

New Testament Antilegomena:

1. Hebrews, questioned because of its yet unresolved problems of authorship.

2. James was questioned at first because of the lack of information regarding the identity of James. It was also questioned because it was obviously written to Christians but addressed to the "*12 tribes scattered abroad*". Finally, James was questioned because of its emphasis upon works.

3. II Peter. Its problem seemed to be vocabulary and style that differed from **I Peter**. However, the reason for the differences if that in the first epistle, Peter used an amanuensis, a secretary, but probably wrote the second book himself.

4. II & III John faced questions regarding the identity of John. (Authorship was also the chief reason the books of **Jude** and **Revelation** were questioned.) All of these books, however, were eventually included in the canon

with virtually universal approval **and it is those centuries of universal approval** that should give us confidence in the authority of the Canon of Scripture.

The Catholic Apocrypha

Now if you pick up a Catholic Bible, you will find in the Old Testament some books that are not in the Protestant Bible. These books have come to be called The Apocrypha, meaning that they are of questionable origin and character. Listed below, are the titles, not that you need to know them, other than perhaps to recognize them when you hear them and to know that they are spurious, and have no place in the Bible.

1. The First Book of Esdras (also known as Third Esdras)
2. The Second Book of Esdras (also known as Fourth Esdras)
3. Tobit
4. Judith
5. The Additions to the Book of Esther
6. The Wisdom of Solomon
7. Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach
8. Baruch
9. The Letter of Jeremiah, (This letter is sometimes incorporated as the last chapter of Baruch. When this is done the number of books is fourteen instead of fifteen.)
10. The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men
11. Susanna
12. Bel and the Dragon
13. The Prayer of Manasseh
14. The First Book of Maccabees
15. The Second Book of Maccabees

Now let me give you some reasons why these books have no place in the Bible.

1. The Catholic Church did not place these books into their canon of scripture until the 16th century A.D. (Just over 400 years ago.) And the reason they did was because the protestant reformers had begun to call into question many of the doctrines taught by the Catholic Church, such as purgatory, prayer for the dead, and others, and some of these books contained references that they could use to try to support their teaching.

2. None of the books are written in Hebrew. All of the Old Testament books were written in Hebrew, although a couple of sections of a couple of books were written in Aramaic...

3. None of the books claim to be inspired.

4. They were not included in the Hebrew canon, or the Old Testament, of the early church.

5. They contain statements and doctrines that contradict the canonical books.