

## How We Got the Bible

### Lesson 9 - The Canon of the Scriptures

#### INTRODUCTION

1. Aim: To explain how we have arrived at the books which are included in the Bible.
2. Scripture
  - a. II Tim. 3:16-17 "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 17 That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works."
  - b. Definition of word scripture - a writing that was authorized by God and as such it is characterized as the voice of God. Sacred writings.
3. Many religious books were written during the period of time when the O.T. and the N.T. were being written.
  - a. Which of these books rightfully belongs in the Bible and which should be excluded?
  - b. Should they all be included in the Bible and considered as Divine in origin?
4. The study of the books which belong in the Bible is called the Canon
  - a. "Canon"
    - i. The English word "canon" is from the Greek
    - ii. "kanon" (Gk.) and "qaneh" (Heb.)
    - iii. Originally meaning "reed" and our English word "cane" is from this
    - iv. Eventually used as a measuring rod
    - v. Came to mean a standard or rule.
    - vi. It was used to refer to the list of books which are received as Holy Scripture.
  - b. A book is considered canonical when it has measured up to the rod of Scripture
  - c. A canonical book is from God.
5. Canonicity does not refer to men deciding what books may be in the Bible, but to men recognizing what books contain divine authority and are then listed with other books containing divine authority (cf. 1 Cor. 14:37)
6. Note: it is not true that the Bible belongs to the Roman Catholic Church, though they claim to have brought the books together
7. Those books not admitted into the canon, but included by some others, were called apocryphal books
  - a. Apocrypha means = hidden, secretive or concealed
  - b. Those books whose origin was doubtful and unknown
  - c. It is doubtful that they were inspired.

#### Discussion

#### **I. THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

- A. Inadequate views of canonicity
  1. Age - antiquity does not make it a part of the canon
  2. Hebrew language - Many other books in Hebrew
  3. Religious book - many religious books not in canon

## B. Five principles of canonicity

1. Is it authoritative? - did it come with the authority of God?
2. Is it prophetic? - was it written by a man of God - II Pet. 1:20 Heb. 1:1
3. Is it authentic? - Does it tell the truth about God, men and history as it is already known?
4. Is it dynamic? - Did the message have the power of God?
5. Was it received? - Has this book been accepted generally by the people of God?  
Those who originally received the writing received it as the word of God -
  - a. I Thes. 2:13 "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe."
  - b. II Pet. 3:16 "As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction."

## C. The Canon was Set in the time of Jesus

1. Authoritative writings known as:
  - a. "Scriptures" (John 7:38; Acts 8:32; Rom 4:3)
  - b. "The Scriptures (Matt. 21:42; John 5:39; Acts 17:11)
  - c. "The Holy Scriptures" (Rom. 1:2)
  - d. "The sacred Writings" (2 Tim. 3:15)
2. If some writings were "scripture" then others were not. If some writings were canonical, others were non-canonical.
3. Jesus referred to its three-fold division: "the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms" (Luke 24:44)
4. Jesus referred to its entirety:
  - a. "from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the sanctuary" (Luke 11:51; Matt. 23:35)
  - b. The references to Abel and Zechariah represent the first and last books of the Old Testament because they were the first and last martyrs in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 4:8; 2 Chr. 24:20-21)
  - c. The Jewish order of the O.T. differs from ours in that Chronicles is placed at the end of the Hebrew Bible.
  - d. So the Old Testament that Jesus knew was a collection of writings reaching from Genesis to Chronicles, with all the other books in between.
5. Note: Jewish discussions at Jamnia (A.D. 90 and 118) considered the canonicity of Esther, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, and affirmed those books

## D. The Canon was Set in the time of Josephus, 1st cent. Jewish historian

1. Only twenty-two books of Scripture (Against Apion I.8; note: the twenty-two correspond to our thirty-nine)
2. Conclusions drawn
  - a. The number of books looked upon as having divine authority is carefully limited to twenty-two

- b. The division of the books is according to a three-part pattern: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings
  - c. The time covered by these books is expressly limited: from the time of Moses to Artaxerxes, the Persian king reigning during Malachi
  - d. The text of these books is sacred
- E. The list of 3rd cent. Christian writer, Origen: twenty-two books total
- 1. The Books of Moses (5), Joshua, Judges-Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah-Lamentations, Daniel, Ezekiel, Job, Esther
  - 2. Twenty-one listed; "The Twelve [Minor Prophets]" left off
  - 3. This was clearly an accidental omission since it is necessary to make up his own number of twenty two.
  - 4. Jerome wrote that there are no more than twenty-two books in the Hebrew canon

## II. THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

- A. Earliest groups of Christian writings (cf. Justin Martyr)
- 1. He said that on Sundays in the Christian worship assemblies "the Memoirs of the apostles" were read together with "the writings of the prophets".
  - 2. It is evident that not long after the close of the apostolic age the N.T. writings were being read generally among the churches.
- B. The Bible of the earliest Christians
- 1. The Old Testament
  - 2. Collections of new writings
  - 3. Paul's letters
  - 4. The Gospels
  - 5. Other books added gradually
- C. Note: Not all books accepted immediately because
- 1. Written in various places in the Roman world
  - 2. Different contents
  - 3. Uncertainty of authorship of some books
- D. Early lists
- 1. Muratorian fragment (Ca. A.D. 175)
    - a. Luke, 1st gospel mentioned by name as the 3rd gospel, followed by John
    - b. Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, Jude, two letters of John, Revelation
    - c. Not included: Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, possibly 3 John
    - d. Accepted with qualification: Wisdom of Solomon and Apocalypse of Peter
    - e. Excluded: Shepherd of Hermas
  - 2. Origen
    - a. 3rd cent. A.D.
    - b. 27 books
    - c. The Four Gospels: "heresy has a great many..."
    - d. Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude, Revelation
    - e. Hesitant regarding: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John

3. Earliest affirmation of all 27 books from Homilies on Joshua (vii.1; ca. A.D. 240)
  - a. Gospels (4)
  - b. Letters of Peter (2), James, and Jude
  - c. Letters and Apocalypse of John
  - d. Luke's deeds of the apostles
  - e. Letters of Paul (14)
4. Eusebius (4th cent. A.D.)
  - a. Books universally acknowledged: Four Gospels, Acts, fourteen letters of Paul, 1 John, 1 Peter and Revelation
  - b. Books disputed: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2-3 John
  - c. Books rejected: Shepherd of Hermas, Epistle of Barnabas, Teaching of the Apostles
5. Athanasius (A.D. 367)
  - a. All twenty-seven books accepted by all
  - b. "These are the springs of salvation... Let no one add anything to them or take anything away from them" (Festal Epistle 39)
- E. Related observations
  1. Other books were important to the early Christians, i.e., the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. But these books were never placed as equal to the Scriptures
  2. Measures used by the early Christians for recognizing Scriptures
    - a. Did the work conform to the "rule of faith"?
    - b. Was the work apostolic?
    - c. Was the work accepted and used by the church at large?
- F. God's providence gradually guided people in bringing together the books of the New Testament
  1. No church council made the canon of Scripture
  2. The authority of the books of Scriptures are inherent in the books themselves and not given to them by any church

### **Conclusion** — Review questions

1. Does authority of a book depend on its canonicity or does canonicity of a book depend on its authority?
2. How does Jesus refer to the canon of the Old Testament?
3. How do the Jews' twenty-two books compare to our thirty-nine books?
4. Why were some books of the New Testament questioned as to their authority?
5. Does the church control the canon, or does the canon control the church?

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**Sources Consulted**

1. How We Got The Bible 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition by Neil R. Lightfoot
  2. Rocky Whitely Oldham Lane church of Christ Abilene, TX
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