

St. George's Fall Theological Forum

The Canon of Scripture: How did the Bible become the Bible?

Parts 1 & 2 – Overview of the Canon

Introduction: The Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-27)

- “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (24:27)
- Which books actually constituted the Law and the Prophets of which Jesus spoke?
- The question of which books are authoritative (and which are not), the criteria by which such a determination is made, and the process of how they came to be authoritative, all deal with the matter of canon.
- The term ‘canon’ derives from the Greek word κανων, meaning a measuring rod.
- The term as we apply it to the Bible was first used by Athanasius in the early 4th century, in his post-Nicene Council letter, *On the Decrees*. He refers to the *Shepherd* of Hermas as, ‘a most profitable book’ but ‘not belonging to the canon.’

The significance of the question of canon

- The process of the canon is a messy one; to this day Christians disagree about which books are canonical and which are not. However, God is Lord of Messes, as well as of Order, and a messy process of canonization does not inherently mean that books canonized are unreliable or non-authoritative, as is often the erroneous conclusion derived from canon studies.
- We note that most, if not all, of the controversy is limited to the Apocrypha and not the rest of the Old or New Testaments.
- The process and status of canon are significant for both historical and doctrinal reasons. If “Scripture containeth all things necessary for salvation” we should be sure about what constitutes Scripture!

The Anglican / Episcopal Canon

- Article VI, Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation, BCP p. 868-9. The list of canonical books given is virtually unanimous among Protestant Churches from the 16th century onward. The Anglican position on the Apocryphal books is different from other Protestant Churches, as well as from the Catholic.
- Note, Ezra and Nehemiah are not named as such, they are referred to as 1 and 2 Esdras, respectively, following the Latin Vulgate nomenclature. Esdras is the Greek form of Ezra.

Table of Esdras Nomenclature¹

English Bible & Apocrypha		Septuagint		Latin Vulgate
Ezra	=	2 Esdras 1-10	=	1 Esdras
Nehemiah	=	2 Esdras 11-23	=	2 Esdras
1 Esdras	=	1 Esdras	=	3 Esdras
2 Esdras	=		=	4 Esdras

¹ Bruce, F.F. *The Canon of Scripture*. Page 47, footnote 11.

The 66 Books of the Old & New Testaments

- ‘Testament’ means a will, and comes from Latin *testamentum*, which translates the Greek *diatheke* (διαθηκη), which can mean a will, but also (in the Bible) means ‘covenant’ (Hebrew *berit*). Thus our Bible consists of the Old and New Covenants, or Testaments, designated OT and NT.
- The 39 books of the OT were and are the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures.
- The life, teachings, and writings about Jesus Christ, and successively his apostles, served as the new interpretive measure for rightly understanding the Scriptures (i.e., the OT), and thus began to be seen as a new authoritative set of works which over time became the 27 books of the NT.
- So how did these books come to be regarded as “Scripture”, that is divinely inspired and preserved, and authoritative in the life and faith of the community?
 - A question of both process and criteria.
 - Relates also to composition, authorship, dating, and transmission, which for the most part we will not be addressing except when necessary

Historical Overview of the OT Canon

- The Hebrew canon consists of 24 books which are identical to the 39 books given in the Protestant canon.
- Three-fold division into
 - The Law, *Torah* (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy)
 - The Prophets, *Nebim*
 - Former or Historical (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings)
 - Latter or Major
 - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and..
 - Twelve Minor (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, as one scroll)
 - The Writings, *Ketubim*
 - Psalms, Proverbs and Job
 - *Megillot* (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentation, Ecclesiastes, Esther)
 - Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (as one), Chronicles
- Sometimes “The Law and the Prophets” is inclusive of all three divisions.
- Three-fold division is first specifically mentioned in the early second century BC in the translational prologue to Ecclesiasticus, aka the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach, which is one of the books of what we today call the Apocrypha.
- Some ancient writers refer to a 22 book canon to numerically coincide with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, but these are the same as the 24 but Ruth is appended to Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah.
- After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, a gathering of rabbis at Jamnia was convened to address the difficulties of Judaism without a temple or commonwealth. They essentially ratified the 24 book canon of the Hebrew Scriptures, which, notably does not contain the books of the Apocrypha. This is the principle reason why Protestant Bibles don’t include it or consider it Scripture.

- The Dead Sea Scrolls contain all the books of HS except Esther. Apocryphal books like Tobit and Judith were also found, although how they were regarded by the Essene community at Qumran is not known.
- It seems that the list of the OT canon was in place by the third century BC, possibly earlier, and was in its final form by the time of Christ.
- The Septuagint – Hebrew Scriptures translated into Greek in Alexandria, late 3rd early 2nd c. BC, denoted by “LXX”
 - Contained the books of the Apocrypha along with all 24 books of HS, although it is debated whether their inclusion was intended to bestow canonicity or simply a convenience for scroll storage
 - Because Christianity was heavily Greek speaking early on, the LXX became the *de facto* OT in the Church. Consequently, it ended up falling out of use by synagogues (in reaction to Christianity’s use of it).

Historical Overview of the NT Canon

- Jesus left no written works; his disciples and their associates produced the writings which became authoritative in the Church.
- The earliest writings are of Paul, dating to the early 40’s. Associates of the apostles, such as Mark and Luke, whose writings were received on account of their connection to the apostles also became authoritative.
- The NT Canon of 27 books falls into five divisions
 - Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
 - History – Acts
 - Pauline Epistles – Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon (arranged in order of length, not date)
 - General Epistles – Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1,2&3 John, Jude
 - Apocalypse – Revelation
- Authorship and dating matter, because of the need to connect them to apostolic authority
 - A number of books are anonymous, e.g. Matthew, Mark, and Hebrews
 - But the Early Church did not have much confusion, with few exceptions (2 Peter for example) as to their authorship – they were ancient, not fools!
- Early Church Father’s attestation
 - Many Father’s quote and treat as Scripture most of the NT books, but often assume the content of that corpus rather than explicitly list them.
 - Clement of Rome’s letter to Corinth (c. 96 AD) regards the teaching of Jesus via the Gospels as being on the same authority as the prophets
 - Papias of Hierapolis (c. 125 AD) describes Mark as writing his Gospel based on Peter’s teaching, and compares it with Matthew.
 - Justin Martyr (d. 165) describes how the ‘memoirs of the apostles’ which he states are called ‘gospels’ are read in churches along with the prophets
 - We also know that from the early 2nd c. onward Paul’s letters were circulated as a corpus and not individually, in codex form. The earliest copy we have extant is the Chester Beatty manuscript, c. 200 AD.

- Note, the orthodox ‘proto-canon’ was remarkably diverse, compared to the (heretical) gnostic canons which were very narrow. Ironic today, considering the incorrect but popular view of the Early Church as stamping out other ‘legitimate’ strands of (gnostic) Christianity.
- Establishing a List
 - Rule of Faith – parallels doctrinally the documents of the apostles.
 - The Gnostic lists, esp. Marcion (c 145 AD); *Gospel* and *Apostle*, which reject all OT references; Paul is the only legit apostle.
 - Muratorian Fragment – codex from the seventh or eighth century containing a list dating from the second (or possibly fourth) century. The list identifies 21 of our 27 books as authoritative, and rejects the Shepherd and works of the gnostics.
 - Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, c. 165 AD was a composite, single volume ‘harmonization’ of the four (canonical) Gospels. It lends weight to both the early authority of the four, and their being put together as a unit.
- Eusebius of Caesarea provides an early exposition on the texts of his day and uses three categories:
 1. Universally acknowledged – the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline letters (plus Hebrews), 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation
 2. Disputed – ‘disputed but recognized by the majority’ are James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 & 3 John
 3. Spurious – The Acts of Paul, the *Shepherd* of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Teachings of the Apostles (the *Didache*), and the Gospel of Hebrews
- Athanasius of Alexandria provides the first formal list with all 27 of our presently received books. The list is given in his Festal (Easter) Letter #39, from 367 AD.

Concluding Thoughts

- The Bible as we have it is not a single work, but rather a library of writings; the product of numerous authors spanning over a thousand years of time.
 - Contrast with many holy writings of other religions which are more or less single works, the product of a single author and/or single revelation
 - e.g. the Koran and the Book of Mormon.
- Given the manifold nature of the Bible, its span of time and authorship, yet it has remarkable internal consistency which is a strong argument for reliability and inspiration.
- Just as the writings came into being over a long period of time, so too did the process of canonizing them progress slowly over time.
 - Rather than a golden tablet descending from the sky, we ought to view the canon’s development as a tree, growing slowly from seed to sapling until one day we realize there is a tree in our yard.
 - Although it has many human authors, the Bible ultimately has God as its author. And just as the Word of God was Incarnate, that is to say both divine and human in all the earthy existence of human life, so too is the Word of God written both divine and human.

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