

The Scriptures III: Canonicity

Introduction

So far we have considered that God shows forth His truth by revealing Himself to man. And even though through General Revelation we may only know some things about God, it is through His Special Revelation that we can glorify Him as He desires

The Bible is the personal, selective registry of God's special revelation, but for this to be so, the men who wrote the Bible had to be inspired by the Holy Spirit of God

The question now is: how do we recognize the books that are "inspired"? This brings us to the subject of Canonicity. This, as well as other related subjects, are not strictly part of the compendium of Systematic Theology, but they are absolutely essential to discern the general subject of the Scriptures

Note of Translation: Etymology of Canon

Kanwn (kanon) "measuring line, rule," from Gk. kanon "any straight rod or bar; rule; standard of excellence," perhaps from kanna "reed" (see cane). ... General sense of "standard of judging"

2 Co 10:13 "But we will not boast beyond *our* measure, but within the measure of the sphere [lit.: standard, rule, limits] which God apportioned to us as a measure..."

I- A Definition of Canonicity

It is the process through which the people of God recognized which books were inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that they could be part of the Sacred Scriptures

It is not that when the church declared a book to be "part of the canon" it made it to become the Word of God, but rather, that the process of canonicity recognized which books were part of the Word of God. The distinguishing mark for a book to be part of the Biblical Canon is its own inspiration. How was the inspiration of our canon recognized then?

To recognize "inspiration" it was necessary to consider several factors and it is important to point out that some factors are not determining of inspiration in and of themselves, even though they are important for example:

- a) Antiquity.
- b) Language.
- c) Agreement with the rest of the Scriptures
- d) Religious value
- e) Authoritative character

The **fundamental factor** to consider whether or not a book was inspired was its "prophetic nature" in the Old Testament and its "apostolic nature" in the New Testament. This means that in the case of the OT, the book had to be written by a prophet or it must have been recognized as "the Word of God" by a prophet. In the case of the NT, the book had to be written by an apostle, or by a direct associate of one of the apostles.

Taking this fundamental parameter into account, the previously mentioned factors may contribute to confirm the “prophetic” or “apostolic” nature of the book

What is the result of applying this principle? Let us consider in the second place:

II- The Old Testament Canonicity

The applying of the above principles resulted in that Israel recognized as the Old Testament Canon, the exact 39 books we find in [most]⁽¹⁾ of our Bibles. (**Rom 3:1-2**)

T: Note of translation: “most” because the Roman Catholic versions consider the apocrypha as part of the Canon as explained later

This was not a simple process, some of the OT books were the subject of discussion as to their inclusion in the Canon or not, like the Books of Esther, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes; however, the canon was duly identified and ratified by several witnesses

1- The witness of Christ: In **Luke 24:34-35**, He alludes to the triple division of the Old Testament in our Bibles.

2- The Witness of the New Testament: where almost all of the OT books are quoted, and none of the apocrypha with the exception of the book of Enoc

3- The Council of Jamnia (or Yavne): which was a Jewish council that took place in 90 AD after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem where the inspired books of the Old Testament were ratified, and the list was similar to that of the 39 books we have in our Bibles. [Note of Translation: some scholars put this in doubt, as they also seek to remove the foundations of a pre-70 AD tripartite division of the OT \(Law, Prophets & Writings\)](#)

4- The Masoretic Text: considered by many as the most reliable text of the Old Testament which keeps the same traditional, Jewish triple division used by the Lord Jesus Himself in Luke 24:34-35.

The Masoretic Text is the authoritative Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible regarded almost universally as the official version of the Tanakh. It defines not just the books of the Jewish canon, but also the precise letter-text of the biblical books in Judaism, as well as their vocalization and accentuation known as the Masorah. The MT is also widely used as the basis for translations of the Old Testament in Protestant Bibles, and in recent years (since 1943) also for some Catholic Bibles.[1] In modern times the Dead Sea Scrolls have shown the MT to be nearly identical to some texts of the Tanakh dating from 200 BCE but different from others.

The MT was primarily copied, edited and distributed by a group of Jews known as the Masoretes between the 7th and 10th centuries CE. Though the consonants differ little from the text generally accepted in the early 2nd century (and also differ little from some Qumran texts that are even older)

The Hebrew word mesorah (מסורה, alt. תרומה) refers to the transmission of a tradition. In a very broad sense it can refer to the entire chain of Jewish tradition (see Oral law), but in reference to the Masoretic Text the word mesorah has a very specific meaning: the diacritic markings of the text of the Hebrew Bible and concise marginal notes in manuscripts (and later printings) of the Hebrew Bible which note textual details, usually about the precise spelling of words.

The oldest extant manuscripts of the Masoretic Text date from approximately the 9th century AD,[3] and the Aleppo Codex (once the oldest complete copy of the Masoretic Text, but now missing its Torah section) dates from the 10th century (From Wikipedia, requires validation)

Thirdly,

III- The Canonicity of the New Testament

Let us remember that in the case of the New Testament, the books in it were originally sent to specific churches or persons. The early church in the apostolic era did not have a collection of canonic NT books

Many of these churches relied on the oral teachings transmitted by apostles and prophets; however, in the measure that these individual letters were written and circulated, they were assumed and taken to be Scripture by the churches.

Ex: Col 4:16 [“And when this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.](#)

We already considered in the previous lesson how Peter equated Paul’s writings to the rest of the Scriptures, and how Paul quoted from the Gospel of Luke treating as “Scripture”. The process of writing of the NT was actually brief and it barely spanned over 50 years

After the death of the last of the apostles, it appears that there was not too much concern in the church to have a defined list of “inspired” NT books

However during the second century of our era the situation changed drastically due to several factors:

- 1- Books that were considered “Christians” started to circulate; therefore, it was necessary to deal with the issue of how much authority should the churches credit to those books
- 2- In case of persecution, was it worth to risk one’s life in order to hide some of those Christian books if perhaps they were not inspired?
- 3- Certain books which contradicted the apostolic writings started to surface
- 4- Some heretics, in order to avoid being confronted with their error denied the inspiration of some apostolic books (Ex: [Marcion of Sinope 144 AD who denied Jesus was a Jewish Messiah and believed that the god of the OT was a tribal and angry different from the God of the NT, he only accepted the writings of Paul and a modified Gospel of Luke](#))

These circumstances obliged the church to make an official recognition of the New Testament Canon. The **fundamental mark** to obtain canonical recognition was the **apostolic imprimatur**, that is, that the book had to be written by an apostle or by a close associate of them, and for this condition to be met, the Book had to be written before the beginning of the second Century i.e., before 100 AD because the last of the apostles died, at the latest possible date, in that year

This factor alone, discarded any book penned after the apostolic age, hence most of the NT books were recognized by the early church as Scripture without too much controversy. In the year 180 AD there was a documented, universal recognition of 20 out of the 27 books in our New Testament. The rest of the books which had problems for a universal recognition were James, 2 Peter, Hebrews, 2 & 3 John, Jude and Revelation

[Note of Translation:](#) “Origen was also largely and ultimately responsible for the coalescence of Christian writings which became the New Testament, even though he

had long being dead by the time the post-Constantinian Church officially approved of the twenty-seven books with which we are familiar today, and even though he would have likely included, along with the twenty-seven, **Shepherd of Hermas**, **Epistle of Barnabas**, and **1 Clement**. He holds this distinction because the canonical choices that were ultimately made seem heavily, if not certainly, influenced by the historical evidences of Eusebius of Caesarea in his Ecclesiastical History [3.25;6.25]: Eusebius got most, if not all, of his information about what Christian writings were accepted by the various churches from the writings and library of Origen” – Wikipedia -

Note: Origen was considered a heretic (this happened in the 6th Century) who believed in the pre-existence of souls, reincarnation, the salvation of demons and a skewed view of the Trinity. The remarkable thing is that, a heretic, believed the Bible to be what we have today, except three additional books

Note of Translation: HOMOLEGOMENA (books that virtually everyone accepted) & ANTILEGOMENA (books that were disputed by some)

Finally, these were recognized as part of the NT Canon. In the year 363 AD during the council of Laodicea, all of the NT books were recognized except Revelation. Some years later in 367 AD in a letter written by Athanasius all of the 27 books in the NT are listed. In the year 397 AD in the Council of Carthage there is a definite list of the 27 NT books.

There were some books which were popular and accepted among certain groups in the church, as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache, but they did not pass the canonicity test

It is good to remember here what we stated at the beginning, the church did not determine the Canonicity of the Books of the NT, she just recognized those who were canonical

Addition of Translation:

Secondary Criteria for acceptance:

The early church discovered the New Testament by discerning whether a book was apostolic. That means it was either written by an apostle or by the close associate of an apostle, hence with the apostolic authority. In addition to this basic and fundamental criterion for recognition, there are certain indications of canonicity. That is, several things occurred when the early church considered a book to be

Scripture:

- It was read publicly (Thessalonians 5:27)
- It was circulated widely (Revelation 1:11; Colossians 4:16)
- Copies of it were collected (2 Peter 3:15-16)
- It was quoted in other writings (Jude 17; 1 Timothy 5:8)

Furthermore, there is evidence that the New Testament regarded itself as canonical. It is written with authority in directing the church. Paul quotes the Gospel of Luke as Scripture, right along with Deuteronomy (1 Timothy 5:8). Paul's letters were designed to be circulated among the churches (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27). Peter had Paul's letters and called them "Scripture" in 2 Peter 3:16.

IV- The Problem with the Apocrypha

When we inspect a Roman Catholic version of the Bible, we find that there are other books in comparison with the Protestant versions plus some additions to the books of Esther and Daniel

Title	Summary
Tobiah	The life of a family in Assyria
Judith	The history of Judith ("the Jewess") rescuing Jews from the Assyrian army
Esther additions	A collection of additions to Esther, in the Septuagint
Wisdom of Solomon	A collection of proverbs; and the last part provides a contrast about Israel & Egypt
Ecclesiastic (Wisdom of Shirac)	A long collection of Proverbs
Baruc	Allegedly written by Jeremiah's amanuensis with a collection of praises, prayers and promises
The Story of Susana	Who is accused of immorality but she is rescued by Daniel in Babylon (Daniel 13)
The Song of the three sons	The song of Shadrac, Mishac and Abed-nego inside the furnace Addition to Daniel 3:24-90)
Bel & the Dragon	Daniel's journeys after he refused to worship the idol of Bel (Dan. 14).
1&2 Macabbeans	Historical narrative about the Jewish war (Inter-testament)

Why the difference between the Roman Catholic and most Protestant Versions?

Around 200 BC the Greek Empire dominated most of the known world. Allegedly under Ptolemy Philadelphus II ([eager to increase the library in Alexandria and to patronize scientific research](#)) Hebrew Literature was translated into Greek and that included the writings of the Old Testament, reason why there were additions of other books with a religious or historical content even though they were not considered as Scripture by the people of Israel.

The result of this translation has been called the Septuagint because there is a legend that says that this labor was commended to 70 elders from Israel. The Septuagint was the Bible used by the apostles when they went out to preach throughout the Greek speaking world

Note of translation: this appears to be the legend: 'King Ptolemy once gathered 72 Elders. He placed them in 72 chambers, each of them in a separate one, without revealing to them why they were summoned. He entered each one's room and said: "Write for me the Torah of Moshe, your teacher." God put it in the heart of each one to translate identically as all the others did

Some of the apocryphal books were quoted by early church fathers and Jerome included them in his Latin Vulgate which came to be the official Bible of the Roman Catholic church at the end of the middle ages; however it was in the Council of Trent in 1546, when the Roman Catholic church officially incorporated them as part of the Canon but labeling them as "deuteron-canonical" – (Second Canon) -

The reasons why reject the Apocrypha are these: (I am quoting pastor Sugel Michelen)

1. They were not part of the Hebrew Canon
2. None of them were quoted by Christ or the Apostles
3. It has not been a verified fact that the LXX version of the first Century included the apocrypha. The oldest LXX manuscript which contains the apocrypha is from the 4th Century
4. No Canon or Council from the Christian church during the first 4 centuries recognized the apocrypha as inspired books and some church fathers vehemently opposed them. e.g. Athanasius, Jerome (a scholar of the Jewish Bible) & Origen (A Hebrew Scholar though a heretic) Augustine included them but he considered them of inferior authority
5. It was only in 1546 when some of the Apocryphal books received complete approval from the Roman Catholic Church at the council of Trent. A council that was called to counteract the Protestant Reformation
6. The Greek Orthodox Church not always accepted the apocryphal books as canonical, but only after the Synod of Jafta in 1642 and at the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672 in which they were included. In this last, the apocrypha was reduced to four (4) books
7. The fact that some of these books appeared in the Dead Sea Scrolls does not prove anything because this was a complete library with fragments from hundreds of books besides those that were considered canonical.
8. Some of the teachings in these books are outright heretical, as the prayer for the dead (2Mac. 12:45-46; comp. He. 9:27; Lk. 16:25-26; 2Sam. 12:19-23) and salvation by works (Tobiah 12:9; comp. Rom. 4:5; Gal. 3:11; Eph. 2:8-9).
9. Some of these books have chronological and historical errors. For example, Tobiah says that he was alive when the Assyrians conquered Israel (722 BC), and also that he was alive when Jeroboam rebelled against Juda (931 BC.); and yet affirming that Tobiah only lived 158 years (comp. 14:11 & 1:3-5 but 931 minus 722 = 209).

10. In the book of Judith Nebuchanedzar is said to have been king of Ninivah instead of Babylon (1:1). While in Baruch, Nebuchanedzar is portrayed as King of the Assyrians. In the introduction of Judith the Jerusalem Bible states: "It seems as if the author would have purposely multiplied the historical errors to distract the attention of the readers to any historical context in order to bring it to consider the religious drama and its outcome" (pg. 529).
11. Most of the apocryphal books were written during the inter-testament period (400 – 0 BC.).
12. These books do not claim to be inspired but rather they include declarations that indicate the exact opposite, for example: in 2 Mac. 15:37 the author finalizes the reading stating: "and thus occurred the events related to Nicanor. And since then, the city has remained under Hebrew rule I will finish my account here. If it has been beautiful and well achieved in its composition, this is what I intended to do; but if it is imperfect and mediocre, I have done my best". The prologue of Ecclesiastic reads: "You are then invited to read it with charity and attention and to show indulgence in those portions where in spite of our endeavors of interpretation, we have not been able to be accurate in some expression."

This does not mean that these books – some more than others – do not have any value, whether historical, moral or in other facets in which they are very useful, but one thing is to value a book, and another entirely different thing is to consider it "the Word of God"

Conclusion

I want to conclude by considering that all of the struggles God's people both under the Old and New Covenant went through, was the result of their conviction that God had spoken and that in the Scriptures they had God's personal registry of His special revelation.

We should never compare any book, no matter how much we appreciate it, to the Scriptures. It was an undue appreciation for some of the apocrypha which confused many among God's people to the point of regarding them as Scripture

The best book, penned by the best theologian or pastor is not inspired by the Holy Spirit, and when we use these books, we must do it with the same spirit of the Christians at Berea (Acts 17:10-11), who compared Paul's message to the Scriptures, in order to verify whether the things spoken by the apostle were according to the truth

Our consciences must not be bound by any writing, be it a book or a confession, except to that whatever written in those books or confessions, reflects our convictions according to what is taught by the Word of God. If we act this way, we will not only be more honoring to the Word of God, but to the God of the Word and we will do a great service to the our church and to its name "Biblical Church of the Lord Jesus Christ"

Note of Translation: a reference to the church where the author belongs “Iglesia Bíblica del Señor Jesucristo”

In our next lesson we will consider the subject of **Textual Critical Textual**, that is, how has the Word of God been **preserved** in the Providence of God through the Centuries