

Lesson 10 The Patristic Period: The Formation of the Canon

What is the Canon?

- The word “canon” is derived from a Greek word borrowed from the Phoenicians meaning a rod or ruler for measuring objects. (Noll, 34) The word was used as a standard for judging whether or not something is straight. (Shelley, 58)
- “So the idea transferred to a list of books that constituted the standard or “rule” of the churches. These were the books read publicly in the congregations because they had a special authority of God upon them.” (Shelley, 58)
- “The first recorded use of the word for the authorities list of books in the bible came in the year 367 from Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in North Africa.” (Noll, 34)

What is the Canon?

- The conflict over which writings were truly authoritative can be seen while Paul and the other New Testament writers were still alive.
 - II Thessalonians 2:2—people were forging letters
 - Colossians 4:16—unclear what epistle Paul is referring to.
 - I Corinthians 5:9—not every letter Paul wrote was written under inspiration. Therefore they were not Scripture
- Finding its roots in the mind of the same God who formed the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, the New Testament Church was never without a canon from the standpoint that they possessed the Old Testament. In Luke 24:44 Jesus fixes the canon of Old Testament Scripture.
 - Law of Moses
 - Prophets
 - Psalms

What is the Canon?

- Christians in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire rejected the canonicity of the 15 Apocryphal books. In contrast, Western Christians under the influence of Augustine received the Apocrypha as part of the Canon. (Shelley, 60) These differences still exist today between Catholics and Protestants.
- By seeking an authoritative collection of books, the New Testament Church affirmed its connection to Judaism by holding to a select list of sacred books. At the same time, the early Christians broke with their Jewish predecessors by claiming that the Hebrew Scriptures were incomplete in themselves without the addition of the New Testament. (Noll, 34)

What is the Canon?

- In practical terms there are many reasons why a collection of authoritative books would have been necessary in the early church.
 - Standards of worship, prayer, and preaching
 - Reading material for public services and private study
 - Theological standard to use in responding to non-Christian critics
 - Deciding doctrinal disputes within their own ranks
 - Text to translate God's Word into the various language of the Greco-Roman world (Noll, 34)

Was Marcion a Heretic?



- Son of a Bishop south of the Black Sea.
- Influenced by Gnostic teacher Credo.
- 140 AD Marcion was banished from his fathers church.
- Beliefs of Credo
- Marcion flees to Rome and teaches two different Gods.
- Marcion alters the Bible to match his beliefs.

Was Marcion a Heretic?

- 144 AD Marcion is banished from the church in Rome.
- Church Fathers declare Marcion to be a heretic.
- Was Marcion really a Heretic or a Rightly Dividing Pauline Grace Believer?



Traditional View of the Canon

- Church history books portray the Marcion episode as a catalyst for the early church to officially identify which New Testament books were authoritative canon and which ones were not.
- Most church history books offer some variation of the following three points as the criteria the early church used in determining the canonicity of disputed books.
 - *Is the book reliably connected to an apostle?* The logic behind this question was simple: The people most likely to tell the truth about Jesus were either eyewitnesses who had encountered Jesus personally or close associates of these witnesses. (Jones, 26-27)
 - *Do churches throughout the known world value this writing?*
 - *Does the writing agree with what we already know about God?* (Jones, 26)

Traditional View of the Canon

- When one uses these criteria to determine the authenticity of New Testament books three groups of books emerge that deserve further explanation.
- *Disputed Books*—of the 27 books of the New Testament 7 were disputed and there could not be admitted to the canon until later. These books include:
 - Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation
- Church historians lead their readers to believe that the majority of Bible-believing Christians “disputed” them because four or five “church fathers” don’t quote them. (Ruckman, 44)

Traditional View of the Canon

- The Bible believer should not be surprised that these books were disputed when one considers their content: premillennial return of Christ, mark of the beast, identification of false prophets, and carnal church leaders.
- *Pseudepigrapha*—refers to those books that were never admitted into the New Testament canon. They are currently published in a book called *The Lost Books of the Bible* and include writings such as:

New Testament Apocrypha

- *Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas (70-79 AD)*
- *The Epistle to the Corinthians (96 AD)*
- *The Gospel According to Hebrews (65-100 AD)*
- *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (108 AD)*
- *The Didache (Teaching of the Twelve) (100-120 AD)*
- *The Seven Epistles of Ignatius (110 AD)*
- *Second Epistle of Clement (120-140 AD)*
- *Shepherd of Hermas (115-140 AD)*
- *Apocalypse of Peter (150 AD)*
- *Epistle to the Laodiceans*

Pseudepigrapha (False Writings)

The Acts of Andrew
The Apocalypse of Paul
The Epistle of Judas
Gospel of Peter
Gospel of Thomas
The Apocalypse of Paul
The Acts of Thaddeus
The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary
The Gospel of Nicodemus
(Giesler, 536)

Traditional View of the Canon

- Sinaiticus manuscript used by the 1881 revision committee to “correct” the KJV in over 5,000 places contains New Testament Apocraphal books. Likewise, Codex Vaticanus contains Old Testament Apocrypha as part of the Old Testament text.
- *Homologoumena*—is the academic term used by church historians to indicate the 27 New Testament books that were accepted into the Canon of Scripture.
- Church tradition teaches that the Canon of was finalized at the Council of Carthage in 397 AD. Bible believers should out rightly reject this notion. The Council of Carthage was forced to recognize what God had already established: 27 inspired books.

Traditional View of the Canon

- While the Old Testament was formed into a canon and preserved by an official priestly class (Tribe of Levi) the New Testament knows no priesthood except the priesthood of all believers. Therefore, any book written and preserved by New Testament Christians would be unofficial and subject to the universal acceptance of the body of Christ, apart from any ecclesiastical tribunal or council. Consequently, church historians have inserted into the real history of the early church the Catholic fiction of an official guardian of the canon. (cleaned up from Ruckman, 47)

Bible Believers View of the Canon

- Since the church fathers quote the Holy Bible more than 35,000 times (19,368 from the Gospels alone), it is perfectly evident that the Book was around somewhere in the first three centuries of church history. In fact, Syrian and Old Latin translations containing the King James Readings date from between 180-200 AD, 100 years before the Council of Carthage. (Ruckman, 41)
- What the Christians had between AD 100-325 were not the divinely inspired originals from the plenary verbal autographs. Rather they had preserved copies of the originals from which the church fathers quoted. (Ruckman, 50)

Bible Believers View of the Canon

- Please consider the following quotation information from the church fathers:
 - *Polycarp (69-155)*—Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, 10 Epistles of Paul
 - *II Clement*—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and shows familiarity with Acts, Revelation, and 6 Pauline epistles
 - *Irenaeus (125-192)*—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 13 Pauline Epistles
 - *Clement of Alexandria (150-217)*—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Pauline Epistles, I Peter, I John, Hebrews, Jude, James, and Revelation. (Ruckman, 48)
- When these quotations are combined with those of Terullian we find all 27 New Testament books in use before 200 AD. With an Old Latin Version being quoted around 150-180 AD and an Old Syriac Version being quoted about the same time. (Ruckman, 48)

Bible Believers View of the Canon

- There can be no doubt about the existence of the New Testament canon before 200 AD. The Churches had it, used it, copied it, and were already translating it into different languages.
- The 27 books of the New Testament were proven to be the inspired words of the living God by virtue of their own merit and the witness of their Author (Holy Spirit) to those words and those words only.
- When God set the nation of Israel aside the people who were responsible for the protection and preservation of the God's Word changed. When Israel fell the job of Preservation passed from the scribes of the tribe of Levi into the hands of the New Testament prophets.

Bible Believers View of the Canon

- Ephesians 4:11—we know that during the infancy stage of the Body of Christ, before the Word of God was complete the gift of prophecy functioned in the Body of Christ.
- Exodus 7:1—one of the functions of a prophet in the Word of God is to be God's spokes person. A prophet also communicated God's Word to his audience. "thus saith the Lord."
 - Foretelling—means to predict the future.
 - Forthelling—means to deliver a message.
- I Corinthians 14:27-33—one of the functions of the gift of prophecy served for the body of Christ was to help identify what was God's word from what was not. This one reason why once the word of God was complete the gift of prophecy passed away.

Bible Believers View of the Canon

Incorrect View of Canon	Correct View of Canon
Church Determines Canon	Church Discovers Canon
Church Is Mother of Canon	Church Is Child of Canon
Church Is Magistrate of Canon	Church Is Minister of Canon
Church Regulates Canon	Church Recognizes Canon
Church is Judge of Canon	Church is Witness of Canon
Church Is Master of Canon	Church is Servant of Canon

Final Thoughts

- When Paul wrote his last epistle Revelation and Inspiration ceased—Colossians 1:25
- Preservation and Illumination of the Scriptures continues in our day—Psalm 12:6-7, I Corinthians 2:13
- The New Testament prophets functioning within the local churches identified Scripture from now non-Scripture. These prophets continued the process of preservation through the meticulous copying of the manuscripts.
- By 200 AD the witness of God the Holy Spirit working through the New Testament prophets and Bible believing Christians after them had identified the contents of the Canon before 150 AD.

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