

The Bible

How The Scriptures Were Given - The Canon of Scripture

Introduction

Accepting the fact of inspiration then the next logical questions are based on the belief that the scriptures are infallible and sufficient for every situation. The questions are:

- a) Are the sixty-six books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven of the New Testament which we have the only ones inspired by God?
- b) Have any which were inspired been left out?
- c) This leads to the matter of the canon of the scriptures that is:
 - i) Who or what group of individuals determined the criteria for certain writings to be included or rejected as being inspired?
 - ii) What was the criteria?

What Is Meant By The Expression “The Canon Of Scripture?”

When we speak of the “canon of the scriptures”, what is actually meant?

- a) The Greek word “Kanon”, translated “canon”, is used in the following places in the New Testament (2 Cor. 10:13, 15, 16; Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:16), and it indicates a straight stick by which an article was secured to keep it straight.

The Vitalness Of The Canon Of Scripture

This is a subject of great importance for if any part of that which we call the “Holy Bible” is not inspired, then we are not only appropriating to secular material the status of being holy, but also being deceived by the evil one. If, on the other hand, there has been passages which ought to have been included but have been left out, we do not have the complete scriptures. The question to be considered is, “By what criteria among the many manuscripts of an ancient day were certain writings deemed to be inspired?” If we are to teach the infallibility and sufficiency of the scriptures, then we must have assurance that the evaluating of such judged to be from God was done in the fear of God, and without any outside religious interference.

As I view this, on one level it seems to be impossible to describe, and it is because it is a work of God. However, perhaps an illustration will help. I have had the privilege of taking many ministry and gospel meetings, and through the years I have found that with some there had been a real burden on my heart to speak from a certain text or subject. I could not explain it except to say it was the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Now this is not on the same degree of inspiration as that which caused men to recognize certain of Paul’s writings to be God’s authoritative word, but it is a faint picture. I say that it is a degree of inspiration, for when anyone speaks it is to be as the “oracles of God” (1 Pet. 4:11).

The Old Testament Recognition Of Which Books, Etc., Were Divinely Inspired

How or by what means the ancient Jews recognized that certain historical facts about individuals, i.e. Abraham, Moses, Nadab; or cities, i.e. Jerusalem, Edom; or nations, i.e. Ammonites, Babylonians, etc., had a unique purpose far beyond the mere historical, or ethical data, is something we do not know. That which we do know is that the Jews recognized long before our Lord’s time the twenty-four books as being scripture, thus, were the canonical books of the Old Testament. The Old Testament which our Lord would have used was divided into three divisions as follows:

- a) The law
 - i) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
- b) The prophets. These were subdivided into two groups:
 - i) The former prophets
 1. Joshua, Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings
 - ii) The later prophets

The Bible

How The Scriptures Were Given - The Canon of Scripture

1. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets (which were counted as one book), Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.
- c) The writings
 - i) Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, 1st and 2nd Chronicles.

The early church recognized the Old Testament so that the early saints followed the example of Christ and His apostles, accepted the Old Testament as the Word of God by making the Septuagint their own, which the Jews left to the Christians. Athanasius in 367 A.D. provided possibly the first list of books which would become the twenty-seven of the New Testament, and it was he who seemingly first spoke of “canonizing”. Possibly the first council to accept the present catalogue of books as inspired and to be accepted was the Synod of Hippo Regius 393 A.D. This was then accepted by the two councils of Carthage in 397 and 419 A.D.

The Work Of The Spirit In Giving The New Testament

When our Lord was here he promised He would send the Holy Spirit of truth who would do four major works relative to the scriptures. The Lord said:

- a) “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.” (Jn. 14:26)
- b) “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.” (Jn. 16:13)
- c) He would:
 - i) Teach you all things
 - ii) Bring all things to your remembrance whatsoever I have said unto you
 - iii) Guide you into all truth
 - iv) Shew you things to come

When God the Spirit was so careful in overseeing what was recorded, there can be no doubt He was just as careful about what was recognized as from Himself, and speedily would have prevented any iota of divergence from it. For Him to do anything less than protect the inspired word would have given an opening for error and confusion among the saints. He could then never have caused Paul to write: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16); nor have guided Peter to write of the writings of Paul as on par with the Old Testament scriptures (2 Pet. 3:16). To question the infallibility of the canon of the scriptures is to question the preserving ability of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary (Lk. 1:35) and did a work which cannot be explained by human reasoning, the evidence proves its validity, so with the constraining and curtailing of the canon of the scriptures. The same holds true when upon individuals of old the Spirit came “upon them” (Jud. 3:10; 6:34; 1 Chron. 12:18; 24:20), and “came mightily upon him” (Jud. 14:6; 15:14).

- a) Simply put, there was sensitivity to the directing of the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit who curtailed their decision making, enabling them to discern the books which were on par with the books of the Old Testament; or the men like Peter, John, and Paul as being on par with men like Moses, Daniel, or Isaiah.
- b) We cannot say that the books written by the apostles were the criteria to make a book canonical for neither Mark or Luke were apostles.
- c) A recognition of being divinely inspired, and therefore fit to be part of the canon of scripture which is an aspect of an awareness, but unexplainable by human terms. It is on a much higher level than saying the poems of Wordsworth, or the plays of Shakespeare were inspired. This was a work of the Holy Spirit causing men to collectively, yet independently, to recognize such and such a book is inspired by God but not another. Just as inspiration was not a work of man but the Holy Spirit working on men, so the same truth was for the recognition of that which was inspired by God.

How Long Was It Before All Twenty-Seven Books Were Recognized As Divine?

The recognition did not happen instantly, that is, the moment they were written or first received. It is evident that Peter and the church of his time believed the writings of Paul were inspired and on par with the Scriptures of the Old Testament when he wrote: "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" (2 Pet. 3:16). The scriptures Peter referred to were those which were in the Old Testament (Rom. 15:4; 16:26; 1 Cor. 15:3-4; 2 Tim. 3:15). On the other hand, the books of 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude and Revelation took considerable time to be recognized as divinely given. For a time it appears that writings such as the 'Epistle of Barnabas' and the Shepherd of Hermas, First and Second Epistles of Clement, etc., were viewed as inspired.

The Early Compilations Of The New Testament

- 1) In the early days of the church there appears to be two collections of Christian writings, the Old Testament and parts of the New Testament as they became recognized as inspired. Paul speaks of such when communicating with the saints at Thessalonica he wrote: "That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand" (2 Thess. 2:2). That which we have, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, was originally known as the Gospel (singular). Ignatius, who was the bishop of Antioch around 115 A.D., spoke of the gospel (the four we have) as being authoritative.
- 2) In approximately 140 A.D. the heretic Marcion made the first known compilation of the New Testament books. Because of his heretical beliefs, he only accepted a portion of Luke's gospel because it was written by a Gentile, and ten of Paul's epistles. However, Marcion's views were not inspired by the Spirit of God and were representative of the view of the saints at large.
- 3) That which we could indicate as the second is the 'Muratorian Fragment.' This manuscript was first written approximately 170 A.D. for in it there is mention of the death of Pious 1 as being recent. It was copied in the 7th century and then discovered and published by Cardinal Ludovico Antonio Muratori in 1740 A.D. In it there is mention of:
 - a) Matthew, Mark, and Luke as the third Gospel (a fact which indicates Matthew and Mark were established as the first and second gospels).
 - b) John, Acts, Paul's nine letters to churches and four to individuals (Philemon, Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy), Jude, two Epistles of John, and the Apocalypse of John and that of Peter.
- 4) By the time of Irenaeus 180 A.D., the four gospel records were fully recognized as inspired. When the gospels were united in a single volume then the writings of Luke were divided into the Gospel and the Acts. Because the Acts was written by Dr. Luke (the beloved Physician, Col. 4:14), it was accepted as also being inspired and suitable for the canon of scripture. However, it must be noted that not all books written by an apostle were recognized as inspired. For instance, Paul wrote four letters to the Corinthians, two of them were recognized as inspired and therefore passed the canon to be the scriptures, the others did not. Furthermore, not all writers of the New Testament had to be apostles for neither Mark, Luke or James were counted among the twelve.
- 5) Origen (185-254 A.D.) mentions the four Gospels, the Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation, and all these were recognized as being inspired. There was some disputing about Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude, with the 'Epistle of Barnabas,' the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, and the "Gospel according to the Hebrews".
- 6) Eusebius indicates that (265-340 A.D.) apart from James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John all the books of our New Testament were accepted.

The Bible How The Scriptures Were Given - The Canon of Scripture

- 7) In (367 A.D.) Athanasius indicated that all twenty-seven books of our New Testament were recognized exclusively as inspired. This was also agreed with by Jerome and Augustine. These all were in the West.
- 8) In the East it was not until 508 A.D. that 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation were included in a version of the Syriac Bible.

Two Major Observations

- 1) It has been said that the church, on the basis the spiritual hierarchy or certain councils, decided the writings were canonical, and which were not. This teaching indicates that the scripture was insufficient of itself and there was the need of clerical endorsement. This is not the case. Note this carefully: The cannon of inspired books was not fixed by church councils; that which they did was acknowledge those books which had already been endorsed by the Holy Spirit, and generally accepted by believers. I say clearly, the scriptures do not derive their authority from endorsement of men, councils, or spiritual hierarchy. The authority is in the books themselves, when as reading them lives were changed for the glory of God.
- 2) The revelation did not depend upon the canon, the canon depended on the revelation and was more a matter of testimony in judgment. God did not inspire Wordsworth or Shakespeare's writings but He did inspire the scriptures. The result is they possess power to discern (Heb. 4:12); power to comfort, principles for guidance (Psa. 119:105); and authority to establish divine principles (Rom. 4:3; 1 Cor. 15:3-4).

The Comfort This Brings

We can rest assuredly in knowing that in the Holy Bible there is nothing superfluous and nothing deficient. This sacred book stands unique, distinct from all other “sacred writings”, and that apart from changes of spelling or the meaning of words, that which we have is as close to the original writings as possible. However, that closeness to the original inspired writings is only as true as the translator fulfilled his work. The new bible for homosexuals is not the inspired word of God. It may contain parts of it, but it is not the word of God.

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

Rowan Jennings, Abbotsford, British Columbia