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The Bible Student

Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

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HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE

The New Testament Canon

(Continued)

A. McD. REDWOOD

The historical development of the New Testament canon follows an entirely different line to that of the Old Testament. During the first decades of the Gospel's history the need for an 'official' body of writings would scarcely be felt. There were in use the Old Testament Scriptures to which appeal was made, as exemplified in our Lord's teaching (cf. Matt. 5:17; Lk. 24:44; Jn. 5:39). The Apostles no doubt made use of these also in their writings and speeches to a very large extent. There would also be felt a natural shrinking from making any attempt to add to these sacred books.

At the first, oral teaching was the only means of disseminating the Christian message—the same method still extensively used in teaching the illiterate masses of many lands. As time went on oral instruction tended to assume a certain fixed 'form' or 'body of teaching', which was passed on from one to another. This 'oral tradition' was undoubtedly a most important vehicle of instruction, though possibly Biblical criticism has often over-emphasised it.

As time went on the Gospel message spread to distant regions bringing young churches into existence, whose members would need spiritual instruction, and so the insufficiency of merely oral teaching would become more apparent. It is not surprising, therefore, that before A.D. 50 Christian writings began to appear. Some think that parts of Christ's own teachings were in writing even before the crucifixion; but this is conjectural. Nevertheless before the first generation of Christians had passed away there

were many narratives in circulation, as may be inferred from Luke, ch. 1:1-4, who wrote his Gospel about A.D. 57. It is acknowledged by all authorities that St Paul's Letters were in circulation by 66-67 A.D. Other New Testament books had emerged earlier, so that before the fall of Jerusalem the New Testament in its several parts was practically complete.

For the purpose of our present enquiry we may divide the history of the canon into four stages, using the utmost brevity in our narrative.

(1) *From the Apostles to A.D. 120.* It is evident from the writings of the Apostolic Fathers (A.D. 70 onwards) that the Gospels and the Epistles were well known before the end of the first century. The extant writings of Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Barnabas contained numerous 'correspondences', or partial quotations from the New Testament books. The Epistle of Barnabas, for example, makes free use of Philippians, and quotes from nine other of Paul's Letters. The date of Polycarp's birth is placed at about 69 A.D., that is, he was 30 when the Apostle John died (c. 98), so that he must have known the Christian Scriptures. Evidence of this is found in his own Epistle where he makes reference to eighteen books of the New Testament, including Hebrews (Lightfoot). The free use made of the Apostle's words in these writings shows that the several books of the New Testament were carefully treasured and studied. They bear distinct witness to the Gospels also. Clement, Ignatius, and Barnabas draw a clear distinction between their own and the Apostolic writings, attributing to the latter the fact of inspiration and divine authority (1 Clem. 1:47; Ign. Ad. Rom. iv).

Later in date the testimony of Papias, whose chief work, *An Exposition of Oracles of the Lord*, written apparently about A.D. 126, is of exceptional importance because he was in all probability a disciple of the Apostle John. He is the first who alludes by name to the writers of the Gospels, and mentions the writings of Matthew and Mark. Eusebius records that he quoted from 1 John and 1 Peter, and acknowledged the book of Revelation to be divinely inspired. We may note finally how the reference in 2 Peter 3:16 would lead us to believe that Paul's letters were well known and in circulation.

(2) *From 120-170 A.D.* We now reach the age of the Greek Apologists. By this time persecution by the civil government and the heretical teachings of Gnosticism had arisen to test the Church's foundations. The Christian writings were brought into great prominence, being on the one hand attacked by heretical writers, and on the other defended by the leaders of the Church. From both sides they receive remarkable testimony in different ways.

Of the Apologists, Justin Martyr (c. 148) was by far the most important. He specially mentions the 'Memoirs of the Apostles called Gospels', which were read on Sunday interchangeably with the Prophets (*Apol.* 1:66, 67). This is possibly the first clear proof of the *beginnings* of a canon. It is of interest that Tatian, a disciple of Justin Martyr, wrote a harmony of the four Gospels, the 'Diatessaron', dated c. 143. He mentions the Apocalypse by name and its author as John, but he seems to have known also the Acts, six Epistles of Paul, with Hebrews and 1 John.

On the side of the heretics the most noted was the Gnostic Marcion (c. 140), and later Celsus (c. 170), who has been called the 'chief literary opponent of Christianity in the 2nd century'. Marcion's main activity was directed to the formation of a canon of his own, consisting of Luke's Gospel and Paul's Epistles; viz., Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians. The importance to us of his work is that he provides the first clear evidence of the canonization of the Pauline Epistles by selecting a Canon out of the books recognised by the Church of that age. At the same time it cannot be claimed that finality had yet been reached. The Epistles of Hebrews, James, 2 and 3 John, and Jude, were still in doubt in some quarters; and 2 Peter was almost in the same position. So that within a hundred years of the fall of Jerusalem all the remaining parts of the New Testament had been collected and received by the Church as fully inspired.

(3) *From 170-303 A.D.* This brings us to the time of the persecutions under the Emperor Diocletian. It was an age of rapid expansion of Christianity, which in spite of persecution spread far beyond the confines of the Roman Empire. It has been called 'the age of a voluminous theological literature, tense with the

great issues of church, canon and creed'. The names which stand out most prominently as leaders of the Church are Irenaeus (disciple of Polycarp and pupil of St John), Clement of Alexandria, Origen (who succeeded Clement as head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria), and Tertullian—representing the three great spheres of Christian learning respectively, viz., Asia Minor, Egypt, and North Africa. The important writings of this period, i.e., the products of these great writers, mark the progress towards agreement which prevailed respecting the full Canon of the New Testament.

Irenaeus had a wide acquaintance with the scattered churches and with established Apostolic tradition. He was an earnest defender of the truth and he bases his teaching very largely on the New Testament. In his writings allusions are made to every book in the New Testament except Philemon, James, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude. Clement likewise makes use of all the New Testament books with the exception of James, 2 Peter, and 3 John; and by such usage acknowledges their authoritative character. Origen, who is acknowledged to be one of the greatest scholars of that age, accepted the divine authority of the same books as Clement had received. What is most important, however, is that he places the Apostolic Scriptures on the same equality as the Old Testament, as may be seen in his statement: "The Scriptures believed by us to be divine both of the Old and of the New Covenant" (*De Princip.* iv:1).

(4) *The 4th century: The close of the Canon.* Up to this point no concerted action had been taken to establish a final Canon of the New Testament. But Diocletian's persecution and the decree for the confiscation and destruction of the Apostolic writings forced the issue. The Scriptures were by now 'unofficially' yet indubitably recognised by all as regards their sources, their authority and their divine inspiration. It now became necessary to 'separate' them from *all other* ecclesiastical treaties, including the many apocryphal works in circulation. This did not actually come to pass till near the end of the century, at the Council of Carthage, A.D. 397.

Eusebius (270-340 A.D.) was the one who took a leading part in

this great work. He himself had witnessed the burning of the Scriptures—a tragic event which doubtless urged him to his task of securing a clearer understanding of what were authoritative and what were spurious. He was peculiarly fitted by his great learning and wide acquaintance with the prevailing thought in other Christian centres, having travelled extensively. He classes the writings which were best known and widely used into three groups: the *second* of which he divided into two sections:

(a) The 'acknowledged'; the authenticity and apostolicity of which were fully accepted; viz.,—The Gospels; Acts; Epistles of Paul (including Hebrews); 1st Peter; 1 John; and the Revelation (though somewhat doubtfully).

(b) The 'disputed': (i) those admitted by the majority, himself included, were—James, 2nd Peter, 2nd and 3rd John, Jude. (ii) Those not so authenticated were: Shepherd of Hermas; the Didache; Epistle of Barnabas; Acts of Paul.

(c) Finally, the 'heretical' included the purely apocryphal and heretical works extant at the time.

Then a somewhat *later list* made by Athanasius (A.D. 367), representing the opinion of the Church of Alexandria, contains the whole of the New Testament Books, as we have them now. The two master theologians of the West, Jerome and Augustine, also accepted the same Canon, which was confirmed by the Third Council of Carthage (A.D. 397), decreeing that, "aside from the canonical Scriptures nothing is to be read in church as under the name of 'The Divine Scriptures'". This finally settled the question regarding the authority and canonicity of the Bible.

The Preservation of the Text

We must turn now to a very important question, viz., How has the Text been handed down during the centuries since first written? In other words: Is our Bible an accurate representation of the originals? It will be obvious that this covers a wide field; and involves more than one line of enquiry. For a more comprehensive treatment the student must consult the larger and more specialised works of the scholars. Our present treatment, therefore, can only be very cursory.

(1) *The Old Testament.* A remarkable fact meets us at the start: we have no MSS of the Old Testament in Hebrew earlier than the 9th or 10th century A.D., except one small papyrus. It can be asserted, however, that we *do* have sufficient evidence to show that the Hebrew Text has suffered no material change since the 1st century A.D., when it was finally fixed at the Synod of Jamnia, 90 A.D. (Kenyon). The present Hebrew MSS contain what is known as the Massoretic Text, that is, it was edited and made by Schools of Jewish Rabbis and scholars who were called Massorettes (from *Massoreth*, 'to hand down'; vide Num. 31:5). These men were imbued with the great ideal of preserving the purest text possible, and were noted for the meticulous care with which they copied their Scriptures. They flourished in the 7th century A.D., and with unremitting toil they produced by the help of the ancient Jewish Targums and Talmud the text of the Hebrew Bible as it was at the time of the Synod of Jamnia.

In addition to this two other forms of the Text have come down to us from pre-Christian times; viz., the Samaritan Pentateuch (which includes only the five books of Moses), and the Septuagint which is a Greek Version containing the whole of the Old Testament. The former strictly is not a version, as it is in Hebrew, but written in different characters from that of other MSS . . . It differs from the Hebrew in about 6,000 places, but the great majority of these are said to be of very trifling importance.

The Septuagint (usually written or printed *LXX*), or Greek Version, is by far the most important of all the ancient translations. It was the Bible of the Greek-speaking Jews; edited in the original text by Origen. The only other version we need mention is the Old Latin or Vulgate (4th Century) containing both the Old Testament and the New, which is still in use by the R. C. Church, but it is of no great importance in questions of textual criticism.

So the general position, as stated by that well known authority, the late Dr Kenyon, is that 'The Old Testament Scriptures may be accepted as having been handed down with no substantial variation since the year A.D. 100'. Coming from such a source this assurance is of the greatest value.

(2) *The New Testament.* The literary evidence for the text

of the New Testament is far more abundant than even that of the Old Testament. In fact, far greater than for any other writings in the whole range of ancient literature. It is computed that there are over four thousand MSS available of the Greek N.T., or parts of it. If we include all the Versions in addition the total would be greatly enhanced.

The fourteen hundred years between the completion of the autographs and the fifteenth century constitute the most important era in the history of the N.T. documents. It furnishes us with the great mass of Greek MSS, the most essential materials we possess for determining the accuracy of the text itself. Three stages of development are to be noted in this era: (a) *The Papyrus*, from the first to the fourth century. (b) *The Uncials*, from the fourth to the ninth, during which vellum (made from skins) took the place of papyrus for writing purposes. (c) *The Minuscules*, or *Cursives*, from the ninth to the fifteenth century.

The discovery and significance of these papyri writings has been well told in the writings of the late Sir F. Kenyon and Prof. Geo. Milligan, to which the student is referred as they are wonderfully illuminating and helpful to any Bible student who will take time to improve his knowledge (see footnote at end of article).

About the middle of the fifteenth century the invention of printing revolutionized everything, even the circulation of the Scriptures. The new method began to do away with the old handcopying labour, and by 1516 the first Greek New Testament was printed by Erasmus, who adopted the standard text. The first complete Bible printed was the Latin Vulgate, but it has had no influence on the transmission of the text. Erasmus' work fired the devout zeal of William Tyndale, who printed an English translation in 1525. He also published the Pentateuch from the original Hebrew, and had translated the historical books before his martyrdom in 1536. With the help of Tyndale's version, and a translation of his own German and Latin Bibles, Miles Coverdale produced the first complete English Bible in 1535, which culminated in our 'great English Authorised Version in 1611—a 'masterpiece of literary skill and style which embedded itself in the life and literature of the English people'.

Can we still rely on it?

But the question may be asked: 'In view of the increasing number of newer "translations" of the New Testament by various men of learning can we still absolutely rely on the accuracy of the text of our English New Testament, assuming that the history of the several books has demonstrated their authenticity and genuineness?' In answer to this we give two quotations from recognised authorities on the subject. The first is from Westcott and Hort, whose work on the Greek text is universally known.

'With regard to the great bulk of the words of the N.T. . . . there is no variation or other ground of doubt; and, therefore, no room for textual criticism . . . The amount of what *can*, in any sense, be called substantial variation, is but a small fraction of the residuary variation, and can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the entire text. In other words, it is only in regard to one word in a thousand that textual critics, by laborious comparison of MSS, have to determine the exact reading of the original text'¹.

The second quotation is from Sir Fredrick Kenyon's book, *The Story of The Bible*:² 'It may be disturbing to some to part with the conception of a Bible handed down through the ages without alteration and in unchallenged authority; but it is a higher ideal to face the facts, to apply the best powers with which God has endowed us to the solution of the problems which they present to us; and it is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scriptures, and our own conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God'.

Let it be stated categorically that, ALL the authorities in the field of genuine Textual Criticism assure us that no single doctrine, of the Gospel is affected by any of the variations still unexplained.

¹ *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, vol. ii; p. 2.

² *The Story of The Bible*; and *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*.

Also worth reading: *The New Testament and Its Transmission*, by Prof. George Milligan, D. D. *The New Bible Handbook*: I-V. Fellowship, London, 1948.