

## *The Canon of Scripture*

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Our word 'canon' goes back through Latin to the Greek word *kanon*, primarily meaning a 'reed' or 'rod'. The Greek word acquired two secondary meanings: (1) a 'measuring-rod' or 'standard', and (2) a 'list' or 'index'. Origen, early in the third century A.D., applied the former of these two secondary meanings to the Bible, to indicate that it is the 'standard' or 'rule' of faith, i.e. the norm by which we are to judge everything that may be commended for our acceptance in the realm of religion. Athanasius, a century later, used the latter of these secondary meanings in reference to the books of the Bible, in the sense in which these books constitute the 'list' of writings which the Church reckons as the authoritative documents of divine revelation. When we speak of the Canon of Scripture, this last sense is the one which we intend; but the other sense, in which we regard the Scriptures collectively as the rule of faith, is not excluded.

The Canon of Scripture, then, is the list of writings delivered to us as the divinely inspired record of God's self-revelation to men—that self-revelation of which Jesus Christ our Lord is the centre. The writings are not authoritative because they are included in the list; they are in the list because their authority has been recognized. For example, the oracles of the prophet Amos were stamped with divine authority as he uttered them in the name of Israel's God. They were written down some time after they were spoken, and it was some time after that that they were included in the canon or list of prophetic writings. Divine authority comes first: canonicity follows authority and is dependent upon it. Similarly, the individual Epistles of Paul bore the stamp of divine authority because he wrote them as the apostle or plenipotentiary of the risen Christ: 'the things which I write unto you', he said, 'are the commandments of the Lord' (1 Cor. xiv. 37). But it was at a later time, and because of the authority which they already possessed, that these individual Epistles were included in the list of sacred writings.

### **THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

The thirty-nine books which make up the Old Testament according to our common reckoning are the books which, from the beginning of the Christian era at any rate, have been accepted as the books of the Hebrew Bible. In the Hebrew Bible they are reckoned as twenty-four all. The twelve 'Minor' Prophets are counted as one book in the Hebrew Bible: the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles are counted as one book each; Ezra and Nehemiah are counted as one book. This explains the difference between the Hebrew total of twenty-four and ours of thirty-nine.

In the Hebrew Bible these books are divided into three divisions: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The Law comprises the five books of Moses. In the 'Prophets' are included the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings (the 'Former Prophets') as well as the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 'Minor' Prophets (the 'Latter Prophets'). The 'Writings' contain firstly Psalms, Proverbs and Job; secondly a group of five books called the 'Five

Scrolls', Canticles, Ruth. Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther; thirdly the books of Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

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The reason for this arrangement is uncertain. It does not represent the order in which the various books were written, nor is it an arrangement in accordance with subject-matter.

The order with which we are familiar in our English Bible is partly based on subject-matter; it is, for the most part, the order found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made in the third and second centuries B.C. It appears that the order of the Hebrew Bible which has come down to us is the order with which our Lord and His contemporaries were familiar in Palestine. In particular, it appears that Chronicles came at the end of the Bible which they used: when our Lord sums up all the martyrs of Old Testament times He does so by mentioning the first martyr in Genesis (Abel) and the last martyr in Chronicles (Zechariah). (See Lk. xi. 51 with 2 Ch. xxiv. 21).

Moreover, it appears from Lk. xxiv. 44 that our Lord knew the threefold division of the Hebrew Bible, for when He speaks there of 'the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms', the last word may refer not merely to the Book of Psalms but to the whole division of the 'Writings' in which the Book of Psalms took first place. There is evidence, indeed, that this threefold division was known in the second century B.C., for the translator of the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus from Hebrew into Greek was plainly acquainted with it, and makes more than one reference to it in the preface to his translation, written about 132 B.C.

It is widely supposed that the threefold division reflects three stages in which the Canon of the Old Testament received recognition. There is no direct evidence for this, however, but it is a reasonable hypothesis.

After the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, a new Sanhedrin or council of elders, consisting of Jewish scholars, was constituted at Jamnia in Western Palestine. They reviewed the whole field of Jewish religion and law, and held long discussions on the scope of the Canon of Hebrew Scripture. They debated whether certain books should not be excluded, and whether certain others should not be admitted: but in the end they did not exclude any book which already enjoyed canonical recognition, nor did they admit any book which had not previously received such recognition.

## **THE APOCRYPHA**

The books of the Apocrypha were not included in the Hebrew Bible, nor were they regarded as canonical by the leaders of official Judaism anywhere. Even Jews who wrote in Greek at the beginning of our era, like Philo and Josephus, recognized only the Canon of the Hebrew Bible, although they used the 'Septuagint' translation. The books of the Apocrypha, while they were written in Greek or translated into Greek by Jews, first received canonical recognition from Greek-speaking Christians. The early Greek Fathers acknowledged in theory that these books were not on the same canonical level as the books in the Hebrew Bible, but in practice they made little distinction between the two classes. The Latin Fathers in general (with the notable exception of Jerome) made no distinction either in theory or in practice. In the sixteenth century, while the Council of Trent affirmed the full canonical status of the

books of the Apocrypha. the Lutherans and Anglicans allowed them to be read in Church only 'for example of life and instruction of manners' but not as part of the rule of faith; and the Churches that followed the lead of Geneva did not accord them even this meed of recognition.

Our Lord and the apostles certainly did not regard the apocryphal books as part of Holy Scripture; the evidence is that they acknowledged as canonical only the books of the Hebrew Bible. and that is the justification for the Protestant Evangeli-

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cal attitude. Our supreme reason for acknowledging the divine authority of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament is the fact that Christ and (following Him) His apostles acknowledged it.

### **THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

In the nature of the case, we cannot quote our Lord's authority for the twenty-seven books of the New Testament in the same way as we can quote it for the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. Yet His authority is as basic to our acceptance of the New Testament Canon as it is to our acceptance of the Old Testament Canon. The authority which we recognize in the New Testament writings is essentially our Lord's authority, directly or indirectly.

All Christians in early days believed, as we do, that God revealed Himself supremely and finally in Jesus Christ. His words, His deeds, His very Person, all constituted the crowning self-manifestation of God, standing to the Old Testament revelation as fulfilment to promise. Therefore the genuine documents in which that saving revelation was recorded were inevitably regarded as possessing His supreme authority. The Gospels are the written form of the witness borne to Christ by His apostles, whom He specially commissioned and to whom He promised that His Spirit would enable them to remember and understand His words, would lead them into all the truth and would show them things to come. But further, the implications of the work of Christ for faith and practice were appreciated by His apostles after His exaltation and the coming of the Spirit as they could not be appreciated before, and in consequence we have the teaching of the New Testament Epistles. If the Gospels give us the story of what Jesus began to do and teach until the day of His ascension (Acts i. 1), the Acts and Epistles record what He continued to do and teach thereafter, by His Spirit in the apostles.

About the end of the first century we find two collections of Christian writings beginning to circulate as collections among the churches: the Fourfold Gospel and the body of Pauline Epistles. This was a step towards the acceptance of an authoritative collection, or Canon, of books of the New Covenant, as distinct from the authority which the individual Gospels and Epistles already had for those who first received them.

### **MARCION'S CANON**

About A.D. 140 a heretical teacher from Asia Minor, Marcion by name, published at Rome a Canon of sacred books. He rejected the authority of the Old Testament entirely, and his authoritative list consisted of an edition of Luke's Gospel, edited in accordance with Marcion's special views, and an edition of ten Pauline Epistles similarly edited.

Marcion's Canon does not mark the first attempt to draw up a Christian list, but it did stimulate the orthodox church leaders to define more explicitly the Canon as they acknowledged it. They said, in effect: 'We do not believe that the New Testament books *supersede* the Old Testament; we place them alongside it as its proper sequel and fulfilment. We do not acknowledge one Gospel only, but four, and one of the four is the genuine edition of that Gospel which Marcion has mutilated. We do not acknowledge ten Pauline Epistles only, but thirteen: and in addition to these we also acknowledge the Epistles of other apostolic men. And as the link between the Gospels and the Epistles we acknowledge the Acts of the Apostles.'

By the end of the third quarter of the second Christian century, then, we find the main contents of our New Testament recognized by the Church in east and west. There remained some uncertainty about

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some of the smaller works at the end of the New Testament, and in some places there was a tendency to give canonical status to a few other early Christian writings which have not maintained this status. But the outlines of the New Testament became more and more definitely fixed, until the twenty-seven books as we know them were practically universally acknowledged in the second half of the fourth century.

It is specially important to hear in mind that the fixing of the New Testament Canon was not the arbitrary work of a Church Council. When at last, in A.D. 393, a Church Council drew up a list of New Testament books, it simply confirmed the canonical recognition that was already well established as the general consensus of Christians. And in this matter the early Christians were certainly guided by a wisdom higher than their own, as may be seen in what they rejected as much as in what they accepted. We could not improve upon their direction. But, enlightened by the witness of the Spirit who guided them, we, too, recognize in the New Testament the books which were given by inspiration of God to stand alongside the books of the Old Covenant, the Bible of Christ and His apostles, and to make up with them the complete volume of God's Word written.

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Prepared for the Web in March 2008 by Robert I Bradshaw.

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