

HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE And WHY WE BELIEVE IT IS GOD'S WORD

by

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CHAPTER TWO

CANONICITY OF THE BIBLE

THE attitude of the Christian Church toward the entire volume of the Scriptures is one of reverence.

The thirty-nine Books of the Old Testament comprise the Bible of the Jews, setting forth the Jewish religion in its historical development and different aspects, covering centuries of time. The Church, therefore, inherited her belief in the sacredness and authority of the Old Testament, from our Lord and his apostles, since the basis of their teaching was the Old Testament Scriptures.

Since the New Testament sets forth the Christian religion in various aspects, covering some sixty years, or two generations, and is thus a complete declaration of those facts on which the Church grounds her life and belief, her reverence for it is readily understood.

None of the Books of the New Testament was written by the Founder of the Christian religion, in marked contrast with the Koran, which is alleged to have been written by Mohammed.

From the beginning of her life the Church had the Old Testament, but not until years had passed were the Books constituting the New Testament written, and added to it. The recognition of these New Testament writings as possessed of divine authority, marked them as canonical, and the method by which they were so recognized has been, called canonization.

The word "*Canon*" comes from the Greek word, *Kanon*, and is akin to the Hebrew word for *reed*. The words "*cane*" and "*canon*" are cognate terms. The word had active and passive senses.

A thing which is employed as a measure is first measured, and only then used to measure other things.

The passive meaning, anything measured, e.g., a measured racecourse at Olympia in turn becomes a measure, and the word means *a straight rod or rule used for measurement* (II Corinthians 10:13-16, passive; Galatians 6:16, active).

Then the word came to mean any list of things for reference, e.g., at Alexandria a list of classical writers was called a "Canon," and Eusebius calls chronological tables, "Canons of times."

This is the meaning of the technical word "Canon" in relation to Scripture. The Canon of Scripture is used first of all in a passive sense, meaning that which being measured becomes the means which measures or tests others.

Thus Scripture is:

- (1) that which is measured or defined by the rule of the Christian Church,
- (2) that which, being measured, becomes thereby the rule of the Church for other cases.

The Bible contains the recognized list of Books which have been measured by a certain rule or standard of measurement and have thereby become measures of other books.

The word is first used in the Christian Church by a poet, Amphilochius, 380, "The Canon of the *God-breathed writings*."

But Origen had spoken of "canonized books" or books put on the list. Afterward Jerome and Augustine, A. D. 400, handled the word technically.

What, then, is the rule of the Christian Church by which a book is "*measured*," or defined as "canonical"?

The Sixth Article of the Church of England describes a Canonical Book as one "of whose authority [there] was never any doubt in the Church."

We must observe that the reference is to authority, not to authorship. The statement is usually regarded as a great difficulty, since it cannot apply to all the books and all the churches, for the Reformers knew well the early doubts about some of the books. It is probable that as the doubts were dead by the sixteenth century the reference is to the Church as a whole as distinct from individual churches. The matter was originally settled mainly by public reading. and general usage in Christian communities.

The first three centuries never pronounced on the subject except by the testimony of individual and representative writers. No corporate evidence was possible. But when that was available and necessary it was soon seen that there was no real doubt as to our books.

The first corporate witness dates from the Council of Laodicea, A. D. 364, where the testimony is clear, and when once the whole Church was able to bear its witness the words of the Article are seen to be justified.

The grounds of Canonicity need consideration. Why were certain books received and certain rejected?

In conversation with a friend I asked him this question:

"What is the ultimate reason why you accept the New Testament? Deep down below everything else, what is it that causes you to accept it, and reject other books?"

My friend said he did not know that he had ever really faced it in that way. So I went on:

"Do you accept it because it is old? There are older books. Do you accept it because it contains truth! Well, there are other books that contain truth. No: beneath its age, beneath its helpfulness, beneath its truthfulness is the bedrock - this book came from men who were uniquely qualified to convey GOD's will to men; and the basis of our acceptance of the New Testament is what is called in technical language '*Apostolicity*'; because the books came either from Apostolic authors, or through Apostolic sanction."

Our view of the Old Testament corresponds to this.

The fundamental reason is the conviction that certain books came from men who were divinely inspired to reveal and convey GOD's will; prophets in the Old Testament and apostles in the New.

Prophets were recognized expounders of GOD's will, and their writings were regarded as immediately authoritative.

The best illustration is found in Jeremiah 36, where the prophet's words were recognized as possessing authority at once. Each book had this authority by reason of its prophetic source, and then gradually came the collection into one volume, so that the Old Testament represents those books which Israel accepted on proper evidence as the divine standard of faith and practice, because they were either written or put forth by prophetic men.

It was not the decision of the people that caused the Canonicity, but the Canonicity was the cause of their acceptance by the people.

The authority came from GOD through the prophets, and the recognition by the people was the effect of the Canonicity. The action of the people was the weighing of evidence, and the outcome was testimony rather than judgment.

In the same way the books of the New Testament were regarded as marked by Apostolic origin.

This may have been authorship or sanction, but there is no doubt that the primary standard of verification and acceptance was the belief that these books came from Apostolic men, either apostles themselves or their associates.

So, the ground of Canoncity was not merely the age, or the truth, or the helpfulness of the books, but, beneath and before these characteristics, because they came from uniquely-qualified instruments of GOD's will.

All other tests were subsidiary and confirmatory.

It is, therefore, important and essential to distinguish between the ground of Canoncity and the ground of the conviction of Canoncity. The latter is quite separate from the former and is subjective, while the latter is rational, objective, and leaves man no excuse.

It is particularly important at this point, to notice what Canoncity really implies and involves.

It created a book, not a revelation. Canoncity is analogous to codification, and implies the existence of separate books.

The authority of each book of the Bible would have been the same even if there had been no collection and codification. So that the authority is not that of a volume, but of a revelation; the revelation did not come to exist because of the Canoncity but the Canoncity because of the revelation, and the Bible, as we have seen, is regarded as a revelation, because it is held to be the embodiment of the historical manifestation of the Redeemer and his truth.

It has been well said that the Bible is not an authorized collection of books, but a collection of authorized books.

This distinction is vital.

It is essential to remember that the quality which determines acceptance of a book is its possession of a divine revelation. So that Canoncity did not raise a book to the position of Scripture, but recognized that it was already Scripture.

Canonization was a decision based on testimony, and the canonizing process was the recognition of an existing fact.

It is, of course, true that the process of canonization by the whole Church implies a cumulative authority, and adds immensely to the strength of the position as representing the witness of the entire Christian body, but it must never be forgotten that the authority of each separate book was in it from the first.

QUESTIONS

1. What has ever been the attitude of the Christian Church toward the Scriptures?
2. What two words describe the fact of the recognition of the divine authority of the Scriptures, and the method by which they were so recognized?
What is the origin and the meaning of these words?
3. How did the Books of the New Testament become canonical?
When was the first corporate testimony to canonicity given?
4. What are the grounds of the canonicity of the Old Testament Books?
5. What are the grounds of the canonicity of the New Testament Books?
6. What does canonicity involve? To what is it analogous?
7. What effect would a failure to canonize the different Books of the Bible have had on their authority?
8. Did the revelation of truth come to be because of. canonicity? State the facts of the case.
9. What has the Bible sometimes been said to be?
10. What was canonization? What was the canonizing process?

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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