

## The Canon of Scripture

Let's take some time and look at the canon of the Bible; or better the two canons that together form our modern Old and New Testaments as we call them (gosh, I really hate those terms). but it's important that we understand just how (or if) we're to place the various books and writings of Holy Scripture into any kind of hierarchy.

The Church views Scripture as though some books have more merit than other books. Many of you know how I have become fascinated by the Torah, so I because Christianity has no problem prioritizing Scripture, I decided to create my studies on Torah; because today the priority is that the Tanakh, the Old Testament, is deemed as anywhere from faulty to worthless to abolished entirely: and in our minds the New Testament is all a Christian should concern themselves with. The Gospels hold the highest position in the New Testament, usually followed by Paul's Epistles, then Peter's and John's and then maybe Revelation.

The term canon simply means that the material it contains (the collection of books) has been agreed to as authorized by some religious body or council. So how and when did the contents of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) and the New Testament become a canon?

Interestingly, even though it happened at a much earlier time than the New Testament, the canon of the Old Testament is a bit easier to trace (although not everyone would agree with all the detailed conclusions about it). The modern Christian position is that it happened about 20 years or a little more after the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (placing it at about 90 A.D.). At the little village of Jamnia (the story goes) some influential Rabbis who had been keeping a very low profile since the destruction of Jerusalem met and decided on the canon of the Old Testament. This is simply not true and frankly doesn't even pass the smell test. Jewish writings explain that this council of Rabbis met for a number of reasons, and the only real issue concerning Scripture was whether to include the books of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. There's no decisive record or evidence that any decision was even made on about those two books; all we know for certain is that the Rabbis met and argued their merit.

The discovery, reconstruction, and translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls should have finally put the nail in the coffin of such a patently inaccurate assertion that it wasn't until after Christ that the canon of the Old Testament was established . . . but it hasn't. Old traditions and agendas die hard. The Dead Sea Scrolls were written around 100 B.C.; and in them every book of the Old Testament has been discovered except for the books of Esther and Nehemiah. No less a historian than Josephus explains that by his era (around the time of Christ and on to the destruction of the Temple) the canon of the Tanakh had long been fixed at 22 books. While that doesn't seem to jibe with the modern count, you need to understand that several books including Chronicles and Kings have since been divided into two parts by Christian editors, because they were so lengthy, and some books were divided out by literature type (like Proverbs and Psalms).

But going back even further we know that the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (known as the Septuagint) occurred somewhere around 250 B.C., and in it is every book of the Old Testament that we now study. Could there have been ongoing discussions about whether to keep it as it was, or to add or subtract a book here or there? Absolutely; in fact we have records of exactly that thing happening, and it's in that same spirit that the meeting of the Rabbis at Jamnia in 90 A.D. took place.

So the books of the Old Testament were in existence and regarded as the inspired Word of God (Holy Scripture) by the Jewish people at some time before 250 B.C. However there were other Hebrew religious books as well that were in existence at that time; these additional books weren't given quite the same merit as the Tanakh but were placed "next to" it; they were judged not to carry the same weight as the Tanakh, but they were just as valid in their content. Just like the book of Deuteronomy was placed "next to."but not in the Ark with the 10 Commandments, so were many books that are today popularly known as the Apocrypha placed "next-to" the Holy Old Testament by the Israelites but were judged not to be of equal weight to them. They were regarded as being divinely inspired, but not on a high enough level of inspiration to consider them as "Holy Scripture."

So how does this compare with the formation of the New Testament canon, as we know it today? Before I address that, I want to point out something that might be startling; and before I do that (so that I'm not misconstrued) I want to state that without equivocation I subscribe to the New Testament being the fully valid and inspired Word of God.

The Old Testament (at least most of it) is what I would call self-canonizing. What I mean is that the very words of those books claim Holy Scripture status. The Torah claims to be the work and words of God, and also claim in them that Moses was to write them down. The Prophets claimed in their writings to be speaking the very words that the God of Israel instructed them to speak. Even several of the Psalms claim to be God-inspired at the least.

The New Testament on the other hand does no such thing. No book of the New Testament is self-canonizing. No book of the New Testament makes the claim that its contents rise to the status of God-breathed. I've stated a few times that the New Testament is primarily the story of the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of a coming Messiah, and then what this means for Jews on the one hand and gentiles on the other. They explain just who the Messiah turned out to be (Yeshua of Nazareth), what He did and commanded during His ministry, and how He came to be and how He died. The story of the life of Yeshua is contained in the books we call the Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke are a little different in nature than the Gospel of John; and those three books are together called the Synoptic Gospels because they essentially tell the same stories only sometimes in a slightly different order, giving slightly different emphasis, and often from a little different perspective.

The New Testament contains another type of literature called Epistles; an epistle is simply a letter written by a church leader. These epistles (mostly written by Paul) deal with various disputes and problems that arose at numerous church locations around the Roman Empire. In reality most of the letters are commentary; commentary on Old Testament passages and commentary on the theological consequences of Yeshua's advent, death, resurrection, and instructions. Sometimes the commentary was needed because almost everything the Jewish religious authorities had decided a Messiah would be and do in no way resembled Jesus.

The epistles of James, brother of Jesus, dealt primarily with things in the church at its headquarters in Jerusalem. James was the supreme leader of the church during Paul's day (not Peter as some teach).

The final type of New Testament literature is expressed in the book of John to a degree, but primarily in Revelation; it's called Apocalyptic. It deals with the revealing of end-times events so it's prophetic in nature; it was about times future to its writer, John.

The nature of the Gospels is important. First, understand that Matthew, Mark and Luke aren't the names of the writers of those books; their authors are anonymous. The Gospels are

somewhat like a biography of Jesus. They were written at the earliest some 20 years or so after Yeshua's execution. And . . . they were written by Jews.

Here, though, is where the rubber starts to meet the road: even though it's well documented that towards the end of the 1st century A.D. the Gospels and some of Paul's letters were being passed around to various church locations, they weren't considered Holy Scripture; they weren't even considered to be of a divinely inspired level equal to those of the Old Testament Apocrypha. The letters were considered to be authoritative, meaning that they were taken to be rules and regulations about how to handle matters within the church. They were seen no differently than we view the bylaws set down by any recognized Christian denomination; while the bylaws are supposedly based on Christian principles they don't rise to the level of being Scripture. The records of the Apostolic Fathers—the generation of church leaders that immediately followed the Apostles—show that under every circumstance their Bible was the Hebrew Bible—the Tanakh—and nothing else. And this is no matter whether that leader was a Jew or a gentile.

Writings from Origen, Ignatius, Clement, Papias and other early church leaders show us that by the first part of the 2nd century A.D. some of the churches located out in the Roman Empire were starting to read portions of the Gospels and portions of the Epistles during church meetings. It was customary to read Old Testament Scripture during a church service (again, what we call the Old Testament was “the bible” then) and then also on occasion read some of those letters and Gospels. It seems that while in no way did the first generation or two of the church that started this habit hold up the letters and Gospels as God-inspired, the fact that they were being read during a church service more or less alongside Holy Scriptures led the following generations to give those Gospels and letters more weight.

The first recorded attempt to actually consider Paul's letters and the Gospels as “Holy Scripture” happened in 144 A.D. A European named Marcion was the culprit. Marcion was a recent Christian convert; a wealthy and powerful gentile shipping magnate. He wasn't a church leader but he did write a book that struck a cord among the now thoroughly gentile-dominated church. In his book entitled “Antithesis” he put forth his personal theology; and it began with the proposition that every thing Jewish must be eliminated from the church. So the church needed to form its own new Bible and simultaneously declare the Hebrew Bible as null and void. Marcion also declared that the Christian Bible should consist only of the Gospel of Luke plus some of Paul's epistles. But not the entire Gospel of Luke; what amounts to the first 4 chapters were to be eliminated since they dealt with the Jewish heritage of Christ.

Marcion was widely denounced, but he did gain a following. No known church body adopted his proposition; at least not in the form he suggested and not until many years had passed.

It's now that the matter gets even more complicated. The Roman Empire was in turmoil and even though it wasn't yet a divided empire, two power centers had emerged: Rome and Byzantium; Byzantium later became known as Constantinople and today is called Istanbul. Naturally the power centers of the church also gravitated there because with the proper political connections the leader of the church in each of those political capitals gained power, visibility and validation. So we have the birth of the Western Church and (separately) the Eastern Church. The Western Church, the portion of the Church with its leadership based in Rome, eventually grew primarily into the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Church based in Byzantium went on to become the various Christian Orthodox denominations such as the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Slavic, Coptic, and others. Protestantism eventually grew out of the Western

Church and most of us identify with one branch or another of either the Catholic or Protestant sub-branches. The Eastern Church is another matter altogether. It doesn't have its birth or current power structure connected to either the Catholic or Protestant churches.

I tell you this because when we discuss the New Testament Canon there isn't one universally agreed on New Testament even today (although the differences aren't major). And there certainly isn't one universally agreed on Bible among Christianity even today (the main difference being the order of the books and where the Apocrypha fits and how many of the 15 Apocryphal books are included).

After around 200 A.D. when Marcion's ideas evolved a bit, we begin to see that some of the Gospels and Epistles were being elevated to the status of Holy Scripture. But it depended entirely not only on which main branch of the church (Eastern or Western) but even which city the church was located in. Some churches refused to recognize anything other than the Hebrew Bible as Holy Scripture, and others chose which of the various Gospels and letters that they viewed as having sufficient merit as to be elevated to Scriptural status. In fact, by this time, many of the books of the Apocrypha were also in the mix as among those that the various churches chose as God-inspired. How did they choose? Church elders and bishops formed councils and they voted.

So, by around 220 A.D. we finally see certain Gospels and epistles being elevated to Holy Scripture status, and the concept of a New Testament being formed. Do you grasp that? It wasn't until well into the 3rd century A.D.—not until about 200 years after the death of Yeshua—that even the concept of an additional body of Scripture, or as we think of it another “testament,” was seriously considered; and even then it was only in some parts of the church. This newest testament wasn't at all conceived to be a replacement nor to be above the cherished Hebrew Bible.

It wouldn't be until the latter part of the 4th century, 367 A.D., that a New Testament canon was recognized as official and even then it was only so within the Western Church. Interestingly every book of the Apocrypha (which the Jews revered but didn't hold up as Holy Scripture) became Holy Scripture alongside the Hebrew Bible and the newly canonized New Testament. Let me repeat that: the first Bible of the Christians was the Hebrew Bible right up until around 220 A.D. The first Christian addition to the Bible was the books of the Apocrypha (ironically books revered by the Jews centuries before Christianity emerged). Now that the Apocrypha was given the status of Holy Scripture it would be a few more decades until a New Testament became a reality and included to form the complete Christian Bible.

Of course in response, the Eastern Church adopted their own New Testament that accepted some of the same books the Western did, but dismissed others and added some more not recognized by the Roman Church (the book of Hebrews has been added, deleted, added again, deleted again, and so on for centuries and is still a bone of contention). It did the same thing with the Apocrypha; the Eastern Church accepted some of them as Holy Scripture and others as not.

It was Martin Luther in the 1500's that first railed against the inclusion of the books of the Apocrypha in a Christian bible (even though it had been that way for over 12 centuries), especially since they were considered Holy Scripture. And as his writings plainly attest it's because he found the books of the Apocrypha (in his own words) “too Jewish.” With the Protestant reformation some books of the Apocrypha were removed from the Biblical canon and with the Geneva Bible they were moved to a separate section of the Bible and given lesser

weight than the Old and New Testaments (very similar to what the Jews had done with the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha almost 2000 years before).

Here's the thing I'd like you to take from all this: it's so terribly ironic that in the last 500 years the church has first removed the Apocrypha and then (for all practical purposes) the Old and original testament of God from the Bible. Oh, it's still there but in name only. The Tanakh has been relegated to a similar status within the modern Church as the Jews first gave to the Apocrypha; a flawed testament of lesser inspiration.

The irony is, of course, that it's only the Torah and the Prophets that actually claim divine inspiration. The New Testament doesn't. For us or anyone to seriously subscribe to the notion that every reference to Holy Scripture by a New Testament author is to that New Testament author's own writings is simply absurd on its face since there wouldn't be any elevation of any of those writings to divine status for almost 2 centuries after they were created. From the moment the Torah and Prophets were created they were of course Holy Scripture. There's no evidence whatsoever that a New Testament author thought he was writing something that would someday be considered as additional, or replacement, Holy Scripture. That would be like me even considering that someday the Bible Studies and commentary I've written would be considered Holy Scripture. I'm sure Paul never even considered it.

The purpose for this detour isn't to in any way discount or question the divine nature of the New Testament; I just want you to see that the New Testament writers and the early church never for a moment doubted the continuing relevance of the Hebrew Bible. The Torah and the Hebrew Bible formed the foundation for their faith. Yeshua was the fulfillment of the prophecies contained in the Tanakh. It was only several groups of gentile church leaders who (centuries later) ordained manmade doctrines and rules—all vehemently anti-Jewish—that turned the Bible upside down and made the original testament as questionable and the newest testament as irrefutable.

I would humbly suggest that just as Yeshua is Messiah and He is God, yet He is also subservient to the Father. Jesus constantly prayed to the Father, asked for His will to be done, and His famous prayer that we call the Lord's Prayer, memorializes this principle. We're told that Jesus is now in Heaven placed next to (placed beside) His Father, at His right hand. This mysterious relationship among the Godhead sets the pattern that we see in Deuteronomy where the Torah (which is the Word of God, just as Yeshua is the Word of God) was laid next to, beside, the Ark, but was subservient to the Ark's contents. So I further suggest that just as the divine Torah is symbolically laid beside its foundation (the 10 Commandments that reside inside the Ark), so should the divine New Testament be laid beside its foundation, the Torah. The Torah didn't replace the 10 Commandments anymore than the New Testament replaced the Old. For us to suggest that the Torah is subservient to the New Testament, or worse that the New has abolished the Old is to break the command of our Savior.

“Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete. Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven —Matthew 5:17