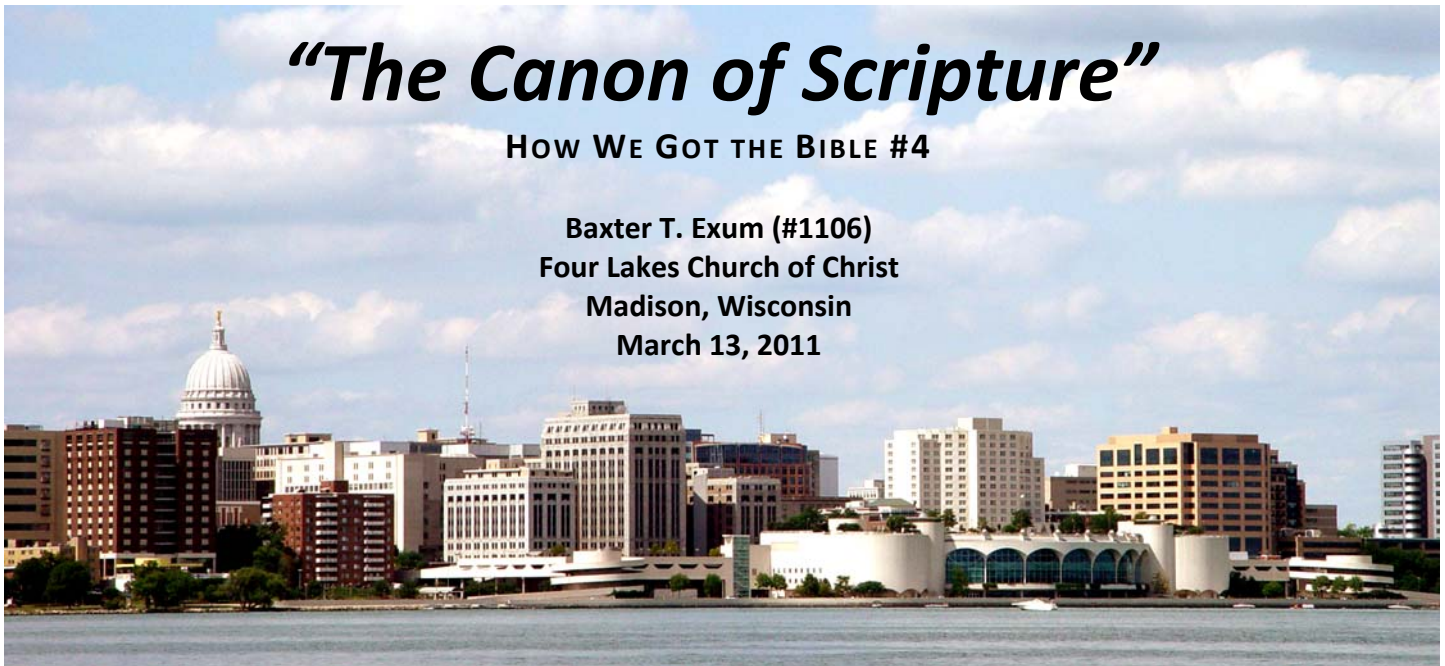


“The Canon of Scripture”

HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE #4

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As most of you know, over the past few weeks we have been looking together at various questions that have been turned in by our members concerning how we got the Bible in its current form.

- Three weeks ago, we looked at the importance of the written word of God. We discovered that God wanted His word written down so that it could be passed along to large numbers of people—not only at the time it was written, but He also wanted it written down so that it could be reliably passed along to future generations. We learned, then, that there is a tremendous value to the written word of God.
- Two weeks ago, we studied the making of ancient books. We focused on ancient writing materials: stone, pottery shards, clay, wood, metal, waxed tablets, papyrus, and vellum (which is animal skin).
- And then last week, we did just a brief summary of the manuscript evidence that we have for the Bible in its current form. Many people will make the accusation that the Bible was copied by hand, and that it must, therefore, be filled with mistakes. Last week, though (in response to those accusations), we started by looking at the reliability of the ancient manuscripts (more than 5,500 in Greek alone), and then we also considered how we should deal with the rather minor variations between the manuscripts.

This morning, I would like for us to move on and to study what is commonly referred to as the “canon” of Scripture. And as you can probably imagine, the word “canon” can be used in several different ways. We are not talking, this morning, about a canon that is used in a war; but rather, the “canon” of Scripture refers to a collection of books that are widely recognized as being the inspired word of God.

The word itself goes back to a Greek word meaning “reed” or “stick.” It sometimes referred to a walking stick (the same word is the basis for our English word “cane”), but the word “canon” (as we are using it this morning) came to refer to a measuring stick. And so just as we would use a yardstick to measure something today, people in ancient times would examine various documents to see if they “measured up” as Scripture. If they met the standard, if they met the qualifications, they would be included in a collection of sacred writings which were passed around as God’s word very early on. The word “canon,” by the way, is used several times in the New Testament, with the clearest example in Galatians 6:16 (p. 1826). Normally, the word is used to refer to some kind of “standard” or “rule” that we follow, and so we come to Galatians 6:16, where Paul referred to what he had just written in the book of Galatians and said, **“And those who will walk by this rule,**

peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” In other words, Paul’s words in the book of Galatians were to be considered a **“rule”** or a **“standard.”** Then, over the next few years, the early Christians started realizing that other writings were also to be considered a standard. Other writings were also to be considered as “Scripture.” In fact, a man by the name of Origen (who lived from 185-254 AD) alluded to the “canonized Scriptures.” In other words, at least in the early 200’s AD, people clearly realized that certain writings “measured up” and others did not.

This morning, then, as we study the “Canon of Scripture,” I would like to divide our lesson into several parts. First of all, we will consider the difference between authority and canonicity. We will then look at the Old Testament Canon, the New Testament Canon, the Apocrypha, and then close by looking at what are sometimes referred to as the “Lost Books.”

I. **But first of all this morning, let us please consider THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AUTHORITY AND CANONICITY.**

I remember having a discussion with a man from the Catholic Church many years ago, and when we got down to what the Bible actually says, the man was stuck. He could see that what he believed was wrong when compared to the Scriptures, and in the heat of the moment, the man referred his own church and said, “Well, we gave you the Bible, so who do you think you are?” You see, it got back to a matter of authority. In his view, at least, his church gave us the inspired books, his church told us which books to follow, so we have no real right to make any arguments from those books that in any way contradict the Catholic Church. But let’s think about that for just a moment. A book’s canonicity (that is, whether it should be in the Bible) depends on its authority (whether it is from God), and not the other way around. In other words, at no point in history was a book of the Bible meaningless until it got voted on by some council. But instead, the book (let’s say the book of Galatians, for example) was authoritative the moment Paul’s words hit the paper. The authority of that letter was immediate and did not depend on getting “voted into the Bible” hundreds of years later. Again: Canonicity depends on authority, and not the other way around.

For an example of this, let us please look together at 1 Corinthians 14:37 (p. 1800). We are about to find that when Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he was writing God’s word. In other words, it was authoritative long before anyone ever said, “Hey, let’s put this in the Bible!” Notice, please, what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:37. Paul was writing about the spiritual gifts, and he said, ***“If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment.”*** In other words, Paul’s letter had authority even before it was ever included in any list of canonical writings.

In fact, we have an interesting quote from Peter concerning Paul’s writings. The passage comes at the end of 2 Peter (p. 1903). Peter was writing about false teachers who love to twist God’s message concerning the coming judgment, and this is what Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:14-16,

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.

So, even as Peter wrote (in roughly 66 AD), Peter understood that Paul (his contemporary) was writing **“Scripture.”** Later, these writings were accepted as canonical because they had authority. The books and

letters were not given authority simply because some kind of council put it on a list. 1 Corinthians, therefore, had authority because it was inspired (not because someone *said* it was inspired). Remember: The word “inspiration” refers to the fact that a document is “God-breathed.” So, there is no vote that can ever make a letter inspired; but rather, a letter is inspired, and then it is gradually accepted as such. And I say “gradually,” because there is not one specific date where the Bible as we have it today just suddenly appeared. There is not a giant printing press in heaven. But rather, over a period of time, various letters and books were slowly accepted and recognized as being inspired as the result of looking at the evidence.

Generally, evidence for inspiration is divided into internal and external evidence. Internally, for example, we can look at a document and determine whether it agrees with other inspired writing. We can determine whether it is accurate. We can determine whether it claims to be from God. And then externally, we can determine whether the document was accepted as inspired by those who read it for the first time. How did they view the document? Did they recognize that it was written by an apostle or someone very closely associated with the apostles? By using those standards (measurements), we start to see a collection of documents that “measure up” as the authoritative and inspired word of God.

II. For an example of this basic idea, we can look at THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON.

As I understand it, scholars basically agree that by the time of Christ, the canon of the Old Testament had already been set. In fact, Jesus and the apostles quote from the books we now know as the “Old Testament,” and they refer to them as *“Scripture.”* In Acts 8:32, for example, we find a reference to the Ethiopian officer reading from the prophet Isaiah (p. 1715). In Acts 8:32, the Bible says, ***“Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: ‘HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.’”*** Notice: The author of the book of Acts refers to the book of Isaiah as being *“Scripture.”* In other words, in the First Century AD, Isaiah was commonly considered to be the word of God. It wasn’t God’s word because someone voted on it, but it was God’s word from the moment it was written, and over time it was accepted as such. It was a part of the Old Testament “canon.” We see something similar in Romans 4:3 (p. 1763). As Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6, he says, ***“For what does the Scripture say? ‘ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.’”*** And there again, Paul recognized the book of Genesis as being *“Scripture.”* It was Scripture not simply because Paul said it was, but it was Scripture from the moment it was first written.

Not only do we have examples of this from the prophets and from the Law (the first five books of the Old Testament), but we also have an example of the Psalms being referred to as *“Scripture.”* In fact, it is the Lord Himself who does this. Please notice Matthew 21:42 (p. 1540). Jesus was arguing with the religious leaders, and the Bible says in Matthew 21:42, ***“Jesus said to them, ‘Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES?’”*** So, Jesus was quoting from Psalm 118:22, and He classified that passage (a Psalm) as a *“Scripture.”*

In fact, as the Lord was leaving this earth, He gave a final commission to his disciples in Luke 24:44-47 (p. 1652). And as we look at this passage, let’s notice what the Lord categorized as *“Scripture.”* In Luke 24:44-47, the Bible says, ***“Now He said to them, ‘These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’”*** Notice, when the

Lord referred to the *“Scriptures,”* He included, *“...the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.”* Very interesting! That is all of the Old Testament. Everything we have fits into one of those three categories.

In fact, in roughly 95 AD, the Jewish historian Josephus referred to the books of the Old Testament as being twenty-two, and when we divide them the way they did (combining 1-2 Samuel, combining Ezra-Nehemiah, and combining Jeremiah and Lamentations, for example), we have the same number and the exact books today as they did back then...way back in 95 AD.

II. We now move on to THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON...

...and concerning the Canon of the New Testament, similarly, we do not have a single date or a council where we have any kind of an official “ruling,” but we find that certain books very early on were considered to be inspired. We have an interesting statement, for example, from an early Christian known as Justin Martyr. Justin Martyr said that on Sundays in the Christian worship assemblies, the “memoirs of the apostles” were read together along with the “writings of the prophets.” Justin Martyr lived from 103-165 AD. So, mid-way through the Second Century, not too long after the last New Testament document was written, we have certain writings from the apostles being read in worship along with the Old Testament Scriptures. In other words, those writings of the apostles were put on the same level as those 22 inspired books from the Old Testament. The writings of the apostles “measured up” as Scripture. From Colossians 4:16, we know that Paul’s writings were circulated among the churches from the moment they were written, *“When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.”* So, Paul’s letters were circulated immediately, even as Paul was still alive.

From history, we know that Paul’s writings were collected first, then the four gospel accounts, and then the rest followed rather quickly. However, since these collections were made at different times and in many different places, the contents of the various collections were not always the same, especially very early on. A book like Hebrews, for example, with an unknown author, took longer than the other books to be universally accepted as Scripture. Maybe we could try to imagine Paul writing to us here in Madison today. If he wrote to the church in Spencer and to the church in Janesville, we would copy those letters and share them immediately. But if John wrote to the church in Niagara Falls, New York, it might take a little longer for us to get a copy of that letter and to accept it as the word of God.

So, we have that reference in roughly 150 AD (through Justin Martyr) to the letters of the apostles being read in various churches. Within the next hundred years or so, we start seeing lists pop up, as people start making copies of those books and letters that are being read. One of the earliest lists is the Muratorian Fragment, which dates to the mid-Second Century. Parts of the list have been lost, but it gives a pretty good list. Luke is the first one, but it is described as the “third gospel,” so we assume that Matthew and Mark are the first two. Luke is followed by John, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, two letters from John, and Revelation. The only books NOT included in the list are Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, and perhaps 3 John (there are quotes from 1 John and then a reference to two of John’s letters).

The Muratorian Fragment, however, does include two books that we do NOT recognize as Scripture—the Wisdom of Solomon and the Apocalypse of Peter. But the Apocalypse of Peter has a comment with it that said that “some of our people” do not want to have it read in the church—recognizing that there was an ongoing discussion (even in the mid-Second Century) concerning what books should be included in any list of inspired writings. On the other hand, the list specifically excludes the Shepherd of Hermas and claims that it was written “quite late in our time in the city of Rome” (c. 140 AD).

In the Third Century (in the 200's AD), a man by the name of Origen lists the four gospel accounts in the order that we have them today (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). He undoubtedly accepts Acts, thirteen letters from Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude, and Revelation. About the other books (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John) he is hesitant. He quotes from Hebrews, but he concedes that some congregations do not accept it. Later in his life, though, Origen lists the same 27 books that we have today. So, by the 200's AD, early Christians recognized basically the same books that we have today as being inspired and authoritative; in other words, they measured up.

In 367 AD, a man by the name of Athanasius of Alexandria published a list of 27 books, the same as our list today, and after his list he says, "...these are the springs of salvation...Let no one add anything to them or take anything away from them."

Several weeks ago, I passed out a list of recommended reading concerning the big question of how we got the Bible in its current form, and on that list was a book by Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*. After all of his comments on canonicity, this is what he says,

In conclusion, it is important to realize that no church council *made* the canon of Scripture. No church by its decrees gave to or pronounced on the books of the Bible their infallibility. The Bible owes its authority to no individual or group. The church does not control the canon, but the canon controls the church. Although divine authority was attributed to the New Testament books by the later church, this authority was not derived from the church but was inherent in the books themselves. As a child identifies its mother, the later church *identified* the books which it regarded as having unique authority.

Very interesting, and I would agree with that statement 100%.

IV. Before we close, we do need to address a group of books commonly known as the APOCRYPHA.

The word Apocrypha literally means "hidden" or "covered." And I should say here that Catholics and Protestants are agreed on the 27 books of the New Testament. So, this is not what the discussion is about. However, Catholics claim an additional 14 or 15 books in the Old Testament (depending on the method of counting), and these books were written between 300 BC and 100 AD. Some stand on their own (like Tobit and Judith), and other parts of the Apocrypha are tacked on to the end of other books as an extra chapter (like *Bel and the Dragon*, which is tacked onto the end of the Book of Daniel). **New American Bible**. However, I would like to give four basic reasons why the books of the Apocrypha should not be included in the Bible.

1. First of all, the 14-15 books of the Apocrypha were NEVER included in the Old Testament Canon. You might remember that Josephus (in 95 AD) limited the Hebrew Scriptures to 22 books (39 when you divide them as we divide them today). This is especially important when we remember that the Old Testament is a Jewish document. In other words, the Jews themselves did not accept the Apocryphal books as inspired. In fact, according to one of my main sources, there is no evidence that the Apocrypha was ever accepted by any Jewish community, either inside or outside the land of Palestine.
2. Secondly, it is important to note that the books of the Apocrypha were never accepted (or even quoted) by Jesus or the Apostles. In the New Testament, there are many references (hundreds of references) to many Old Testament events and passages, and almost every Old Testament book is

quoted in the New, but the New Testament writers NEVER quote a book from the Apocrypha. That should tell us something!

3. Thirdly, the books of the Apocrypha were never accepted as Scripture by any of the early Christian writers. In fact, around 400 AD, Jerome (whose Latin Vulgate translation is still the basis for the official Roman Catholic Bible) strongly maintained that these books were not to be included in the canon of Scripture.
4. And finally, the books of the Apocrypha do not “measure up” to the level of inspiration. Remember, the word “canon” refers to a reed that was used for measurement, a yardstick, and the material in the Apocrypha does not measure up. There are some huge chunks that are obviously fictitious, and the books often contain historical, chronological, and geographical errors. One of these I looked up yesterday afternoon. In Judith 1:1, the Apocrypha says that Nebuchadnezzar was the “King of the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh.” And yet if you are familiar with history, you know that Nebuchadnezzar was actually the king of the Babylonians in Babylon!

So, the books of the Apocrypha simply do not “measure up” to the level of inspiration.

V. In addition to the Apocrypha, perhaps some of you are familiar with what are sometimes referred to as “LOST BOOKS.”

As many of us have heard over the past few years, there are some other writings associated with the New Testament that are not accepted by the Catholic Church and yet are still discussed by some people. With the Da Vinci Code book and movie, we were re-introduced to the so-called “*Gospel of Judas*,” a book that claims that Jesus was in love with Mary Magdalene, that Jesus had children with Mary, and that Jesus basically conspired with Judas and gave Judas permission to betray Him. I have included some information in the cubbyholes on some of this.

There are other so-called “lost books” that have surfaced through the years. For example, the “*Infancy Gospel of Thomas*,” which claims (among many other things) that when another child bumps into Jesus as a child, Jesus strikes the other kid dead right there on the spot. We also have the so-called “*Acts of John*,” where John supposedly finds bedbugs in his bed at an inn and commands the bugs to leave and behave themselves. Or the so-called “*Acts of Paul*,” where Paul baptizes a lion, and the lion later spares Paul from death in the amphitheater in Ephesus. But again, these books are not really “lost gospels,” but instead, they are books that were written later that do not “measure up” as Scripture.

Conclusion:

I hope that our study this morning has helped all of us have a deeper appreciation for the sixty-six books of the Bible and how we came to have that particular number. Lord willing, next week we will be able to look at some of issues involved in translating the Bible into our modern English language.

The Bible teaches that God sent His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. We respond to that sacrifice by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins. We have no way of forgiving our own sins, but when we obey the Lord, He has promised to cover our sins with the blood of His Son. If you have any questions, if you would like to study further, if you would like for us to pray

about some situation in your life, or if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com