

THE CANONIZATION OF SCRIPTURE

I. IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Who determined what books of the Bible were in or out?
2. Are there books missing from the Bible or books that should be included but are rejected?
3. What is the Apocryphal and why do some Christians accept their place in the Bible when others don't?
4. What was the criteria used to determine which books were inspired?

II. WHAT IS A CANON?

1. The English word "canon" is derived from the Greek and Hebrew word meaning "reed". Over time it came to gain the meaning of a "measuring reed" and the idea of "standard" was associated with it. With reference to the Bible, canon refers to the official standard of books that shape Christian belief and practice. All other "religious" or "spiritual" books are compared with the "standard". The Christian canon is believed to be the ultimate authority and only infallible source of Christian writings.
2. The interesting fact is that there is no single Christian canon but multiple. All canons have much agreement but there are some differences between traditions in Christianity.
3. The Protestant canon has 66 books. 39 in the OT, 27 in the NT.
4. The Roman Catholic canon has 73 books. 46 in the OT, 27 in the NT.
5. The Eastern Orthodox canon has 76 (roughly) books. 49 in the OT, 27 in the NT.
6. All Christian canons agree on the New Testament. The difference lays with the Old Testament. Some traditions include books known as the Apocryphal which will be examined later.
7. When speaking about Christian writings in the early days of the church there are three tiers of writings. The first and most important is the Canon. This the inspired and authoritative books that form Christian faith and practice. The second tier is the Apocryphal or deuterocanonical books, which include early post New Testament writings. The reception of these books vary but generally they are considered spiritually helpful and beneficial (though not inspired). The third tier is a group of

post New Testament writings called the "Pseudepigrapha" which means "false writings". These books were written by unknown persons in the name of known apostles to garner acceptance. No tradition in Christianity accepts these books as spiritually beneficial.

III. THE CRITERIA USED TO DETERMINE THE CANON

1. The criteria used to determine the canonical status of books was plain and straightforward.
2. For Old Testament books the criteria used was
 - i. Is it recognized as God's revelation?
 - ii. Does this book contradict with the other books considered inspired?
 - iii. Is it accepted as authoritative?
3. Various Jewish sources like Philo, Josephus, and others testify that the end date of revelation was around 400 BC.
4. Jesus himself indirectly speaks to what he believes is the authoritative Jewish canon. The passage is in Matthew 23.34-35 and Luke 11.49-51. In Matthew 23.34-35 Jesus says,

"³⁴ Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. ³⁵ And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar."

In context Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees and drawing a line between them and their ancestors who persecuted and murdered God's prophets. Jesus mentions he will send prophets and then says the blood of "all the earth" will come upon them from the murder of Abel to the murder of Zechariah.

Abel is in Genesis. Zechariah is in II Chronicles. With these two men Jesus implicitly draws boundaries around the inspired time where God sent prophets. Abel is the first murder and Zechariah is the last murder. In our English Bibles Chronicles is in the middle but in the Hebrew Old Testament it is the last book. Thus, Jesus himself hints at what he considers the scope of authoritative writings.

5. For New Testament books the criteria used was the following:
 - i. Does it come from an Apostle or under the supervision of an Apostle?
 - ii. Is it recognized by the church as inspired?
 - iii. Does it agree with the oral Apostolic tradition?
6. The Gospels, Paul's letters, and Acts gained recognition very quickly amongst the early church. But other books like James, Hebrews, and II Peter took time until they were finally accepted.

IV. WHAT IS THE DEUTERONONICAL BOOKS?

1. There are a group of second tier books known as the Apocryphal or deuterocanonical books that deserve our consideration. I prefer the term deuterocanonical because the term can include early post New Testament books that did not make its way into the canon but were considered beneficial.
2. The word "Apocryphal" means "hidden" and the term Deuterocanon means "second canon". The Old testament apocryphal consists of:

Wisdom of Solomon (30 BC)

Ecclesiasticus (132 BC)

Tobit (200 BC)

Judith (150 BC)

I Esdras (150-100 BC)

I Maccabees (110 BC)

II Maccabees (110-70 BC)

Baruch (150-50 BC)

Letter of Jeremiah (300-100 BC)

II Esdras (AD 100)

Addition to Esther (140-130 BC)

The Prayer of Azariah

Susana

Bel and the Dragon

Prayer of Manasseh

3. The Catholic and Eastern Orthodox canon accept some of these books in their Old Testament. The reason is primarily two-fold. First these books were included in the Septuagint. The New Testament authors and early church would have been aware of these books and most likely read them as well, additionally some of these books appear in Codex Sinaiticus. Meaning these books retained a special status for some time.
4. The arguments against viewing the apocryphal as inspired include:
 - i. Jesus quotes the Old Testament many times but never from the apocryphal
 - ii. The apocryphal is absent of phrases like "Thus says the LORD"
 - iii. The New Testament authors never quote the apocryphal
 - iv. The Jewish canon is affirmed by different Jewish sources including Jesus indirectly

5. In the New Testament there were books that almost received canonical status but ultimately did not due to not meeting the above criteria. Interestingly these books were viewed as beneficial and were even read in worship services. These books include:

The Shepherd of Hermas

The Didache

I Clement

The letters of Ignatius

V. CONCLUSIONS

1. The canonization process was an organic one, not formal
2. The Church recognized inspired books, it didn't declare them inspired
3. There are good reasons to believe that deuterocanonical books are not inspired
4. Deuterocanonical books can have value and benefit to Christians though not inspired or authoritative
5. Christian writings exist on two tiers: Canon and Deuterocanon. A third tier of writings that claim to be Christian but are not, is the Pseudepigrapha.
6. We can have confidence our Protestant canon is the correct and right Bible.