

The Canon of the New Testament

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Introduction

The word canon comes from the Greek word *kanon*, which in turn is taken from the Hebrew word *kaneh*, meaning a reed or measuring stick. Later it came to refer to literature of acceptable standards, and then it came to mean the authoritative books accepted by a religious community.

The term actually occurs in 2 places in the NT and is translated in the King James Version as "rule" in both places. 2 Corinthians 10:13 says, "But we will not boast of things without our measure, but according to the measure of the rule which God hath distributed to us, a measure to reach even unto you." Paul further states in Galatians 6:16, "And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy."

Therefore, when we talk about the canon of the Bible, we are referring to that collection of books that has generally been accepted as being inspired of God and as the authoritative rule of God's people. This lesson will focus on the history of how the books of the NT came to be written and collected.

The Apostles to Receive Guidance into All Truth

At the close of His earthly ministry, shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus promised His disciples that the Holy Spirit would remind them of all He had said, and would guide them into all truth. He said, "These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:25-26; see also 16:13).

Furthermore, Jesus said, "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me, and you will bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning" (John 15:26-27).

While NT Scripture gives abundant evidence that all Christians receive the indwelling of the Spirit, it appears that the apostles would be given a measure of the Spirit's help somewhat beyond that otherwise typically received by believers. Jesus said that, since they had been with Him from the beginning, the apostles would be used to "bear witness" in a special way.

The apostles were to wait in Jerusalem to receive the Holy Spirit as was promised (Luke 24:49). They would be "baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence" (Acts 1:4-5). Jesus said, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). All of this was in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies which said, "...The law shall come forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." (Isaiah 2:3; Micah 4:2).

The Day of Pentecost

The apostles were indeed filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and "began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance" (Acts 2:4). This was the fulfillment of what Jesus had earlier declared to Peter and the other apostles, "Whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19, 18:18).

Jesus did not mean that they would bind and loose whatever they themselves devised, but rather that with the Holy Spirit guiding them they would proclaim the things God wanted bound and loosed. Remember Matthew 10:20 says, "For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you."

The various instructions and directives later given to individuals and congregations would be regarded as authoritative because such would originate from the Holy Spirit. To further demonstrate their authority, they were given the ability to speak in other tongues (languages), prophesy, and work miracles. In defense of his own authority, Paul said, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles" (2 Corinthians 12:12).

The Word of God Given Orally

Throughout the book of Acts we read about the apostles orally declaring the word of God. This was the standard of authority during the early days of the church. The inspired words of the apostles were to be received as coming from God Himself. 1 Thessalonians 2:13 says, "And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God." In Acts 20:25-27, Paul said, "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."

The Word of God Given Orally and in Writing

The apostles soon began delivering God's will both by oral teaching and preaching and by writing. Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 said, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us." Paul wrote letters to several churches and stated that they should be read publicly when the Christians assembled (1 Thessalonians 5:27; Colossians 4:16). Early historical records indicate that apostolic writings (along with OT writings) were indeed read in the assemblies on a regular basis.

Peter, in 2 Peter 3:1-2 said, "This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles." Likewise, Paul 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" (1 Corinthians 14:37).

In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter refers to the writing of Paul, and it is significant that he calls Paul's writings "Scripture." It is true that, in the early church, the term "Scripture" was generally used to refer to that of the Old Testament. But notice that Peter categorized the writings of Paul in the same class as "the rest of the Scriptures," thus indicating that the inspired writings of Paul were also to be regarded as truthful and authoritative Scripture.

Development of the NT Canon

The early Christians apparently soon realized that the writings of both the OT and the NT were to be regarded as Scripture, and, as Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

At some point in time the early Christians began to circulate many of the apostolic writings (see Colossians 4:16 about letter to the Laodiceans). It is likely that copies were made of these writings and thus began to be collected. Some think that Peter's comments in 2 Peter 3:16 would indicate that there was already a collection of Paul's letters at that time.

In the 2nd century, following the death of all the apostles (and thus the end of the divinely-inspired apostolic teaching), the writings of the apostles likely became more valuable. The desire to exchange and collect such writings increased. The gospel accounts were apparently quickly accepted by the Christian community. Paul's letters were commonly accepted. There was yet, however, no mention of a canon of the NT; there were only casual collections of writings that were being passed around.

Soon, however, spurious or pseudonymous letters came into circulation among the churches (letters falsely bearing apostolic names and/or claiming apostolic authority). Furthermore, false teachers arose claiming knowledge handed down by tradition. All this led to the beginning of the canon as Christians realized the need to determine what writings were genuine and what writings were not. By the end of the 2nd century, the idea of a NT canon was clearly understood. The extent of that canon, however, was yet to be determined.

It is important to understand the criteria used by early scholars to determine the canonicity of any book. The true (and obvious) test of canonicity is/was inspiration. If a book was clearly inspired of God, then certainly it was accepted as part of the NT canon. The question then remains: how was inspiration to be demonstrated?

There was a clear and distinguishable difference between those books that were genuinely inspired and those books that were not. The apocryphal writings (such as the Didache, Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Gospel of the Hebrews) were of such an inferior class that such could be noted with reasonable certainty. These books were generally more concerned with such things as miracles than they were about teaching.

Furthermore, there was little actual concentration on Jesus Christ Himself, and the moral, ethical, and spiritual effect of these books was inferior to that of genuinely inspired writings. On the other hand, books that were obviously written by one of the apostles were found to be clearly superior; they were therefore accepted by churches everywhere.

According to history, several books were universally accepted by every church without any doubt or hesitation. These were the 4 gospels, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul, 1 Peter and 1 John (20 books). Several years would pass, however, before the acceptance of the complete canon of 27 books as we have today.

In the 3rd century, Origen, a well-known scholar of that time, gave a list of generally accepted books. He acknowledged the four gospels, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. He mentioned Jude, wavered in regard to James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John, and he evidently hesitated concerning Hebrews because, as he said, "God alone knows who wrote it."

In the early part of the 4th century, Eusebius expressed the general Christian thought of his time. He accepted Hebrews as authentic and indicated that James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 John were beginning to find recognition. Finally, it was in 367 that a man named Athanasius first gave a list of canonical books identical with our 27 today. Scholars since that time have generally remained in agreement that the 27 books we have in our NT are all inspired of God and are the only available such writings.

Original Languages

The OT was originally written in Hebrew, except for a few passages in Aramaic (language closely related to Hebrew, adopted by the Jews following the Babylonian captivity): Jeremiah 10:11; Daniel 2:4-7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18, 7:12-26.

There are also a few Aramaic phrases in the NT: Mark 5:41 (*Talitha cumi*); Mark 7:34 (*Ephphatha*); Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46 (*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*); 1 Corinthians 16:22 (*Maranatha*); Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6 (*Abba*). Other than these few occasions, the NT is written in Koine Greek, which was the everyday common language of the people of that day.

The original Scriptures were written on animal skins, called vellum or parchment, or on papyrus, which comes from a water plant from the marshes of the Nile. Obviously, we no longer have the original autograph copies of any of the books of the Bible. What we do possess are copies of the originals and copies of them; all these have been handed down through the years.

Texts of the Old Testament

For a long time, the earliest complete manuscripts of the Hebrew OT were dated about AD 900-1000. These manuscripts are the work of Jewish scholars called the Masoretes; hence, their work is called the Masoretic Text.

Then, in 1947, some Palestinian herdsmen accidentally stumbled onto a cave near the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is the largest body of water in Palestine; near this sea are the ruins of a former small village called Qumran, a city which existed from about 100 BC to AD 100. Hidden in the caves among the ruins of this old location, archaeologists discovered a few complete books and thousands of fragments written by the ancient inhabitants (generally called Essenes). Some part of every OT book (except Esther) was found; these are the oldest copies of the OT found, dated about 200 BC and still in the original Hebrew.

There are basically two reasons why so few ancient manuscripts are available. First, when transcriptions were made onto new scrolls, it was common to destroy the older writings lest they should fall into the hands of profane people. Secondly, history tells us that various attempts were made by the enemies of the Jews to destroy their copies of Scripture. In the 2nd century BC, Antiochus Epiphanes burned all the copies he could find; later, many scrolls were destroyed in the Roman war of AD 70. Fortunately, the copies we do have of the Hebrew OT are well preserved and represent quite accurately the original autograph copies inspired by God.

Texts of the New Testament

Various manuscripts of the NT are to be found from every time period since the 1st century. During the 1st 3 centuries, writing was done upon sheets of papyrus. These were bound together in a codex, much like our books today. The letters during this time period were generally all capitals with the letters not connected to one another. This style is called uncial or majuscule.

From the 4th century to the 10th, NT writing was still done with majuscule letters, but the writing was then done on vellum or parchment instead of on papyrus sheets. The use of these animal skins was quite common for the Hebrew OT and was now restored for copies of the NT because of its durability. The use of such parchments continued until the introduction of paper in the 14th century.

Beginning in the 10th century, the style of letters moved from the majuscule (all capitals) to what was called miniscule or cursive style. In this style letters are connected together much like our common cursive writing today. Miniscule writing on parchment was common until the 14th century when it was replaced by miniscule writing on paper. All writing was replaced by printing in the 15th century.

Copying of Texts

Keep in mind that all copying until the 15th century was done by hand. It would seem obvious to most people that mistakes and variant readings were inevitable under such conditions. When scribes would make copies by dictation, certain words would often sound alike. Sometimes a man would depend on his memory and thereby make mistakes.

Words that were not spelled accurately would eventually be changed through the process of time and copying. When a scribe was copying directly from another manuscript, at times he would misread a word or letter; at times he would look at the wrong word and thereby copy the wrong thing.

Occasionally a scribe would attempt to clarify a difficult reading or insert a marginal note. Many such errors made their way into manuscripts and were passed down through the years. There are actually many thousands of variant readings among all the manuscripts available, although it is generally held that there is no variation that poses a threat to any fundamental doctrine.

It would be obvious that the work of textual scholars is to attempt to determine what the reading of the NT ought to be. They do so by sorting through the errors and all the available manuscripts in an effort to restore as close as possible the original reading of each verse of Scripture.

Early Translations

The first complete translation of the Bible into English was done by John Wycliffe in 1380 before the invention of the printing press. He was unable to read Greek so he translated from previous Latin versions of the Bible. His efforts to translate the Bible into the common language of the people were severely opposed by church authorities. In 1428, following his death, to show their contempt for his work, the church ordered that Wycliffe's bones be dug up, burned, and the ashes be cast into the River Swift.

In 1525, William Tyndale produced the first printed version of the NT in English. Realizing that the Latin versions had grown full of errors through centuries of copying, he translated from available Greek manuscripts. As with Wycliffe, Tyndale's work met with anger and persecution. He was burned at the stake in 1536; copies of his book were burned as well.

After Tyndale, there were other efforts to translate the Bible into English: Coverdale Bible, 1535; The Great Bible, 1539; Taverner's Bible, 1539; The Geneva Bible, 1560; The Bishop's Bible, 1568; The Rheims-Douai Bible, 1582. Things had suddenly changed from no Bible in the language of the people to several from which to choose, thereby bringing about confusion and division.

Thus, in 1604, King James ordered a group of scholars to translate the Bible as accurately as possible from the original languages. The result is the King James Version, printed in 1611. The original KJV of 1611 was actually in an older form of English (most likely Middle English); it was revised several times: 1629, 1638, 1762, and finally in 1769. This last revision differed from the original in about 75,000 places.

In 1870 it was felt that the KJV needed revising. Scholars had learned a great deal more about the Greek and Hebrew languages since 1611. These scholars also had the benefit of many recently found manuscripts, many of which were much older than those used by the KJV translators. This revision was published in 1881 as the English Revised Version. In 1901, the same revision (with a few minor spelling changes) was published in the United States as the American Standard Version.

The Continuing Work of Translators

Since that time we have continued to see many more translations of the Bible. Many people welcome new translations; many oppose them and wish to cling to the older KJV or ASV. Is there a need to continue to have new translations of the Bible? Should we remain faithful to only the older versions?

A large number of Biblical scholars agree that it is important that we continue to translate the Bible. New manuscripts are discovered continuously which enable people to know more accurately what the original writers wrote. In 1611, the KJV translators probably knew of about 25 manuscripts of the Greek NT. By 1881, they had come to know about 1500. Today the number of manuscripts and fragments totals well over 5000.

In 1611, no known manuscripts dated earlier than the middle ages. By 1901, scholars had access to manuscripts from the 4th century. Today, we have papyrus manuscripts from as early as the 2nd century. Today, we can know clearer than ever before the original text of the Greek NT.

Scholars today have a greater knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew languages than ever before. Even in the days of the ASV (early part of 20th century) there were 500 Greek words that were not to be found anywhere outside the Greek NT. Such a singular occurrence rendered the task to translate a word accurately quite difficult. A scholar could only make an educated guess at a given word based upon the context.

Today, because of further archeological finds, that list of words has been reduced to less than 50. Such increased knowledge and scholarship have enabled translators to translate the Bible more accurately now than ever before.