

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 11

Origins of the Canon – Part One

If we were attending a Jewish worship service at a synagogue, the scriptures would be kept in an ark. Once removed, the scriptures would then be carried to the *bimah* for reading. In an orthodox high church service, the gospel would be carried down the aisle in reverence, and before reading, a call would issue forth, “Wisdom! All stand; let us hear the Holy Gospel.” In a Catholic liturgy, special prayers would be offered both before and after the liturgy reading. During an Anglican communion service, typically all will stand while the gospel is read with a proclamation in unison, “Glory to Christ our Savior.” At the conclusion, the reader would say, “This is the gospel of Christ,” and the congregation would respond, “Praise to Christ our Lord.” In Reformed churches (like the Church of Scotland and certain Presbyterian churches in America), the Bible is carried from the vestry to a reading desk. The Minister follows the Bible by a respectful distance. The Minister is listed with the initials V.D.M. after his name. Those initials stand for the Latin *Verbi Divini Minister*, meaning a “Minister [in the real sense of ‘servant’] of the Word of God.” All would stand as the Minister declared, “Let us hear the word of the Lord.”

Why such a tradition of reverence in the church? Orthodox Christianity views the Bible as the divine and inspired word of God. It is in the Bible that God has spoken to man and revealed the matters pertinent to salvation. The Bible gives us great history of God’s work among people, as well as the ultimate story of God’s act of redemption in Jesus Christ, God’s final word made flesh. Scripture demands the reverence of the church because of what it is.

The question of scripture’s origins is a thoughtful and legitimate question that Christians should be able to answer. The answer is complicated and will take more than a few classes to develop. At this point in the Church History Literacy series, we will pause for two Sundays and set out the basics of the Bible’s historical development in at least the first two centuries of the church. As the class unfolds, we will follow other significant developments that happened later, such as the translating of the Bible into Latin, the changes in Hebrew scripting, the reformation movement, the translation of scripture into common languages, the scholarship that questions and reconstructs scripture to more closely model the supposed originals, discoveries that have assisted us in understanding the early manuscripts (including the Dead Sea scrolls), and finally, the various versions that are available for the modern churches. But, that is for later classes! Today, we start by discussing the origin of the canon of scripture itself.

CANON

Canon – specifically, the Christian canon – should never be confused with a “cannon.” While it is sharper than any two-edged sword, it is neither a cannon nor a gun! The word “canon” refers to our collection of scriptures that the church considers authoritative as the word of God.

Where do we get such an unusual word? The roots of “canon” go back beyond Latin and Greek into early Semitic. In its earliest known form (K-n-h), the Semitic word meant a “reed” or a “rod.” The Greeks took this root and used the word as more a measuring rod (like a ruler or yard stick). The key to the Greek word was a reference to the measurements or marks on the ruler. The Latin version of the word was *canna* (from which we get the English word “cane”).

So, the Christian “canon” is ultimately the collection of writings that the church uses as its measuring stick – its ruler – the defining reference for Christian faith and life. More commonly, we might call the “canon” our “Bible” (from the Latin “*Biblia*” for “Books”) or “scripture.”

Christianity has two general canons, the Catholic canon and the Protestant canon. The Catholic canon includes the entire Protestant canon but adds additional writings commonly called the “Apocrypha.” Both the Catholic and Protestant churches recognize the role of scripture as canon, as the measuring rod for faith and practice. The famous Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) wrote that “canonical scripture alone is the rule of faith.”¹ Similarly, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), a bedrock of Christian Protestantism affirms the 66 books of the protestant canon as “all which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule and faith of life.”²

Our approach in this class will involve focusing first on the Old Testament’s inclusion in the church’s canon of scripture, followed by examining the composition and collection of the New Testament.³ In the process, we will cover

¹*On the Gospel of St. John*, Lesson 6 on John 21.

²Westminster Confession of Faith, 1 §2.

³Our words “Old Testament” and “New Testament” are not found, per se, within the Bible itself. The Bible does speak repeatedly of the covenant between God and his people. The Greek word (*diatheke*) is used for “covenant.” *Diatheke* can also be translated as a “will” but more commonly means an agreement between parties. This word is used in Hebrews 9:18-20 where a “new covenant” is contrasted with the “old covenant” referencing Jeremiah 31:31-34. The Latin word for the Greek διαθηκη *diatheke* (covenant) can be *instrumentum* (a legal document) or

the collection process of the Old Testament books (scroll), its Jewish use as well as Christian use, its translation into Greek (the “Septuagint”), the inclusion/exclusion of the Apocrypha, and the ordering of the books.

OLD TESTAMENT BEFORE CHRIST

The Jewish scriptures before the time of Christ were not in a “book.” Books were a few centuries from coming into vogue. The Jewish scriptures were a collection of scrolls. Five scrolls (we call them Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy⁴) were called scrolls of Law. The Hebrew word for “law” is “*Torah*.” Hence, the first five books are called the “*Torah*.” The remaining Old Testament was considered inspired because it was the words of prophets. Often then, what we call the “Old Testament” was called “the law and the prophets.” Even Jesus used this reference. When asked about the greatest commandment in the Law (read that Torah, the first five books), Jesus replied from Deuteronomy 6:5 to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Jesus followed this with another Torah quote from Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet after answering the question about the greatest commandment in the Torah, Jesus added, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Mt. 2:37-40).⁵

Notice that the New International Version capitalizes “Law” and “Prophets.” The editors recognize that Jesus is using the technical reference to the two groups of scriptures that made up the Old Testament. In other words, Jesus is saying that the two greatest commandments of the Law are also the two keys to all scripture.

At some point around the time of Christ, some began referring to the Old Testament scrolls in three categories. The law/Torah was always the same. But,

testamentum (a “will” or “testament”). The first Latin writer of note in the church was the trial lawyer turned theologian Tertullian that we spoke of in our last lesson on Montanism. Leaving behind an illustrious legal career in the courts of Rome, Tertullian was a profuse writer for the church from his home in Carthage, North Africa. In his book Against Marcion (arguing against Marcion’s brand of Gnosticism spoken of in earlier lessons), chapter 4, verse 1, Tertullian stated Marcion set up two Gods, one belonging to one *instrumentum* and one to the other. In chapter 15 of Against Praxeas, Tertullian wrote of “the whole *instrumentum* of both *testamenta*.” These writings were the first to begin referencing the Old Testament and the New Testament similarly.

⁴That is the title the church has added to these books. The Hebrews entitled each book by its first word. Hence, “Genesis” is called “*Bareshith*” which is the first word meaning, “In the beginning.”

⁵See also Mt. 7:12; 11:13; Lk 16:16.

some divided “the prophets” into “the prophets” and “the other writings.”⁶ This division culled out from the prophets those writings that we call Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, the *Megilloth* (a scroll containing the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (one book in the Hebrew) and Chronicles.⁷ If one were to buy a Jewish copy of scriptures today, it is called the “Tenakh.” This word stands for each of the three sections of scripture. The “T” is for the Torah (the law). The “N” is from the Hebrew word *Neviyim* which means “other writings.” Put them together, add some vowels to help with pronunciation, and voilà – you have the Tenakh, or Hebrew Old Testament.

SEPTUAGINT

Several hundred years before Christ, there was a very large community of Jews (hundreds of thousands) in Alexandria, Egypt where Greek was the predominant language since its conquering by its namesake Alexander the Great (331 B.C.). In an effort to ensure that Greek-speaking Jews were able to read and understand scripture, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. Scholars call this Greek translation of the Hebrew scripture the “Septuagint.” Septuagint comes from the Greek word for 70. This title is based on a likely fictional account of the number of scholars who translated the Hebrew into Greek.⁸ The Septuagint is often abbreviated “LXX” because those are the Roman numerals for “70.”

⁶Some scholars see this tripartite division in Jesus’ comment in Luke 24:44, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

⁷Some believe Jesus referenced the Old Testament in these three divisions in Luke 24:44 where he said, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” The reference to the Psalms is seen as the third category of Old Testament scriptures.

⁸There is a legendary account of how the Septuagint translation came about in a letter an Alexandrian Jew named Aristeas wrote to his brother Philocrates (written sometime between 200 B.C. and 50 B.C.). Aristeas describes the translation of the Torah (5 law books) as proceeding by order of King Ptolemy II (285-247 B.C.). The Alexandrian library was the greatest in the ancient world. The King’s librarian, Demetrius, was ordered by King Ptolemy II (285-247 B.C.) to add a Greek translation of the Hebrew law. Demetrius asked the Jewish High Priest of the time (Eleazer) for help. Eleazer sent 72 elders from Israel (6 from each of the 12 tribes) for the task. The king gave a party for seven days, apparently as a guise for checking out the abilities and scholasticism for the 72 elders to make sure they were up to the task. The 72 were then sent to a resort near the sea where they made the translation in 72 days. Most scholars readily admit that this story has both legend and truth in it. The legend was bolstered and modified by later writers over the next few centuries. The pre-Christian Hebrew scholar Philo claimed the 72 were divinely inspired and that each scholar translated in isolation, but all produced a word for word identical translation (*Vita Mosis*, 2.5-7). Eventually, the 72 (shortened for some reason to “70” for purposes of calling their work the “Septuagint”) were eventually credited with translating the entire Old Testament. Most every scholar will agree, however, that the Torah was translated first, and the rest of the Old Testament later.

Ultimately, this Greek version of the Old Testament became the Church's first Bible. It contains the Greek Old Testament (which is more than the Hebrew) that Paul and other New Testament writers most used in their writings.

The church used the original Septuagint, but the Jews ultimately made significant translation changes **because** of the church's use of the translation. For example, in Isaiah 7:14, the Hebrew reads that the Messiah would be born to a "young maiden." Now, the Hebrew word translated "young maiden" (*almah*) most often references a "virgin," but it does not necessitate a "virgin" (like the Hebrew word "*be'tulah*"). When the Alexandrian Jewish scholars translated this into Greek over one hundred years before Christ, they chose the Greek word *παρθενος* ("*parthenos*"), which is a "virgin."⁹ There was an optional Greek word for young maiden, but that word was not deemed to carry the Hebrew intent.

Once the church used the Septuagint to show the messiahship of Jesus, who was born to a virgin, a section of Judaism decided to retranslate this passage and use an alternate Greek work that was less specific on the virginity issue. Ultimately, the church's usage of the Septuagint led to most Jews shunning its use.

THE APOCRYPHA

There are a collection of writings that Roman Catholics include in their Old Testament scriptures that are not included in Protestant scriptures called the "Apocrypha."¹⁰ The four lessons in Biblical Literacy, which we devoted to each of these books, are available for those with greater interest in what these books contain.¹¹

The Protestant Reformation removed these books from the canon with the reformation leaders deciding that the original church did not have them in their canon. The arguments centered on the fact that the books were not included in the Hebrew canon. The reasoning was that the church took the Jewish scriptures, and

⁹ *Parthenos* meant "virgin," but was also used in the Septuagint in Genesis 34:3 for Dinah after she was raped.

¹⁰ From the Greek word meaning "hidden." Apocrypha is the term Protestants use, the Roman Catholic term is "deuterocanonical" meaning that these writings were not originally in the canon ("protocanonical") but were accepted later.

¹¹ For brevity's sake, we can state that there are 12 to 15 different books of the apocrypha depending upon how one counts. Three of these are not considered canonical by the Catholic church (1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh). Some are independent books, and others are additions to Old Testament books (additions to Ester and Daniel). Most scholars date these books between 300 B.C. and 100 A.D.

those scriptures never included these writings as inspired. A second argument was that Jesus never referred to these books in his recorded ministry. Similarly, the Apostolic writings do not reference passages from the Apocrypha as scripture. Nor do the New Testament writers quote from any apocryphal books, though they quote from most every other Old Testament book. Reformation leaders also pointed out that early scholars of the Roman Catholic Church, including Jerome, the 5th century scholar that provided the landmark translation of scripture into Latin, did not believe the Apocrypha was canonical.

There are more reasons set out for excluding the books. That being said, even Reformation writers recognized the spiritual lessons that are offered in places in the writings. Likewise, other parts of the Apocrypha offer historical insight into the time period between the Old and New Testaments.

ORDER OF THE BOOKS

The Protestant Bible has 39 books to the Old Testament. The Hebrew Bible has 24,¹² yet the books are substantively the same. Why the difference in number? Let's use the Hebrew divisions discussed earlier to see the numbering difference. The Law (Torah) is the same five books, Genesis through Deuteronomy. The Hebrew Prophets are four "former prophets" followed by four "latter prophets." The former prophets are Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. While these number four in the Hebrew scripture, the Christian Bible divides both Samuel and Kings into two books. The Hebrew latter prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and "the Twelve." The twelve are the minor prophets in the Christian bible, and hence, the number 12 rather than one! The "other writings" are typically ordered Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Ezra and Nehemiah are considered one book. Similarly, while the Christian Bible separates Chronicles into two, the Hebrew Bible considers Chronicles only one book.

This order is typical in Hebrew Bibles today, and has been for some time. While certain books were probably in different orders at different times, we are fairly certain of several orderings. The Torah has its five books in the order of their chronology. Similarly, the former prophets are easily ordered by the time of the events recorded. No doubt as the other scrolls were kept, the order for the books might vary. There is, however, a good indication that even in the time of Christ, Chronicles was considered the last of the Hebrew canon.

¹²Josephus wrote in the 90's that there were twenty-two books of the Old Testament. Josephus followed another Jewish tradition that added Ruth to the end of Judges and Lamentations to the end of Jeremiah (*Against Apion*, 1.38).

In Luke 11:50-51, we read of Jesus charging that the generation would be responsible for “the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah.” Now we know from Jeremiah 26:20-23, that a prophet named Uriah was killed 200 hundred years after Zechariah. So, why does Jesus bookend the deaths with Abel and Zechariah? Abel, of course, is the first to die in Genesis, and Zechariah was the last death in Chronicles (2 Chr. 24:20-22). We see Jesus using canonical order common to Jewish scriptures as to the first and last book at least. It is much like a current expression “from Genesis to Revelation.”

The Christian Bible does not follow the Hebrew order of Old Testament books. The Christian Bible gets its order from the Septuagint copies. Although the order in Septuagint texts differ, that is the family tree we can trace our roots to in finding the current Biblical ordering of our Old Testament texts.

Because the Old Testament was originally a collection of scrolls, there is way to find a set “order” for the Jews who first collected the scriptures. The advent of the “book” brought an “ordering” question to the forefront. Previously, the only time where order was an issue was when people were listing the books. In other words, while the scrolls themselves were not ordered into a book, some would write and list out the scrolls. Of necessity, then, someone would order the scrolls in such a list.

With books, however, clear decisions on ordering must be made. Originally, the term used for a “book” was a “codex.” The inventor of the book/codex, like the inventor of the wheel, never got a patent to secure her/his name in history. But, the invention was nonetheless great. Scrolls required two hands to read. They were no doubt quite bulky when one hand had to unroll while the other rolled. And if you were looking for a passage in the middle of a 35-foot roll, then good luck on finding it!

With the early books, several sheets of papyrus (or later, parchment) were folded in half and stitched together in the middle fold. While the origins of books are lost in history, more and more scholars are agreeing that the Church is predominantly responsible for the popularity of the codex/book, if not the outright invention!¹³

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS A WITNESS TO CHRIST

Jesus himself taught that his coming was not to “abolish the Law or the Prophets [read that Old Testament].” The Law (Torah) and Prophets were neither irrelevant

¹³C.H. Roberts, “The Codex,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 40 (1954): 169-204; *The Birth of the Codex*, (Oxford 1983); *Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 2, 68-92.

nor inferior. Instead, Jesus said, “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Mt. 5:17-18). If the law (Torah) was a reflection of God’s ethics in practical function among men and nations in space and time, then Jesus (being God incarnate) fulfilled the law in the sense that Jesus lived God’s ethics day in and day out among men and nations at a specific point in space and time.

The prophets (the rest of Jewish scripture beyond the law/Torah) also bore witness to Jesus as Christ. Repeatedly, as the Spirit of God foretold through the prophets about God’s coming ransom of men, the prophets were telling of Jesus in measurable ways that validated his mission and ministry.

Hence, we see the New Testament writers constantly referring to the Hebrew Scriptures for their explanations and teachings about Jesus.

In addition to the New Testament writers, early church writers saw the Old Testament as God’s holy word about Jesus as well. We saw in the writings of Clement and others clear references to the Old Testament as our holy words for the church.

OLD TESTAMENT INTERPRETATIONS

As the New Testament and early church writers consistently used the Hebrew Scriptures to teach about Jesus as Christ, certain issues began to surface. As discussed in the first two lessons, the church transformed from a branch of Judaism into a Gentile-centered faith. A division between the church and Judaism grew more and more pronounced as time went on.

This placed the church in a bit of a dilemma. The church was at odds with Judaism, and yet, the church leaned heavily on the Jewish scriptures. What was more, those scriptures taught much and spoke often of God’s external and special relationship with the Jews.

What was the church to make of this? As we will discover in our studies of early church writers from Alexandria, a school of allegorical interpretation was strong in parts of the early church. This school taught an interpretation of the Old Testament that viewed references to Israel as references to the church. Passages and stories alike in the Old Testament were viewed to have an allegorical meaning that spiritualized whatever was written.

Some of what these early writers thought proper in understanding the Old Testament would also seem inline with 21st century evangelical thought. Most, however, would seem a bit outlandish. We will study this more in depth as we look at other early writers.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. We have a rich heritage in scripture. “The grass withers, and flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.” Isaiah 40:8
2. God has worked through many in history to secure us his inspired word. “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:16-17
3. We are remiss if we fail to take time to study this treasure we have. “Do your best (study) to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” 2 Timothy 2:15