

(c) Canonicity

Today we turn to the subject of canonicity.

If the doctrine of inspiration of Scripture is true, then there is automatically drawn a line between those books which are inspired and those which are not. There are inspired books, and there are books that are not inspired. So the doctrine of inspiration implies that there is an authoritative body of inspired literature with precise literary limits to it. This body of writings is inspired and is therefore the Word of God to us. These writings therefore belong to what is called the “canon of Scripture.”

(1) Definition

What do we mean by the word “canon” (with one “n” not two)? “Canon” is a word that means *rule* or *standard*. When we talk about canonicity, we are talking about those literary limits to inspired books that are God’s Word to us. The canonicity of Scripture concerns the question of which writings belong to this inspired body of literature to which we give allegiance as authoritative. This is the question of the canon of Scripture – which books ought to be in the Bible?

Let’s treat this question with respect to the Old Testament and the New Testament separately.

(2) Old Testament

With respect to the Old Testament, Jesus and the apostles accepted the Jewish canon of Scripture that existed at that time. The Hebrew Bible which was used by Jesus himself, as well as the apostles, is the same Bible that Protestants today call the Old Testament. So

Jesus used the same Old Testament canon of Scripture that Protestants recognize today. The twenty-four books of the so-called Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible are the books which were recognized by Jesus to be inspired by God and to be God's Word to us. This Masoretic Text is the same text that is recognized by rabbinical Judaism as the canon of the Hebrew Bible. It is the Bible that was used by Jesus.

There is, in addition to this Hebrew Bible, a Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. This is usually abbreviated by the Roman numeral LXX, for 70. The Septuagint was a translation of the Old Testament that was used in Egypt by Hellenized Jews. That is to say, Jews who were Greek-speaking and lived in a Greek culture. In this Greek version of the Old Testament, there are a number of books that are accepted as part of the Old Testament canon by Roman Catholic and also by Eastern Orthodox confessions. This is where these additional books of the Old Testament recognized by Catholic and Orthodox churches come from. They are part of the Septuagint. These are referred to as the Old Testament "apocryphal books" or the "deuterocanonical books." These are not the same thing as the apocryphal books of the New Testament, which I'll say something about later. When people talk about the New Testament apocrypha, they are talking about books that were written hundreds of years later than the time of Jesus and are not recognized by any Christian confession as belonging to the canon of Scripture. But with respect to the Old Testament apocrypha, as I say, Catholic and Orthodox churches do recognize these additional books found in the Septuagint as part of the Old Testament canon. These apocryphal books include things like Tobit, Judith, certain additions to the book of Esther, certain

additions to the book of Daniel, a book called the Wisdom of Solomon, and 1st and 2nd Maccabees, among others. These are to be found in your Roman Catholic Bible today. The Greek Orthodox will also accept additional texts like Psalm 151 and others. These would be part of the Orthodox church's canon.

The earliest list that we have in church history of the canon of the Old Testament comes from a man named Melito of Sardis who flourished around AD 175. He lists all of the Old Testament books that are recognized by Jews and Protestants except for the book of Esther. He does also add the Wisdom of Solomon, which was one of those apocryphal books that I mentioned. That is the earliest list that we have among the church fathers for the Old Testament.

So with respect to the canon of the Old Testament, I think it is relatively uncontroversial when we say that we accept the same canon of Scripture that Jesus himself accepted, and are therefore on very solid grounds.

(3) New Testament

What about the New Testament? Since the NT comes after the time of Christ, this is somewhat more difficult to establish. With respect to the New Testament, Jesus promised his disciples that he would, through the Holy Spirit, bring to their remembrance everything that he had spoken to them and taught them. Look at the promises, for example, in John 14, 15, and 16. First, John 14:26. Jesus says, "But the Counselor, 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 have said to you." Then flipping over to John 15:26-27: "But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth,

who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.” And then John 16:13: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” Here Jesus, in commissioning the disciples to be witnesses of what he has taught them and said to them because they were with him from the beginning, are promised the Holy Spirit to give them an accurate remembrance of what Jesus had said to them and taught them.

When you look at the remainder of the New Testament, you find that the apostles had a firm conviction that the Gospel which they were preaching was the Word of God. It is remarkable that they would refer to this message – this Gospel that they proclaimed – as God’s Word.

For example, look at 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13:

For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our behavior to you believers; for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

Here Paul speaks of the Gospel of God, which was preached to the Thessalonians, and commends them because they recognized it and received it, not as the word of men, but this was the very Word of God that was being proclaimed to them.

Also in Galatians 1:11-12: “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” Here, again, Paul says, *This isn’t man’s Gospel; this is a revelation from God – from Jesus Christ – and that is what I am proclaiming to you.*

Also in 1 Corinthians 14:36-37:

What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached?

If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.

Here Paul asserts his authority as an apostle and he says, *This is the Word of God that has come to you. It is a command of the Lord. Anyone who is spiritual should recognize it as such. This is not something that is merely human.*

So the apostles had this strong conviction that in the power of the Holy Spirit they were proclaiming the very Word of God.

This is all the more remarkable when you realize that by the time of the first century, it was widely believed in Judaism that prophecy had ceased – that there were no more prophets speaking the Word of God. 1 Maccabees 9:27, which is one of those apocryphal books from the intertestamental period, says, “There

was great distress in Israel such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them.” Here Maccabees refers to the fact that prophets had ceased to appear in Israel.

In the first volume of his commentary on the book of Acts, Craig Keener makes the following observation,

Josephus [who was a first century Jewish historian] contends that there has been no exact succession of prophets since the time of Artaxerxes, which is why no books had been accorded canonical authority since that time. . . .

That is why there were no more books added to the Jewish canon – because, according to Josephus, prophets had ceased to appear. Keener says,

Moreover, although prophecy continued, the title ‘prophet’ belongs only to the past and to the future.

There would come at the end of history – at the end time – another prophet. But until then, prophets belong only to the past, according to Josephus. Keener says,

Josephus used the term ‘prophets’ for his time only when he spoke of false ‘prophets.’ . . . No one denied that revelatory experiences continued to be possible. But biblical prophecy was seen as different from postbiblical prophecy; thus, in Josephus and Philo [Philo is another first century writer in Alexandria, Egypt – one of those Hellenized Jews that I spoke of.] ‘pneuma [or *spirit*, like the Holy Spirit] is confined to prophecy in the biblical period,’ giving a special role to the canon. . . .

So prophesy, through the Holy Spirit (which is what gave canonical status to these Old Testament books), is confined to the past according Philo and Josephus. Keener goes on to say,

even where prophecy continued, it was rarely seen in the same terms as OT prophecy. Josephus and Philo do not associate current inspiration with the Spirit; Qumran [this is the Dead Sea Scroll community – the Essenes that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls] documents associate prophecy and the Spirit only with the past. . . . The early Christians seem to be noteworthy in overcoming this reluctance to apply the designation to contemporary figures. (pp. 890-1, 894)

So the proclamation of the apostles that they were announcing the Word of God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit really broke the mold for first century Judaism, which believed that that type of prophesy had ceased. The apostles believed that in the power of the Holy Spirit they were proclaiming the very Word of God to their hearers. Thus they put their proclamation on the same level as the Old Testament canonical books.

The letters that were left behind by these apostles were very rapidly accepted as being on a par with Old Testament Scriptures. We see this in 2 Peter 3:15b-16. There we read,

So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.

So by the time that the epistles of Peter were written we see that Paul's letters were already being accepted as being on a par with Old Testament Scriptures.

When you read the sub-apostolic church fathers, that is to say, those church fathers who wrote immediately after the apostles, we find them distinguishing very clearly between their own writings and the writings of the apostles that are found in the New Testament. They did not regard their own work as inspired, but they did treat the works that we today find in the New Testament as being authoritative. For example, Ignatius, who is one of the very earliest of the sub-apostolic fathers, much earlier than the New Testament canon's being established, already spoke of a collection of writings which he called "the Gospels and the apostles." These were evidently the four Gospels and certain epistles of the New Testament written by people like Paul. This would be the early evidence of the canon of Scripture already being accepted, including the four Gospels and various epistles.

From the very beginning, these four Gospels and the book of Acts were never doubted by anyone. Everyone recognized that the four Gospels and the book of Acts were part of authoritative Scripture. It wasn't the case that the church selected these books to be in the canon, or that they decreed that these books would be regarded as authoritative. Rather these books imposed themselves upon the early church. It was never doubted that these were the correct record of the life of Jesus, and his teachings, and the history of the early church. These were not selected or declared to be authoritative. They simply imposed themselves upon the early church and were recognized right from the very beginning.

In fact, even those who doubted the canonicity of some books that are today included in the canon of the New Testament always accepted the four Gospels, the book of Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, 1 John, and 1 Peter. That is already a substantial enough canon to establish fundamental Christian doctrine as authoritative. These books were accepted as authoritative Scripture even by persons who doubted some of the other books that were included eventually in the canon.

In the eastern part of the empire – that is to say, in the Greek-speaking eastern empire of Rome – there were doubts expressed about the book of Revelation, or (as it is sometimes called) The Apocalypse of John. Some doubted that the book of Revelation was really authoritative Scripture. In the west (the Latin part of the empire), some church fathers expressed doubts about the book of Hebrews. They didn't think that that should be an authoritative book. So there was some doubt expressed about those two books. But the rest of those books that I mentioned were universally recognized.

In AD 175 we have the earliest list of canonical books belonging to the New Testament. This is a list that was discovered by an Italian scholar named Ludovico Antonio Muratori, and so it is called the Muratorian Canon. The Muratorian Canon dates from around AD 175, as I say. What is listed in the Muratorian Canon? It includes the four Gospels, the book of Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, the book of Jude, two letters of John, and the book of Revelation. It doesn't mention Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, or James. Interestingly enough, the Muratorian Canon does accept the Wisdom of Solomon as canonical. It also accepts the Apocalypse of Peter,

which is not in our New Testament today. This Apocalypse of Peter is not the same thing as a Gnostic document that goes by a somewhat similar name; this is something different, and the Muratorian Canon includes it.

In the year AD 200 another church father named Caius provides a similar list of accepted books. He lists the same twenty-one canonical books that are found in the Muratorian Canon, so this shows that there was a pretty firm conviction about those books at that time.

I think you can see from the lists of New Testament books that I've provided that the issue of canonicity was never about the question, "Are there things outside the New Testament that should have been included in it?" Rather the doubts were, "Are there things in the New Testament that should have been left out?" There were some doubts expressed by certain church fathers about Hebrews and Revelation, for example. But, if anything, what we have in the canon would be too many books, but not too few! So we don't need to worry that there may be some inspired book that has been left out of the canon and that therefore we are deficient because we lack this book in our authoritative Bible. Nobody was worried about that. The only concern was: Did something get in that should have been left out?

By the year AD 340, the church father Eusebius gives the list of the canonical books of the New Testament that is accepted today by all Christian denominations whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox.

We might ask the question: what justifies us in including a book in the canon? The way Protestants answer this question is typically by

saying that the canonical books have to come out of the apostolic circle. Either they were written directly by an apostle or they were written by those who were associates of the apostles. For example, Luke. Luke wasn't an apostle, but as an author of a Gospel and an associate of the apostles, he comes out of the early apostolic circle. Having an origin in the apostolic circle would be a necessary condition for being canonical. Also, consistency with the other books already recognized as canonical would be a necessary condition of being in the canon. You couldn't have something in the canon that was inconsistent with the other canonical books. And then, finally, frankly, Protestants trust in the Holy Spirit to guide the church in recognizing those books of Scripture in which we hear the Word of God spoken to us. This criterion is admittedly more subjective, but it is saying that through the words of the New Testament that have been assembled we sense that God speaks to us through these books, and therefore we believe that these are the limits of the canon.

I don't think that we should think of the canon as something that is decided upon by men. I think it is rather the opposite, as we've seen. These books rather impose themselves upon the church. The church recognized them as being authoritative and therefore part of the canon. There was never any question that the apocryphal Gospels, for example, and other forgeries that were written centuries later should ever been included in the canon. Popularizers like Dan Brown in his book *The DaVinci Code*, who present the church as being some sort of a conspiratorial alliance to destroy these other Gospels and prevent them from becoming part of the Bible, is just a total fabrication and distortion of church history. Right from the very earliest time, the Gospels and Acts imposed

themselves as the authoritative record of the life of Jesus, and everybody knew that these later so-called apocryphal gospels like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Philip, and so forth were forgeries that arose decades, even centuries, after the death of Jesus and therefore were spurious.

The only question that the church really faced was with regard to certain books. There were some doubts expressed as to whether or not they should be in the canon. But here is what is critical, I think. Even if you rejected those books as canonical – say you didn't admit Hebrews or Revelation – nothing essential to Christian doctrine would be lost because there is no Christian doctrine that is taught uniquely by those books and depends solely upon those books. There is no harm in recognizing them as canonical since they are in harmony doctrinally with the indisputable books of the canon. I think we simply trust God in providentially ordering history such that these books which he has inspired commended themselves to the early church fathers and imposed themselves upon the church from a very early date.