

Book of Books: The N.T. Canon – Week 3

INTRO

Who wrote the bible? How was it put together? Why these books and not others? How was it preserved over the millennia? Can we trust it?

The Bible has two purposes:

1) To glorify God; 2) For us to know Him and have salvation.

CANON: (Greek) – A canon was when a reed was cut to a certain length, and as a ruler/standard for measuring an entire building project.

When we speak of the Christian canon, we are referring to the list of books which orthodox Christianity recognizes as the words of God. The collection of these books is the ruler, the standard of our faith.

- Unlike the O.T., ALL Christian faiths agree on the 27 books of the N.T.

1 Peter 1:20-21 - *...no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

The process of canonization was slow, organic, and handled with great scrutiny. The Church didn't give/assign authority to certain books. **It recognized the authority which was already on them by God as His word.**

HOOK

Let's jump back to the early 1900's in America. Suppose there was a traveling fitness specialist, named Phil, with ground-breaking methods. Those who followed his guidance had unprecedented results in weight loss, strength, diet, and general health. He moved from town to town staying several months at each place building fitness groups called Squads, setting up a Squad leader, and speaking at municipal centers, high school gyms, and even stadiums gathering people in each town who wanted to get healthy. Now imagine your name was Bob (or Jo-Bob), and were part of his entourage, which he affectionately calls his Posse. You traveled with him helping with logistics and set up.

After several years, you heard his speeches so many times you could easily quote them word for word, heard him respond to thousands of fitness questions, and knew all his fitness routines. Tragedy struck. Phil had an unexpected death, & his goal of sharing his strategies with everyone was left unfinished.

You and a few others on the "Posse" began the organization "**Fitness by Phil**" and started traveling to new towns doing exactly what he did: founded fitness Squads, set up leaders, and gave his speeches. After spending several months with people, you began to really care about them and wrote letters to the

Squads to check up on them. When they responded with needs, you reiterated what Phil taught you and reminded them how to put it into practice. Phil's principles were, for the first time in this story, being written down somewhere (in those letters). The others on Phil's Posse did the same. One even wrote a biography on Phil's life along with some of his most important speeches.

Tragedy struck again. You and everyone on the Posse was drafted into WWI and died overseas. Since Phil and those closest to Phil were all gone, the biography and those letters became highly sought after for the principles Phil taught. (Pay attention.) If someone from Squad #1 had a weight-gain problem or fitness question, but that question was answered in a letter to a Squad #2 Squad #1 would ask Squad #2 to send the letter or at least a copy of the one they had. Soon, the Posse's letters were circulating and being collected among the Squads. Plus, new Squads were springing up everywhere.

During this time, other people sought to get on the fitness-fame bandwagon, so they wrote similar sounding letters with their own ideas and signed them as members of the Posse trying to get attention. One writer even forged your signature on one of his letters and calls it: 3nd Bob (JoBob).

To be continued...

- This is an over-simplified analogy of Jesus (Phil), His apostles (posse members), the apostle's disciples (squad leaders), and the early churches (squads).

BOOK

John 14:26 - *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 have said to you.*

- This is the promise we stand on.

LOOK

The 27 New Testament books were written in Greek by Jesus' disciples in a 50-year span between AD45 and AD95. They were written on **papyrus** which is a plant cut into strips and pressed into sheets of paper-like writing material that would be rolled into a scroll. No later than the early 100's, Christians began to copy their writings onto flat sheets of papyrus and sewed them together between two pieces of wood like a book with covers. This was called a **codex**. It's unfortunate they used papyrus because, like paper, it deteriorates over time especially in humid climates like Israel. This is one of the two reasons the original letters ("autographs") of the disciples are gone. The second is the persecution by Diocletian (AD303-306) against Christianity. He sought to round up and destroy Christian writings.

Sadly, only fragments of their earliest copies have been found. Those were in dry, hot climates like Egypt. But, beginning in the 300's, scripture was copied onto codices made of high-quality animal skins (parchment) which lasts much longer than papyrus. We have 2 complete bibles from the mid-to-late 300's still in existence (Codex Vaticanus & Codex Sinaiticus).

O.T. AUTHORIZATION – **Does the O.T. leave room for more scripture to be added?**

Jeremiah (**Jer.31**) almost 600 years before Jesus prophesied that God would give a new covenant. One which will finally deal with the sinful human heart and animal sacrifices will no longer be necessary. With the giving of a new covenant, it naturally follows that its proclamation to Israel and the world at large would make room for a new collection of written scriptures to compliment the books of the former covenant (the O.T.). If when Jesus spoke, God was speaking, His teachings were authoritative scripture.

THE NEW TESTAMENT ORIGINS

Jesus traveled from town to town giving sermons, performing miracles, answering questions, and teaching everyone who came to Him. He spoke boldly with authority as if He was God, Himself and did things only God could do. He foretold his death, and according to the will of God, died on a Roman cross and resurrected from the grave. However, His death, resurrection, and ascension came to His apostles as shockingly abrupt, but they remembered their assignment.

- **John 14:26** - *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 have said to you.*
- **Matthew 28:19-20** - *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*
 - It was their commission to – by the power of the Holy Spirit - remember His words, to teach what He taught, and give testimony as eyewitnesses to His life, death, and resurrection.

That's exactly what His apostles did.

Acts 10:39-42 – (Peter speaking) *We are witnesses of all that He did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put Him to death by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him on the third day and made Him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. 42 And He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the one appointed by God....*

They replicated what Jesus did. They traveled, taught, founded Christian communities (churches), and even performed miracles. They wrote letters to those churches instructing, correcting, and encouraging, and they wrote just as they

preached testifying to the death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus. Several even wrote biographies on what they had witnessed Jesus say and do. This correspondence between the disciples and the churches would become our N.T.

- **2 Thess. 2:15** - *So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*

The churches from the beginning recognized the authority given to the apostles to deliver God's word, so as they wrote letters and biographies, the churches added them to their collections of Jewish scriptures holding them in the same regard as scripture. Each church desired to have, not only those letters addressed to itself, but also copies of any writings given to other churches.

Paul's earliest letters to those churches he founded were already being circulated by AD50 and the first biography about Jesus, the gospel of Mark, was written in the mid 50's. Mark is almost undoubtedly Peter's gospel.

- John Mark was Peter's traveling companion and scribe, so the gospel is either Peter's dictation to Mark to inscribe it into Greek ("Mark, write this down." – Peter), or Mark's compilation of Peter's teachings about Jesus after his death (giving it a later date since Peter died in AD64). Either way, it would be Peter's account of his time with Jesus.
 - That the gospel was Peter's teachings written by Mark is attested to by Papias, Irenaeus, Clement, Eusebius, Tertullian, and Origen.

Matthew wrote soon after probably referencing and expanding on Mark.

Then **Luke**, Paul's traveling companion, sat down and compiled as thorough of a biography as he could also leaning heavily on Mark. Luke would have known the apostles, and even Mary, Jesus' mother very well. She lived with John in Ephesus which was a frequent stop of Paul. Perhaps, this is why Luke includes Mary's perspective in Jesus' birth narrative.

- **Luke 1:1-4** - *Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.*

A majority of the **N.T. books** were written and circulating by the late 50's, early 60's. But tragedy struck in the form of heavy Christian persecution beginning

in AD64 by Rome under Nero. It was during this time (AD64-66) that Peter and Paul were martyred. The apostles and close associates of Jesus were dying off quickly, so their writings and copies of their writings became cherished and sought after.

Paul's letters to the churches were probably already compiled and circulating as a collection (corpus) by AD85.

Most of the N.T. writers had been martyred by the late 70's. The last books of the N.T. to be written were by **John**, whom church tradition records as having been boiled in oil and miraculously survived. He was the only apostle who would not be martyred. He wrote his letters and gospel between AD70-90 and the book of Revelation around AD95 on the island of Patmos where he was exiled by Rome.

Revelation, being the last book written by an apostle and having a foreshadowing tone, make it a perfect close to the N.T.

THEY RECOGNIZED THE AUTHORITY OF EACH OTHER'S WRITINGS

Should we consider the apostle's writings to be scripture on par with the O.T.?

It seems apparent that while the apostles were still living and even under their supervision, collections of their writings were being compiled and placed with the O.T. as the authoritative word of God.

Self-Attestation: ("I'm right because I'm telling you what Jesus said.")

Several of the writers claim their teaching as being inspired by God.

- Paul, in **1 Thess. 2:13** - *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.*
- Paul, in **2 Thess. 2:14-15**, claims God's salvation comes through his and the other apostle's teachings and writings.
- Peter, in **2 Pet. 1:15**, asks his writings remain in the churches "after his departure."
- John, in **Rev. 1:1-2**, makes the clearest claim to be giving revelation from God.

Verifying One Another: ("They are right because they are saying what Jesus said.")

The N.T. writers constantly refer to the gospels as the source material behind their doctrines and theology.

- Paul, in **1 Cor. 11**, quotes the gospel's account of the last supper.

- Paul, in **1 Tim. 5:18**, quotes **Matt. 10:10/Luke 10:7** as scripture. (This is evidence that Matt/Luke were already written and recognized as scripture.)
- Peter, in **2 Peter 1**, references the gospel's account of Jesus transfiguration.

We get a cool hint that Peter was aware of a collection of Paul's writings and acknowledges them as authoritative.

- **2 Peter 2:15b-16** - *...our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.*

There is no canon at the end of the 1st century for a couple of reasons:

One, communication and travel was slow and difficult. The churches were far apart, and a trip of several hours today took months or even years then. Plus, copies of their writings had to be written by hand which was slow, laborious work.

Two, church gatherings and copying of books had to be done undercover because of the intense persecution. Although the severity of persecution changed with each new emperor, full religious freedom wouldn't come until Roman emperor Constantine with his Edict of Milan in AD313.

Added to the difficulties was that many other books/letters were being written and circulated as well. These paralleled and imitated the apostle's writings. Many of them even claimed to be written by an apostle.

With the distance, persecution, lack of communication, and imposter's books, you can understand why each church's collection of N.T. writings would vary from each other. You couldn't simply put out a text blast to the church leaders to gather next weekend, bring whatever letters they had, and come compare notes to iron out a canon.

Therefore, the process of reaching agreement and uniformity among Christian churches was a very slow process. It took wise and earnest people being led by the Holy Spirit over several hundred years. *Next Week: Sealing the N.T. canon.

FURTHER INQUIRY

Next week we'll look at how the church fathers recognized which books to include in the N.T. What were some of the New Testament "apocryphal" books which were rejected as part of the canon?

TOOK

Jesus' directive to His disciples was very clear. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they were to **remember His words and teach them**.

E.g., Story of Bob and his gas station. (Tardy Oxcart, pg. 183, Charles Swindoll)

The commission to His disciples hasn't changed. Jesus-followers are to remember His words and teach them knowing everlasting life is in the words of our Savior. We can't teach what we don't have hidden in our hearts.

- Bob preached, but not from a pulpit or stage. He preached through intentional, Spirit-led conversations.

RECAP

- If Jesus was God, then what He taught is authoritative scripture.
- After His ascension, His apostles continued His work by spreading His teachings, giving testimonies as eyewitnesses, and founding churches.
- They wrote letters to the churches they founded including several biographies.
- As those who were trained by Jesus, the apostle's teachings were considered to have the same authority, and copies of their works were circulated.
- Within a span of 20-30 years, most of the apostles were martyred.
- Each church sought to have collections of the apostle's writings for teaching and gathered all they could get their hands on.
- Because of the distant regions the churches were in, slow communication, and religious persecution, collections of books varied from church to church.
- They taught what they had but a consensus needed to be made.

Challenge 1: Select a verse. Memorize it and quote it to yourself all day tomorrow.

Challenge 2: Share what that verse means to you with someone tomorrow.

Soli DEO Gloria