

Luther and the Canon of the Bible

by Jim Seghers

Introduction

The origin of the word “canon” is unclear. It may come from the ancient Greek word *kanon*, which meant a “straight rod” or “bar,” thus it was a measure perhaps like our modern yardstick. In relationship to the Bible the word “canon” has taken on the technical meaning of the authoritative list of the books that make up the inspired and revealed word of God. Origin in the third century appears to be the first to use the term in this technical sense.

Since neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament comes with an index in the original versions, the issue of the canon is important. It is clear that an authority other than the Bible determined which books constituted the Sacred Scriptures. The canon of the Bible accepted by Catholics contains 46 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament. The canon accepted by Protestants usually contains 7 less books following the lead of Martin Luther. The following are the books rejected by Luther: Tobias, Baruch, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiastics, I & II Maccabees, 7 chapters of the book of Esther, and 66 verses of the third chapter of Daniel.

The Christian Canon

It is historically inaccurate to describe Christianity as “a religion of the book,” that is, the Bible. Clearly Jesus founded a Church through the instrument of his Apostles. The Apostles faithfully transmitted the word of God that was given to them by Jesus. Eventually, a summation of this teaching was transmitted to the Church in a written form, which we call the New Testament. As John writes at the end of his gospel: “This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn 21:24-25). The New Testament, then, grew organically from the Church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Christianity was not founded on the New Testament, but on the apostolic instruction of which the New Testament is a summary.

As the books of the **New Testament** were composed they began to be circulated among the local churches. The 4 Gospels, Paul’s 13 Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles were generally accepted as being divinely inspired. However, these inspired books were not the only writings widely circulated within the early Church. There were 50 works claiming to be Gospels, 22 Acts and various Apocalypses. Some of the books in the New Testament were disputed, namely, the Epistles of James, Jude, 2nd Peter, 2nd and 3rd John, Hebrews, and Revelation. In addition, other works were accepted in some local communities as being divinely inspired, for example, Shepherd of Hermes, Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles, Gospel according to the Hebrews, Paul’s Epistle to the Laodiceans, and the Epistle of St. Clement.

The criteria for determining the acceptance of a book as scripture was its apostolic origin. The earliest extent list of accepted books is the Muratorian Canon, which is dated around 190. It

was discovered in 1740. By the end of the fourth century it was becoming clear that a definitive canon needed to be established. Under the influence of St. Augustine bishops met at the councils of Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397. The list formulated at these councils is same as found in Catholic Bibles today. Subsequently this list was approved by Pope Damasus I and by the Council of Carthage in 419. Christians accepted this canon until Luther discarded the books mentioned earlier. When the Council of Trent decreed on this matter in the sixteenth century it merely formalized what had been accepted for well over thirteen centuries.

Interestingly there seemed to be fewer disputes in the early Church regarding the canon of the **Old Testament**. When the New Testament quotes the Old Testament it is usually citing the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was formulated by Jewish scholars at Alexandria c. 280 BC. This came to be known as the Alexandrian (Greek) Canon. It contains the 46 books that one finds in a Catholic Bible. African Jews still use that canon of the Old Testament to this day.

The respected Protestant patristics scholar J. N. D. Kelly writes: "It should be observed that the Old Testament thus admitted as authoritative in the Church was somewhat bulkier and more comprehensive than the [Protestant Old Testament] ... It always included, though with varying degrees of recognition, the so-called Apocrypha or deuterocanonical books. The reason for this is that the Old Testament, which passed in the first instance into the hands of Christians, was ... the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. ... most of the Scriptural quotations found in the New Testament are based upon it rather than the Hebrew. ... In the first two centuries. ... the Church seems to have accepted all, or most of, these additional books as inspired and to have treated them without question as Scripture. Quotations from Wisdom, for example, occur in 1 Clement and Barnabas... Polycarp cites Tobit, and the *Didache* [cites] Ecclesiasticus. Irenaeus refers to Wisdom, the History of Susannah, Bell and the Dragon [i.e. the deuterocanonical portions of Daniel], and Baruch. The use made of the Apocrypha by Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian and Clement of Alexandria is too frequent for detailed references to be necessary"¹

Within Judaism the canon of the Old Testament became an issue after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70AD. It is believed that the remnant of the Pharisaical Jewish leadership met at Jamnia around the year 100. They formulated the so-called Palestinian (Hebrew) Canon, which eliminated the books subsequently rejected by Luther. In part their argument was based on the fact that no Hebrew originals of these books were in existence. They reasoned that God would not inspire scriptures in a language other than Hebrew. Ironically, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrates that Hebrew originals were in existence in Palestine.

Luther

Luther rejected the seven previously mentioned books of the Old Testament citing the Palestinian Canon as his authority. Clearly his reasons were doctrinal. However, his decision

¹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 53-54.

poses serious difficulties. What authority from God would Jews have in the Christian era to determine which books of the Old Testament were or were not divinely inspired?

Clearly Luther and subsequent Protestants reject Tradition. They confess that the Christian faith is to be based on the Bible alone. Where does the Bible teach that Jewish rabbis in the Christian era have the authority from God era to determine the canon of scripture? Additionally, where does Luther get the biblical authority to determine the canon of scripture?

Luther's problems with the Bible were not limited to the Old Testament. His attitude toward certain New Testament books is also shocking. He was barely restrained from throwing out the Epistle of James, which he called: "an epistle of straw with no character of the Gospel in it." Where does the Bible give any man the authority to make such judgmental statements regarding the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? He also dishonored Jude, Hebrews and Revelation, declaring that they were not on the same footing as the rest of the books of the Bible. Where does the Bible teach that? Luther placed all four of these books in an appendix to his German translation of the Bible.

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