

HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE

A BASIC INTRODUCTION BY DR. ABRI BRANCKEN, 10 Jun 2018

INTRODUCTION

2 Timothy 3:16-17, NKJV

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Christian often ask me how we got our Bible. Many believers want to know how the sixty-six books got chosen to be in the Bible. Why these sixty-six? Why these books and not others? Who decided what went into the Bible? The Bible is a book supernaturally inspired. The message of Truth came from outside of our dimension of space-time.

OT & NT BOOKS - CANON

The Bible is a collection of writings, and the earliest ones were set down nearly 3500 years ago. The Bible was written over 1600-year period by over 40 different authors. There are 66 books in the Bible. The 39 books of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) form the Bible of Judaism, while the Christian Bible includes those books and also the 27 books of the New Testament. This list of books included in the Bible is known as the Canon. Canon refers to the books that we regard as inspired by God. It is authoritative for faith and life. "Canon" is a Greek word meaning "rule" or "measuring stick."

HEBREW SCRIPTURES (OLD TESTAMENT)

Jesus himself referred to these books when he spoke of the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms (Luke 24:44). The Hebrew Scriptures are divided into three parts, namely the Instructions (Torah), Writings and the Prophets. The first five books of the Bible are attributed to Moses and are commonly called the Torah or Pentateuch (literally "five scrolls"). Moses lived between 1500 and 1300 BC, though he writes about events in the first eleven chapters of the Bible that occurred long before his time, for examples the creation and the flood. The first five books were the first to be accepted as canonical by the Hebrews and religious leaders.

These earliest accounts were handed on from generation to generation in songs, narratives, and poetry.

The writings of the thirty or so other contributors to the Old Testament span a thousand years! They recount the times and messages from Moses' successor, Joshua, to the last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi, who wrote his little tract around 450 BC. The prophets' writings were also not brought together in a single form until about 200 BC. The remaining Old Testament books were adopted as canonical even later. The Old Testament list was probably not finally fixed much before the birth of Christ. The Jewish people were widely scattered by this time and they really needed to know which books were the authoritative Word of God because so many other writings claiming divine authority were floating around. With the fixing of the canon they became a people of one Book, and this Book kept them together.

INTER TESTAMENTAL PERIOD

Then there is a 500-year period when no writings were contributed to the Bible, but the events in that time was written in advance by Daniel. This is the period between the testaments, when Alexander

the Great conquered much of the world and when the Greek language was introduced to the Hebrews.

NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament was written during a much shorter period, i.e. during the last half of the first century AD. It was the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, which triggered the writing of the NT and the message spread across the Near East and then westward to Greece and on to Rome. Half of the New Testament books were contributed by one man, the Apostle Paul, in the epistles he sent to groups of new Christians and to his assistants Timothy and Titus. The apostles, along with other evangelists and teachers, traveled from place to place to plant churches and encourage believers. As need arose, the apostles wrote letters to various churches. Often the letter would be copied and shared with neighboring churches, who, in turn, would share it with still other churches.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote, "After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea" (Colossians 4:16).

ORAL TRADITION AND THE WORDS OF JESUS

The words of Jesus were recognized as inspired very soon after the resurrection, yet it was 2-3 decades before his words were circulated in written form. We have one clear example of oral tradition when Paul is addressing the Ephesian elders,

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' - Acts 20:35

This citation is especially interesting since Luke, the author of Acts, does not record this saying in his own gospel. In fact, this *agrapha* (the Greek word "unwritten") does not appear in any of the four canonical gospels and is a witness to the sayings of Jesus being transmitted in an oral tradition.

HOW THE CANON WAS FORMED

There is not a single date when we can say that the canon of the New Testament was decided. The New Testament canon developed, or evolved, over the course of the first 250-300 years of Christian history.

No specific church created the canon, but the churches and councils gradually accepted the list of books recognized by believers everywhere as inspired.

The early church looked at the apostles for the authoritative word of God that was sound doctrinally. When the apostles died, their writings remained and was circulated among churches as they were considered authoritative. The early church therefore had a number of books that they used and everybody agreed on as having authority. So, the body of believers recognized the writings of the apostles or those leaders associated with the apostles as authoritative. It was not just a small group of people who decided about the NT books. In the first and second centuries after Christ, many, many writings and epistles were circulating among the Christians.

Later, in the early third century, there were some debates about certain books. In western regions of the empire, the book of Hebrews faced opposition because it is unclear who authored it. In the east Revelation was unpopular. Eusebius, a church historian of the fourth century, records that James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John and Jude were the only books "spoken against" (though recognized by others).

THE NT IN THE 2ND & 3RD CENTURIES

By the time we come to the end of the second century and look at the citations of Clement of Alexandria (195-202 AD) and Tertullian (205-225 AD) we find numerous references from almost every New Testament document. As time went on, some "heretics" began to have different opinions about which books were inspired, e.g. Marcion. He rejected the Old Testament, along with any writings that might reinforce views other than his own. He developed a list of books he considered acceptable: portions of the Gospel of Luke, ten of Paul's letters, plus a letter purportedly from Paul to the Alexandrians. This list is known as the Marcion Canon. In A.D. 144, the church of Rome excommunicated Marcion.

Gnosticism also started infiltrating the church. Gnostics believed that:

- All matter is evil, and the non-material, spirit-realm is good.
- There is an unknowable God, who gave rise to many lesser spirit beings called Aeons.
- One evil, lower spirit being is the creator who made the universe.
- Gnosticism does not deal with 'sin', only ignorance.
- To achieve salvation, one needs to get in touch with secret knowledge.

Anyway, the church had to respond to false concepts and fables coming into the body of believers and other questionable ideas that started to surface. The following are guidelines that seemed to have been used to recognize inspired books, although these criteria cannot be found so clearly described by the church fathers (patristic writings), nor in any council prior to the late fourth century.

1. Was the letter written by a God appointed apostle?

Was the writer truly appointed by God to write it? If someone was recognized as an apostle, then his writings were considered authoritative.

2. Was the letter written by someone associated with a true apostle?

Was the person close enough to a recognized apostle, for example, Luke was associated with the apostle Paul. Mark was associated with Peter. Others were very closely associated with the apostolic leadership, e.g. Jude, James (the half brother of Jesus). So, their books (letters) had authority because they very close to recognized apostles.

3. Was the writer confirmed by acts of God?

Did God perform signs, miracles and wonders to confirm that the person spoke on His behalf? In Exodus 4, Moses was given miraculous powers to confirm his call. In 2 Corinthians 12:12, Paul teaches that the mark of an apostle is "signs, wonders and miracles." Miracles were the means by which God confirmed the authority of his spokesmen.

4. Does the message tell the truth about God in line with OT Scripture?

Truth cannot contradict itself, so agreement with the other books of Scripture was only logical.

5. Was it accepted by God's people?

The inner witness of the Spirit was equally important. A key question these early Christians asked was, when we read this, is there an inner sense from God that what is written is right and true? Initial acceptance by people to whom the work was addressed was crucial. What was the original audience's sense? Did they accept the book as an authoritative word from God? Daniel, who lived within a few years of Jeremiah, called Jeremiah's book "Scripture" in Daniel 9:2. Paul called the Gospel of Luke "Scripture" in 1 Timothy 5:18. Peter affirmed that Paul's letters were "Scripture" in 2 Peter 3:16.

6. Historical, geographic, etc. accuracy

When dates, places and names were given, was it correct. Historical accuracy was important. If the facts of a book were inaccurate, it couldn't have been from God.

Although the exact list of New Testament documents was confirmed at the third Synod of Carthage (397 AD), this was a relatively small regional council and by this time the 27 New Testament documents had already been agreed upon by most of the church.

THE OFFICIAL CANON

Many people think the New Testament writings were agreed upon at the Council of Nicea. The actual concern of the council was clearly and unambiguously the relationship between the Father and the Son. Is Christ a creature, or true God? There were about 20 church rules voted on at Nicea – and did not primarily deal with sacred writings. The first historical reference listing the exact 27 writings in the orthodox New Testament is in the Easter Letter of Athanasius in 367 AD. His reference states that these are the only recognized writings to be read in a church service. Again, the formation of the canon did not come all at once like a thunderbolt, but was the product of centuries of reflection.

APOCRAPHA

Many people wonder why the Apocrypha is not in the Protestant Bible. Apocrypha are works, usually written, of unknown authorship or of doubtful origin. Apocrypha means "those hidden away." Early Christians differed over whether these extra books should be considered Scripture or not. Apocryphal writings are a class of documents rejected by some as being unworthy to be properly called Scripture, but, as with other writings, they may sometimes be referenced for support, such as the Book of Jasher, Enoch, etc. The Books called the Apocrypha consist of 14 books originally attached to the Greek Old Testament that were not in the Hebrew-written Bible. During the sixteenth-century Reformation, Martin Luther spoke strongly against the Apocrypha. In reaction the Roman Catholic Church convened a council in Trent (now in Italy), where they declared the Apocrypha to be canonical. To this day Catholics and Protestants disagree on this issue. Catholics uphold the Apocrypha. Protestants believe that the Apocrypha is useful but not inspired.

THE WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WHEN

The important thing to remember is that when the Bible was written is not as important as what was written. However, the when is important also as we sense how God's presence persisted through the centuries and gave us "in the fullness of time" the full-orbed revelation of salvation and hope through his son Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

The New Testament developed, or evolved, over the course of the first 250-300 years of Christian history. No one particular person made the decision. The decision was not made at a church council. The particular writings that became those of the New Testament gradually came into focus and became the most trusted and beneficial of all the early Christian writings.