

The Establishment of the Canon of Scripture

[Conference Paper]

By *Gerald. E. Geiger*

The topic assigned involves the Canon of Scripture. 'Canon' was originally a Greek word which in turn was borrowed from a Semitic word. Its root meaning is 'reed.' A reed was used as a measuring rod and we find that the Greek word 'canon' has this meaning as well as the meaning of a 'rule' or 'standard' in the metaphorical sense. Origen used the word to denote what we call the 'rule of faith', the standard by which we are to measure and evaluate everything that may be offered to us as an article of faith. As we use the term 'canon' it simply means the books which belong to Scripture.

Our concern is to ascertain as much as we can about the formation of the canon of Scripture. In seeking to answer the many questions that arise in connection with this subject, we would wish that we had an on-the-spot report. However, such a report is not extant. When the bits of information available are pieced together we still have a desire for more information. Even though details are lacking, I am convinced through the study of the subject assigned that what we call our Bible is indeed the revelation that God intended for man.

Various questions concerning the canon of the Old Testament are removed when we realize that the Old Testament Scriptures as we know them were in existence at the time of Christ. He quoted from them during His ministry. He mentioned details from the first book, namely Genesis and from the last book which was II Chronicles according to the Jewish order. These words of Christ are recorded in Luke 11:51: "From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias." On other occasions, Jesus made a 3-fold reference to the Old Testament. For example, He said in Luke 24:44: "... all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the Psalms concerning me." As further evidence concerning the Old Testament canon, it might be added that Christ did not condemn the use of the Old Testament as it then existed whereas he condemned the traditions of the Jews. Certainly, if we follow Christ in this as we should in all else, we are safe.

From references such as we have made, we are certain that the Old Testament Canon existed already at the time of Christ. But we still have not stated how it came into existence. Schaller in his "Book of Books," states that Moses' writings were delivered to the Levites and Joshua followed this example. Tradition which is fairly credible is the only source we have concerning the other books. It states that Ezra or some other prophet established the canon as we have it. These writings were widely distributed. The Psalms were copied and used extensively in temple worship. The first public recognition which the Hebrews gave the sacred document seems to have taken place in 621 B.C. when the 'book of the law' which Hilkiah found in the temple was formally accepted by the pronouncement of King Josiah. The Pentateuch acquired recognition when the Torah was translated into Greek and became the Bible of Jerusalem. In 90 A.D., the Council of Mania formally accepted the Canon of the Old Testament but it was only approving what had long been accepted for they neither admitted or expelled from the canon. This canon did not include the Apocrypha.

Concerning the Apocrypha, which have been suggested for inclusion into the canon, we note that Jesus never made any reference to them. This alone is sufficient to convince me that they were not meant to be part of or equal to the Old Testament Canon. We also know that historians such as Philo or Josephus, who were contemporary or who lived shortly after Christ and the Apostles, did not accept the Apocrypha. Josephus was of the opinion that scriptural inspiration ceased shortly after the return from the Babylonian captivity. As we glance at the books which Josephus included in the Old Testament, we find only 21 titles but he simply grouped different ones together. His canon included the same material as we have today in our Old Testament. So much information I was able to gather concerning the Canon of the Old Testament.

The most reliable evidence concerning the Old Testament is that which Christ Himself said regarding it. The same is true of the New Testament. Jesus said to His disciples that He would send them the Holy Spirit adding: "He shall teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you.... He will guide you

into all truth ... and he will shew you things to come.” John 14:26 and 16:13. Certainly an examination of the contents of the New Testament show us that what the Apostles wrote was merely an interpretation and application of what Jesus himself said. What they wrote was the same as what they spoke, both done under the prompting of the Holy Ghost. Thus Paul is able to say: “We speak not in words which man’s wisdom teacheth but which the Holy Ghost teacheth.” I Cor. 2:13. What they wrote must remain the immovable foundation of the New Testament Church. But the question in our minds as we consider the assigned subject is which books were actually meant as God’s revelation for all time.

It is well that we remember that the New Testament Canon was not formed merely by chance. Even as God caused His men to write His Word, so also we might conclude that He directed the establishment of the New Testament Canon. If one only thinks of the variety of authors and the unity of thought, he must conclude that it could not have happened just by chance. Therefore, though we do not have more details concerning the establishment of the New Testament Canon, let us not forget that in this God had control and in love for mankind, He has preserved that which He intended man to have.

As the New Testament Church had its beginning, there was no immediate need to have a collection of writings as a source book of doctrine. The church had the Old Testament and regarded it highly. But as various questions and problems were answered by writings of the Apostles, the church felt a need to save them for future reference. They were kept on their bookshelves and kept that they might be read and studied time and again. Polycarp of Smyrna wrote thus to the Philippian church: “Paul being absent wrote unto you epistles, by which, if you pore over them, you shall be able to be built up unto the faith which was given unto you.” So we might conclude that letters were copied and traded. Paul even encouraged the Colossians and the Laodecians to exchange his letters. (Colossians 4:16)

History doesn’t record for us the names nor the places of residence of those Christians who were particularly zealous in the collection of the apostolic writings. But such work was done because St. Peter knew of a collection of Paul’s letters. He writes: “And also in all his epistles ... “ II Peter 3:16. Prof. Blume in his article: “The Formation of the New Testament Canon”, (Wis. Luth. Quarterly, 1941) said that Paul’s letters did not just drift together but as a result of some individual or group of individuals at one of the leading apostolic congregations. As Prof. Blume wrote in ‘41, he thought that Theodor Zahn’s idea was rather reliable. His opinion was that in the 80’s of the first century, the 13 letters of Paul accompanied by Hebrews were collected by the church at Corinth and made available to Christians everywhere. After further study, Prof. Blume presented the following information to his class in the spring of ‘64. He stated that which he presented was merely a working hypothesis. He said that on a believing and confessional basis, we must use all our facts to make a believing hypothesis. He felt that the canon was gathered at the time of persecution and that it might have been John whom tradition tells us was in Ephesus at the end of the first century. Prof. Blume felt that since God works through instruments, we need an individual and this work of gathering had to be in hands of a great individual active in the church. There had to be someone pushing it since opposition and persecution would have destroyed the works. There are many indications that in John we have such a man. He was a literary figure who worked with books and letters as such. He and the church had been reflecting on what the Gospels meant. He had met the world. He saw how the Word must be presented. He was an eye-witness to the events recorded in the Gospel.

John’s style is that of one who is literary conscious. In His Gospel, he has a prologue and a conclusion in which he refers to what he writes. In writing Rev. 2:2 he speaks of ‘trying apostles.’ This could refer to their writings. It could have been that in the church at Ephesus there was a conscious effort to locate the letters in order to hold the apostles in the place they should hold. By example and leadership, John is a figure who could do this. It might be noted that Paul, Timothy and John served in Ephesus. There was no other spot in the world better equipped for gathering the canon. The Ephesus congregation was also a solid congregation. It is Prof. Blume’s assumption that John was at Ephesus when he wrote his Gospel and in this community, favorable to him the canon was gathered.

The question cannot be definitely answered, but I feel Prof. Blume has a very good case in concluding that John might have been God's instrument at Ephesus to gather the canon. Other hypotheses are offered but none seem to be any better than that presented by Prof. Blume.

We might add a few additional thoughts concerning the gathering of the various books. There was no rigid authoritarian church government which regulated the establishment of the canon. The process took place before any organization controlled the church. However, church leaders traveled freely and exchanged ideas by visits and letters. The canon was established before the last eyewitness to the Apostles died. But all this does not help us understand why we have only the 27 books we do in the New Testament.

One of the general requirements for entrance into the canon was apostolic authorship. Luke's book of Acts helped to convince many of the authority of Paul and his writings. But Apostolic authorship was not the only requirement. Two of the Gospels bear the names of men who were not apostles. Their books were accepted because they bore the convincing marks of real authority. The early Christians were not exceptionally intelligent people but they did have the capacity to recognize divine authority when they saw it. If we were to compare the canonical writings with other early Christian literature, we must conclude they judged wisely.

In bringing our study to a conclusion, we turn to Prof. Blume's article in the "Quarterly" and pick out a few facts from the first centuries concerning the canon. He states that from a study of the writings of the earliest Christians outside of the apostolic circle, it is evident that they knew and used the New Testament as it is constituted today. They do not quote by chapter and verse but the subject matter is the same. Different men have favorite writings and may quote freely from them. Their writings indicate that certain letters were circulated together, e.g. those of John. In 1935, a Gospel was found which included words and phrases of all 4 canonical Gospels and it was dated before 150 AD.

After these early Christians, there were more attacks made on the church and the Christians had to defend themselves against Jews and Romans and show they had a right to exist. The New Testament writings took on greater importance. At the same time, sects arose which denied truths taught by historical Christianity and referred to its own body of Scripture. Justin the Martyr wrote in 165 and refers to most of the New Testament books but doesn't list them individually. Marcion, the heretic, was the first to list the books and so as a result the church too took steps to make clear just which books they included in the canon.

We have seen that there is evidence that all the books of the New Testament were accepted as Scripture somewhere but not all were accepted everywhere. Rome refused to accept Hebrews and the East showed uneasiness about Revelation. But, about 200 A.D. there were those who said: "This is the canon." There is the Canon Muratori, though very difficult to read, it lists all New Testament books except James and possibly Hebrews. Then followed an age in which apostolic authority was supreme. Thus Hebrews, II Peter, II & III John, James, Jude and Revelation came to be classed as the "doubtful" books. There were also the "accepted" books as opposed to the "rejected" books. "Doubtful" did not necessarily mean it was rejected by all. It is Origen in 230, who gives us two lists, the one lists all the accepted books and is known as *Omologoumena*. The second list indicates the books some rejected although he accepted them. These were known as the *antilegoumena*. On the first list he included the four Gospels and 14 letters of Paul, including Hebrews, I Peter, I John and Revelation. On the second list were James, II Peter, II & III John, Jude, Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas. This meant he accepted 29 books. Eusebius accepted the books of the New Testament as we have them today but said of Revelation: "if it seem proper."

By 367, the canon was settled. Athanasius is the first to list the books of the New Testament as we know them. He was widely traveled and knew the Christian world as few men did. His list is without unfavorable remarks concerning Revelation. By this time the honest well-informed and devout Christians everywhere acknowledged those books as Scripture which Apostolic Fathers early in the second century knew and used as such. The New Testament canon was not demarcated by the arbitrary decree of any church council. When at last a Church Council, the Synod of Carthage in 397 listed the 27 books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity.

There were differences of opinion but before the fourth century was out, Christians everywhere accepted precisely those books as infallible, apostolic word which the church's first leaders were already accepting when the second century was just getting under way.