

## TREDTRI (Monday & Wednesday Class)

### 5. Canon and Divisions of the Bible<sup>1</sup>

#### 5.1 Canonization of the Bible

The books of the Bible did not all attain their authority at one time. They were accepted as the Scripture of the Jewish and Christian communities only after a long process that we call *canonization*.<sup>2</sup> It refers to the process by which a book was accepted into the official list of core scriptures (such as the Bible) by a particular religious group.

Generally, *canon* is an official list or collection of writings that a particular religious group considers as its “core scriptures” or “authorized books,” which are used by the group as the basis for its religious beliefs, moral precepts, and communal practices. The Greek word “*kanon*” originally meant “measuring rod; rule; criterion” (cf. 2 Cor 10:13-16; Gal 6:16), but later came to mean such a list of writings that met certain criteria. A scriptural canon is usually considered “*fixed*” or “*closed*,” meaning that no additional books will be added to it.<sup>3</sup>

**5.2 Four Criteria for Canonicity** (*why certain books were eventually accepted into the NT Canon, while others were rejected*):

5.2.1 ***Apostolic Origin*** - attributed to and/or based on the preaching/teaching of the first-generation apostles (or their closest companions).

5.2.2 ***Universal Acceptance*** - acknowledged by all major Christian communities in the Mediterranean world (by the end of the fourth century).

5.2.3 ***Liturgical Use*** - read publicly along with the OT when early Christians gathered for the Lord's Supper (their weekly worship services).

5.2.4 ***Consistent Message*** - containing theological ideas compatible with other accepted Christian writings (incl. the divinity *and* humanity Jesus).

#### 5.3 . Stages of Canonization

##### 5.3.1 The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)

A. 400 BCE – the Torah had gained authoritative status

B. 200 BCE – the Prophets was considered canonical

C. 130 BCE – the Writings was in the process of being fixed as canonical.

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<sup>1</sup> Wegner, *The Journey from Texts*, 53-57.

<sup>2</sup> Hauer, Christian H., and Young, William A., *An Introduction of the Bible. A Journey into Three Worlds*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 9. Hereafter referred as Hauer, *Introduction to the Bible*.

<sup>3</sup> Felix Just, SJ, PhD, “New Testament Canon” [[http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT\\_Canon.htm](http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT_Canon.htm)] Accessed on 01/04/07.

D. 100 CE – the whole Hebrew Bible was finally fixed<sup>4</sup>

The evidence suggests that some books (Ezekiel, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Esther) that became canonical were the subject of dispute. Other books not included in the Hebrew canon were thought by many to have a valid claim to the same authority as many of the books that were included. The Jews of Egypt in the last two or three centuries BCE apparently developed a different ordering of the Prophets and Writings (reflected in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the TaNaK, and in the Christian Old Testament) and included other books not found in the Hebrew canon (the Deuterocanonicals or Apocrypha). However, the Hebrew canon finally attained acceptance in the entire Jewish world, and it is today also accepted by Protestant Christians.<sup>5</sup>

#### 5.4 The Christian Bible (New Testament)

The process of canonization of the New Testament began with the preservation of the sayings of Jesus and stories about him that were considered authoritative for the communities that sprang up and proclaimed him Lord. Gradually these were collected and adapted, creating the gospels. The gospels were probably written by 100 CE.<sup>6</sup>

By 200 CE the gospels, Pauline letters, and some other writings were held to be of equal authority with the Hebrew canon (and Deuterocanonicals). Yet the authority of other writings (Hebrews, Second and Third John, Second Peter, James, Jude, and Revelation) were still being disputed. Some books judged not of canonical status were deemed authoritative in some Christian communities.<sup>7</sup>

It was not until the fourth century that the New Testament canon, as we know it, was closed. Even then controversy continued. Canonization was still a concern in the sixteenth century, when the Protestant reformers decided to exclude the Deuterocanonical books from the Old Testament, and the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1546) reaffirmed the canonicity of most of the “Apocrypha”.<sup>8</sup>

#### 5.5 . Four-Fold Role of the Evangelists as Authors (*what they contributed, even if "God is the Author" of all scripture*):

5.5.1 **Selectors** - from among the many things Jesus said and did, they chose which stories they wanted to include and which to omit.

5.5.2 **Arrangers** - they organized the materials in a particular sequence, not necessarily chronologically but often in thematic blocks.

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<sup>4</sup> Hauer, *Introduction to the Bible*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

5.5.3 **Shapers** - they adapted and edited the individual stories from their sources so as to emphasize the themes they wanted to stress.

5.5.4 **Proclaimers** - they were not objective historians, but preached the “good news” about Jesus in ways appropriate to their audiences.

## 5.6 Canonical Arrangement of the NT<sup>9</sup>

5.6.1 The 27 books of the New Testament are **NOT** listed in *chronological* order (the order in which they were written historically); several *other* principles were operative.

5.6.2 The **overall** order begins with the life of *Jesus* (the four Gospels), then deals with the growth of the Christian *Church* (Acts, Letters, Epistles), and finally focuses on the *Eschaton* (the end of time, as described symbolically in the Book of Revelation).

5.6.3 The four **Gospels** are listed in what *was* traditionally regarded as their chronological order (i.e., Matthew was thought to be the oldest Gospel); most scholars today, however, believe that *Mark* was the first written Gospel (or at least the oldest of the four canonical Gospels in their full versions, as we know them today).

5.6.4 The **Acts** of the Apostles was originally the second volume of Luke's two-volume work; but when the four Gospels were grouped together, Acts was placed after John.

5.6.5 The Letters written by **Paul** (or at least attributed to him) are divided into two sub-groups: those written to communities and those addressed to individuals; within each sub-group, the letters are arranged *not* in chronological order, but rather in *decreasing order of length* (more or less, although Galatians is slightly shorter than Ephesians).

5.5.6 The anonymous "Letter to the **Hebrews**" comes immediately after the Pauline letters because people *used* to think it was also written by Paul; it may have been written by one of his followers, but was almost certainly *not* written by Paul himself.

5.5.7 The Catholic or General **Epistles** are also listed in decreasing order of length, although letters attributed to the same apostle are grouped together.

5.5.8 The Book of **Revelation** closes out the NT canon, since it concludes with a description of the end of time (New Heavens, New Earth, New Jerusalem, etc.).

## 5.6. Stages of NT Formation and Transmission

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<sup>9</sup> Felix Just, SJ, PhD, “Canonical Arrangement of the New Testament” [[http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT\\_Canon.htm](http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT_Canon.htm)] Accessed on 01/04/07.

Some scholars propose only 3 stages (Historical Events, Oral Tradition, Written Texts), others 5 stages (Historical Events, Oral Tradition, Written Tradition, Editing, Canonization). Joseph Kudasiewicz has identified four stages:<sup>10</sup>

### **5.7 Scriptural/canonical/biblical**

When used by Jews or Christians, these adjectives seem interchangeable, referring to any books contained in their Bibles (i.e., part of the "canon" of the Jewish and/or Christian scriptures). But remember: which books are considered part of the Bible depends on whom you ask! The 27 books of the New Testament are considered "scriptural/biblical" by all Christians, but not by Jews; and several books of the Old Testament are considered "canonical/biblical" by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians, but not by Jews or Protestant Christians (as explained in detail below). Moreover, the "scriptural" writings of any non-Judeo/Christian religion should not be called "biblical"; and they should only be called "canonical" if they are part of an "official list" of writings considered sacred by that religion.

### **5.8 Non-biblical/non-canonical/non-scriptural books**

Ancient writings that are *not* part of the Bible, including the OT Pseudepigrapha (Jewish), and many early Christian writings (many of which also called Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses). But again, beware: the same writing might be considered "biblical" by one group and "non-biblical" by another group.

5.8.1 ***Jewish Scriptures*** - can refer *either* to the Hebrew Bible (HB, for homebound Jews who read Hebrew) *or* to the Septuagint (LXX, for Diaspora Jews and early Jewish-Christians who spoke Greek).

5.8.2 ***Christian Scriptures*** - refers *not only* to the New Testament (NT), *but also* to the Old Testament (OT), since Christians accept *both* testaments in their Bibles.

5.8.3 ***Greek Scriptures*** - can refer *either* to the LXX alone (for ancient Greek-speaking Jews) *or* to the combination of LXX *and* NT (for ancient and modern Greek-speaking Christians).

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Kudasiewicz, *The Synoptic Gospels Today* (Makati: ST PAULS, 1997) 51. According to Kudasiewicz, these four elements can be found in the prologue to the Gospel of Luke (1:1-4).