

Canon of Scripture

Lesson 5

I. The Christian Canon of the Old Testament in the East

- a. In order to understand the canon of the OT we need to examine the contributions of the **Eastern Church**. The Eastern Church fathers not only helped to identify OT canon, but they also helped to formulate orthodox confessional statements of faith which Protestants embrace today.
- b. There is no clean, clear, simple and authoritative way to explain the canon of OT Scripture because such a classification did **not** occur in one fell swoop as the result of a church council or decree of some kind.
- c. OT canon, as recognized by the Christian Church, came about progressively over a period of **300-400** years. As the research will show, various bishops and congregational leaders approached the subject from divergent viewpoints.
- d. These divergent perspectives were inevitable due to the cultural, sociological, political and linguistic differences between the Christians of Eastern and Western Europe. These differences eventually led to a **schism** in the Church.
- e. The Eastern Christians spoke **Greek** whereas the Western Christians spoke Latin. The Eastern Church's administration was governed by a group of bishops (i.e., Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem) which shared a common language and cultural background.
- f. The Western Church's administration was governed by a single bishop: the bishop of Rome. All these factors led to some basic theological differences between the Orthodox Church of the East and West and led to **differences** in their respective Old Testament canon.
- g. When examining the question of what books were originally included in the Old Testament canon, it is important to note that some of the books of the Bible have been known by more than one **name**.

Sirach is also known as Ecclesiasticus; 1 and 2 Chronicles as 1 and 2 Paralipomenon; Ezra and Nehemiah as 1 and 2 Esdras, and 1 and 2 Samuel combined with 1 and 2 Kings become 1- 4 Kings.

II. Uncials & Codices

- a. At an early date the Egyptian Christians (Coptic Eastern Church) used the **codex** form and not the older scroll form for their copies of the Septuagint.
- b. A codex (Latin for "trunk of a tree" or *block of wood*, or book; plural *codices*) is a book made up of a number of **sheets** of paper, vellum, or similar substance, with hand-written content.
- c. Developed by the Romans from wooden writing tablets, the codex is usually stacked and bound by fixing one edge with covers. The codex is the replacement of the **scroll**, and is often associated with the rise of Christianity and the canon of the Bible.
- d. Another frequently used term in ancient Bible research is **Uncials**. Uncials are a style of writing characterized by somewhat rounded capital letters and found especially in Greek and Latin manuscripts of the fourth to the eighth century A.D.
- e. In 1751, it was thought that only 23 copies of OT uncial manuscripts collected in codex form existed. By 1859, that number had increased to 64 uncials, and in 1909 they numbered 161 uncial codices. Today, they number around **300**.
- f. Scholars invented a system of classification which used capital **Latin** letters to identify the uncials that were known to exist. Codex Alexandrinus received the letter "A", Codex Vaticanus – "B", Codex Ephraemi – "C", Codex Bezae – "D" and so on.
- g. The great uncial codices of the complete Greek Bible (Eastern Church) from the **4th-5th** centuries AD provide evidence of which reveals the various books which were acknowledged as having the status of Holy Scripture.
- h. For example, the Syriac version, (150A.D), **omits** Chronicles. The contents of the codices Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and Alexandrinus dating back to the 4th century also vary somewhat from one another. These variances in time became known as the Septuagintal plus list.
- i. Various Eastern Church Fathers also contribute to our understanding of the process of Old Testament canon through their **writing** and preaching records.

III. Justin Martyr

- a. Justin Martyr, (AD 100–ca.165), was an early Christian Apologist. He regarded the Septuagint version as the only **reliable** text of the Old Testament.
- b. Where the Septuagint differs from the Hebrew text, the Jews (he said) have corrupted the text so as to obscure the scriptures' plain prophetic testimony to Jesus as the **Christ**. None-the-less, he held to a canon identical with that of the Jews.

IV. Melito of Sardis

- a. One of the few early church fathers who provided a list of the Old Testament canon was Melito, bishop of Sardis about **AD 170**. His interest in the canon of the OT drove him to make a journey to Palestine in order to carefully investigate the canon of Hebrew scripture.
- b. His is the **earliest** Christian list we have. Melito may also be the first writer to describe the collection of Scripture as 'the books of the old covenant' (or Old Testament).
- c. The 'Wisdom' he included in his list is not the Greek book of Wisdom that was well known in the East of the first century, but is another name for what we know as the book of **Proverbs**.

Canon of Scripture

Lesson 5

- d. His list of Old Testament books is provided in a letter to a friend named Onesimus and was preserved by Eusebius. None of the writings in the 'Septuagintal plus' is listed.

V. Origen

- a. The next surviving Christian list of Old Testament books was drawn up by Origen (AD 185-254), the greatest biblical scholar among the Greek fathers.
- b. He spent the greater part of his life in Alexandria, where from an early age he was head of the catechetical school in the church of that city; then, in AD 231, he moved to Caesarea, where he had a similar teaching ministry.
- c. His list (also preserved by Eusebius) identifies the number of books as twenty-two (thus agreeing with Josephus). Inadvertently he omits the Twelve Minor Prophets, but this is an oversight as he states the number of books as twenty-two and then names but twenty-one.
- d. Origen said: "We should not be ignorant that there are twenty-two books of the {Old} Testament, according to the tradition of the Hebrews, this corresponds to the number of letters in their alphabet."
- e. Even so, Origen made free use of the 'Septuagintal plus' and did not hesitate to refer to them; believing that they were profitable and appropriate reading for believers.

VI. Athanasius

- a. The first writer known to have used the word 'canon' in the sense of 'canon of scripture', as we understand the term is Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria.
- b. In one of his works Athanasius mentions the Shepherd of Hermas (a work which elsewhere he calls 'a most profitable book' as 'not belonging to the canon').
- c. As bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius picked the date of Easter celebrated by the Church. Each year he wrote a letter to the churches dealing with some matter of current importance. In announcing the date of Easter in 367 A.D., he dealt with the canon of the Old and New Testaments.
- d. He was concerned about the introduction of heretical or spurious works (which he calls 'apocryphal') among the books of Holy Scripture: *Inasmuch as some have taken in hand to draw up for themselves an arrangement of the so-called apocryphal books and to intersperse them with the divinely inspired scripture, concerning which we have been fully persuaded, even as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered it to the fathers: it has seemed good to me also, having been stimulated thereto by true brethren, to set forth in order the books which are included in the canon and have been delivered to us with accreditation that they are divine. My purpose is that each one who has been led astray may condemn those who have led him astray and that those who have remained untarnished may rejoice at having these things brought to remembrance again. The books of the Old Testament, then, are twenty-two in number, for (as I have heard) this is the traditional number of letters among the Hebrews.*

VII. Canons of Laodicea

- a. Shortly before Athanasius issued his thirty-ninth festal letter in AD 363, a church council was held at Laodicea. The 'canons' or rules put forth by this council were acknowledged by later church councils as a basis of canon law.
- b. Canon 59 states that 'no psalms composed by private individuals or any uncanonical books may be read in church, but only the canonical books of the New and Old Testament'. Canon 60 (the last of the series) then enumerates those canonical books.
- c. The so-called canon of Laodicea included as canonical only the books that were considered canonical by the Hebrews and rejected the books of the Apocrypha.

VIII. Later Greek Fathers

- a. In the last two decades of the fourth century other Greek fathers drew up lists of the canonical books, to much the same effect as their predecessors. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem from 348 to 386, gives a list which follows Origen's.
- b. Gregory of Nazianzus (c 330 A.D. - 390 A.D.) may have been the first of many down through the ages to produce a list of books of the Bible in poetic form, for easier memorization. Like Athanasius, he gives the total of Old Testament books as twenty-two and omits Esther.
- c. Orthodox synods at Iasi (1642) and Jerusalem (1672) reversed the earlier OT canon and confirmed as 'genuine parts of scripture' the contents of the 'Septuagintal plus'.
- d. This means that the Old Testament canon of the Eastern Church today is comprised of 49 books compared with 46 for Roman Catholics and 39 for Protestants.

IX. Application

- a. The fact that Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants do not agree on what constitutes the canon of Old Testament Scripture causes some people anxiety. What effect does this lack of agreement have upon you?
- b. If you are troubled by this lack of unity what actions could you take to satisfy your own curiosity about these differences?