

Canon of Scripture

Lesson 6

I. The Canon of the Old Testament in the Western Church

- a. At the close of the Apostolic period, theology became more systematic as the first serious intellectual challenges were raised against Christian faith. This gave rise to an apologetic theology and various **creeds** which provided an authoritative statement of belief.
1. I believe in God, the Father creator of heaven and earth. 2. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. 3. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. 4. He suffered under Pontius Pilot, was crucified, died, and was buried. 5. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. 6. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. 7. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. 8. I believe in the Holy Spirit, 9. the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, 10. the forgiveness of sins, 11. the resurrection of the body, 12. And life everlasting. Amen.
- b. The **apologists** Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus, all spoke to their cultured audiences in their own language. As a result, technical theological terms were created and specific theological problems began to be clarified.
- c. In the struggle against Gnosticism, the continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament had to be established. The need to distinguish inspired from non-inspired literature **forced** the question of the canon of sacred Scripture.
- d. The question of canonicity also became important because the Gnostic, **Marcion**, had rejected the whole of the Old Testament and some of the New Testament. Even some of the church's major figures differed on the list of inspired books.
- e. In addition, during the period between 100 and 313 A.D. the church was forced to give consideration to how it could best meet the external persecution from the Roman state and the internal problem of heretical teaching and consequent **schism**.
- f. The obvious need of the Church was to close its ranks by the development of a canon of **both** the Old and New Testaments which would give Christianity an authoritative book of faith and practice.
- g. The rise and expansion of the role of bishops gave the church a bond of unity in its structure and authority. During this time, the church began calling itself the "**Catholic**" or universal, church, a term first used by Ignatius in his epistle to Smyrna.
- h. Towards the middle of the third century, the theological schools of Alexandria (Greek), and Carthage, Africa, (Latin) began laying their **separate** foundations, the one for the theology of the Greek, the other for that of the Latin Church.
- i. The need for a Latin version of the scriptures was realized in Africa decades before a similar need was felt in Rome itself due to the fact that the **Jewish** community in Rome was largely Greek-speaking until the end of the second century.
- j. The official language of the province of Africa was Latin and it was in **Carthage** that the Bible began to be translated into Latin in the latter half of the second century AD.
- k. Until **Jerome** produced a new translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew text at the end of the fourth century, the Latin Old Testament was a rendering of the Septuagint, including the Septuagintal plus.
- l. The early **Latin** fathers provide us with a picture of the establishment of the canon of the Old Testament in the Western Church.

II. Tertullian

- a. Tertullian (D. **225AD**), of Carthage, was the preeminent of all the Latin fathers before the time of Jerome. He is the first writer among the Latin fathers. Referring to the two testaments as "instruments" the Latin legal sense, meaning to instruct or equip.
- b. He said that the Old Testament is 'the whole **instrument** of Jewish literature'. He identified the Old Testament as the Septuagint (including the 'Septuagint plus').
- c. Tertullian made **no effort** to distinguish those parts belonging to the Hebrew canon from those which were found only in the Septuagint.

III. Jerome

- a. Jerome was born in AD 346 or 347 at Stridon in Dalmatia. His parents, who were **Christians**, were able to give him an excellent education.
- b. He came to Rome in his teens to perfect his classical studies in the school of Donatus, one of the most celebrated grammarians of his day and he became a **master** of Greek as well as Latin literature.
- c. As a result of a nearly fatal illness at Antioch in 374 he resolved to **devote** himself to biblical study, and abandoned his work on secular literature.
- d. He spent the next four or five years leading the life of a hermit in the desert east of Antioch; pursuing sacred learning and studying Hebrew with the **aid** of a Jewish Christian.
- e. At the same time he familiarized himself with the Aramaic vernacular of the regions around him. After this period of seclusion he returned to Antioch and was **ordained** a teaching elder.

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- f. He was present in 381 at the Council of Constantinople and went from there to Rome where he gave secretarial help to Pope Damasus. There, because of the unsatisfactory condition of the text of the Latin Bible, he began revising it.
- g. After he was not elected Pope, he left Rome and began a two year pilgrimage, settling in Bethlehem. There he established a monastery for himself and spent the rest of his life in biblical study. He continued revising the Latin Old Testament from the Septuagint.
- h. He soon became convinced that the only satisfactory way to translate the Old Testament was to abandon the Septuagint and work from the original Hebrew. He completed the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Latin in 405.
- i. For this work, Jerome needed to perfect his knowledge of Hebrew, and with the help of Jewish teachers continued his work. However, Jerome's dependence on Jewish instructors increased the suspicion of some of his Christian critics.
- j. Jerome's study of the Hebrew Bible quickly made him aware of the question of the 'Septuagintal plus'. In his list of canonical books of the Hebrew Bible he identified them as 22 in number.
- k. In his prologue to Jeremiah, Jerome pointed out that he had not included the book of Baruch in his version of the major prophet because it is neither read nor recognized among the Hebrews.
- l. What Jerome calls the Apocrypha corresponds to Athanasius's second category of Old Testament books. These other books, called by Rufinus and others 'ecclesiastical books' were viewed as appropriate books for reading in church.
- m. The writings of the 'Septuagintal plus' are not in the canon properly speaking, he said, "they may not be used for the establishment of doctrine, but they retain great ethical value which makes them suitable for reading in the course of Christian worship."
- n. Jerome died in 420. He and Origen stand alone among early church fathers for their expertise as biblical scholars; of the two, Jerome has exercised the greater and more long-lasting influence.
- o. For over a thousand years the Vulgate, (the name applied to Jerome's translation), was the definitive edition of the most influential text in Western Europe. For most Western Christians of that era, it was the only version of the Bible ever encountered.
- p. The Vulgate's influence throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period is thought to be even greater than that of the KJV in English. For Christians during middle ages, the phraseology and wording of the Vulgate permeated all areas of their culture.

IV. Augustine

- a. Jerome's younger contemporary Augustine, bishop of Hippo, from 395 until his death, was strong where Jerome was weak (in his power as a theological thinker) and weak where Jerome was strong (in linguistic training).
- b. Augustine acknowledged that an acquaintance with both Hebrew and Greek was necessary in order to understand the scriptures properly, and especially (where the Old Testament was concerned) an acquaintance with Hebrew was needed.
- c. Augustine explicitly stated that he believed the limits of the canon of Old Testament scripture were forty-four books: (the Septuagintal plus list). This total is reached by counting the twelve Minor Prophets separately.
- d. He also enumerated twenty-seven books of the New Testament as they had been enumerated by Athanasius.
- e. Augustine believed that since the apostles themselves drew their prophetic testimonies from both the Hebrew and the Septuagint alike, that 'both sources should be employed as authoritative, since both are one, and both are inspired by God'.

V. Church Councils

- a. At the Synod of Hippo (393) and the Third Council of Carthage (397), a decree was ratified, which in effect placed all the canonical and deuterocanonical books on the same level, and in the course of time they actually became considered by some as of equal authority.
- b. From the 4th to the 16th century the process of gradually widening the limits of the canon continued. Pope Gelasius (492-496) issued a decretal or list in which he included the Old Testament Apocrypha.
- c. After this decree, the Western Church was divided. Some followed the strict canon of Jerome, while others favored the larger canon of Augustine without noting his cautions and the distinctions he had made between inspired and uninspired writings.
- d. These are the first church councils to make a formal pronouncement on the canon. The council did not impose a canon upon the churches, they simply endorsed what had become the general consensus of the churches, West and East.

VI. Application

- a. One description of the canon of Scripture is that it is a fallible collection of infallible books. The Roman Catholic view is that it is an infallible collection of infallible books, because the church is infallible in its authority.
 1. Which position best explains your belief? Why?
- b. Do you believe that you have everything you need in your personal Bible to teach you, train you, and prepare you for living a spiritual life that is honoring and pleasing to God? Why? Why not?