

# Canon of Scripture

## Lesson 7

### I. JEROME TO THE REFORMATION

- a. Despite the objections to Jerome's **innovations** (his use of the Hebrew text rather than the Greek Septuagint) Jerome's Latin Bible made its way slowly but surely in the western church, gradually ousting the Old Latin version.
- b. The rank and file readers as well as the well-instructed were not at all impressed by the argument that the new translation was much more **accurate** than the old: it appears that accuracy was a matter of concern only to a minority.
- c. Nevertheless, the sheer merit of Jerome's version won the day, until it came to be known as the 'Vulgate' or '**common**' edition—the name also applied to the version that Jerome's work superseded.
- d. During this period, the Old Testament canon was a matter of interest only to a **minority**. It was felt that for purposes of devotion or edification, why make any distinction between Esther and Judith, or between Proverbs and Wisdom?
- e. Throughout the following centuries most **users** of the Bible made no distinction between the apocryphal books and the others. All the books were treated alike and were simply handed down as part of the Vulgate.
- f. But the vast majority of western European Christians in those centuries could not be described as 'users' of the Bible. Their use was **limited** to certain parts of the Bible which were repeated in church services, and to the well-known Bible stories.
- g. The idea of well-defined limits to the sacred books was something that would not have occurred to them. Even among the most literate Christians, a lack of concern about such matters was very much the **norm**. That would change in time.
- h. With the revival of serious biblical study in the early Middle Ages (12<sup>th</sup> century), fresh attention was paid to questions of canonicity. Hebrew sources were once again explored and a new emphasis was placed on interpreting Scripture in the **literal** sense.
- i. However, not everyone agreed how Scripture should be read and understood. For those who were more concerned with the **spiritual** or allegorical method than with the literal sense of interpreting, the distinction between first and second canonicity remained unimportant.

### II. THE REFORMERS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

- a. During the Reformation the issue of canonicity became a primary concern. Luther stood upon the authority of scripture **alone** (sola scriptura) as opposed to the authority of the church. That raised the question of what precisely constituted 'scripture alone'.
- b. It was Luther's protest against the abuse of the indulgence system that led him ultimately to break with Rome. The indulgence system was rooted in the belief in purgatory and the practice of prayers for the dead. These were found in the **Apocrypha**.
- c. Luther stood by his principle of 'scripture alone' and therefore cited that the **only** authority for praying for the dead was found in 2 Maccabees 12:45 f. (*where praying for the dead, 'that they might be delivered from their sin', is said to be 'a holy and pious thought'*).
- d. In harmony with Jerome, he believed that 2 Maccabees did not belong to the books to be used 'for establishing the authority of ecclesiastical dogmas'. He **rejected** outright the canonicity of the Apocrypha.
- e. Luther showed his acceptance of Jerome's distinction between the two categories of Old Testament books by gathering the Apocrypha together in his **German** Bible as a sort of appendix to the Old Testament, instead of leaving them as they stood in the Vulgate.
- f. Luther had little regard for the Apocrypha, but his idea of the canon was derived not from tradition but from the **gospel**. He said 'what preaches Christ' ought to be included. He thought the books of the Hebrew Old Testament fit that qualification.

### III. THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

- a. With reformist ideas sweeping through Europe like a forest fire, the **Counter**-Reformation (Council of Trent) concerned itself with the canon of scripture as well as with many other issues which the Reformers had put in question.
- b. They convened in 1545 to consider the relation of scripture and unwritten **tradition** in the transmission of Christian doctrine; they made pronouncements, among other things, on the text, interpretation and the canon of scripture.
- c. They decreed that among various translations of the biblical text, ultimate authority should be given to the 'ancient **Vulgate** edition. They endorsed the use of both the canon and deuterocanonical material without distinction.
- d. Trent also decided not to enter into the question of difference in status between one group of books and another and so they **set aside** Jerome's distinction between the books and accepted the Apocryphal.
- e. This was probably the first time a church council made a **ruling** on the canon of scripture. Furthermore, the decree of Trent was fortified by an anathema pronounced against all dissenters.

# Canon of Scripture

## Lesson 7

- f. The decree of Trent explained that the biblical books were acknowledged as canonical because God was their author, and being inspired by the Holy Spirit the canon was **entrusted** solely to the church.
- g. **Today**, there is general agreement among Roman Catholic scholars to call the additional books 'deuterocanonical'. Therefore, Jerome's distinction is maintained in practice, even if it is not supported by the decree of a Church Council.

### IV. THE ELIZABETHAN SETTLEMENT

- a. When Mary I died in 1558, Elizabeth succeeded to the throne. One of the most important concerns during Elizabeth's early reign was the question of which form the **state** religion would take because the Protestant Reformation was sweeping Europe.
- b. **Mary**, a practicing Roman Catholic, using the instrument of Royal Supremacy reinstated Communion with the Roman Catholic Church. When Mary died, Elizabeth I, a Protestant, sought to undo the ties to the Catholic Church and called upon Parliament to act.
- c. The Elizabethan Religious Settlement was Elizabeth I's response to the religious **divisions** created during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I. This response, described as "The Revolution of 1559", was set out in two Acts of Parliament.
- d. The Act of **Supremacy** re-established the Church of England's independence from Rome, and resulted in Parliament conferring on Elizabeth the title Supreme Governor of the Church of England.
- e. The Act of **Uniformity** set out the form the English church would take, including the re-establishment of the Book of Common Prayer.
- f. Parliament debated the Reformation Bill which recreated an **independent** Church of England. The drafted Reformation Bill defined the Holy Communion in terms of Reformed Protestant theology, as opposed to the transubstantiation of the Roman Catholic Mass.
- g. The Bill ordered that ministers should not wear the surplice or other Roman Catholic vestments. It allowed priests to **marry**, banned images from churches, and confirmed Elizabeth as Supreme Governor of the Church of England.
- h. The Bill was heavily resisted in the House of **Lords**, where Roman Catholic's were in majority. After reworking the bill they allowed for belief in transubstantiation in the Communion, and refused to grant Elizabeth the title of Supreme Head of the Church.
- i. As a result, in Rome, a Papal bull was issued in **1570** by Pope Pious V, declaring: "*Elizabeth, the pretended Queen of England and the servant of crime*" to be a heretic, released all of her subjects from any allegiance to her, and excommunicated any who obeyed her orders.
- j. The bull, written in Latin, is titled "ruling from **on high**" (a reference to God). Among the queen's alleged offences, it lists that "*she has removed the royal Council, composed of the nobility of England, and has filled it with obscure men, being heretics.*"
- k. English Protestantism in the Elizabethan age is also represented by **two** new versions of the English Bible published under Elizabeth—the Geneva Bible (1560 A.D.) and the Bishops' Bible (1568 A.D.).
- l. The **Geneva** Bible was produced by English Protestants who sought refuge at Geneva during the reign of Mary Tudor. It was issued with a dedication to Elizabeth. It included the apocryphal books in a section following the Old Testament.
- m. Coming from Geneva, the home of Calvin and Beza, this was seen as a moderate and reasonable response which basically reiterated Jerome's position: the apocryphal books **are not** to be used for the confirmation of doctrine.
- n. Some of the users of the Geneva Bible, however, had no appreciation of the Apocrypha. To cater to them, some copies of this version printed in 1599, both on the Continent and in London, were bound up **without** the section containing the Apocrypha.
- o. The **Bishops'** Bible, on the other hand, was the work of men committed to the Elizabethan settlement and was viewed as somewhat of a concession to Roman Catholics.
- p. In it the section containing the Apocrypha was annotated with a special title but **nothing** was said to indicate any distinction in status between its contents and the other books.

### V. Application

- a. Having briefly reviewed the historical developments in England during the Reformation period we can easily see how those developments shaped the thinking of the framers of the US Constitution.
  1. What does the clause "freedom of religion" mean to you personally?
  2. What potential problems do you see when the separation between Church and State is violated?
  3. How might your personal exercise of faith be affected where the State runs the Church?
  4. Compose a prayer of thanksgiving to God for providing you with a country where you may still exercise your religious liberty.