

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Bible Student* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php

The Bible Student

Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

NEW SERIES

OCTOBER 1957

VOL. XXVIII No. 4

HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE

A. McD. REDWOOD

‘The Bible may be treated historically or theologically. Neither treatment is complete in itself; but the treatments are separable; and here, as elsewhere, the historical foundation rightly precedes and underlies the theological interpretation.’ So wrote Dr Westcott 80 years ago. More recently Sir F. Kenyon has stated: ‘The foundation of all study of the Bible with which the reader must acquaint himself if his study is to be securely based is *the knowledge of its history as a book.*’ Both statements, in somewhat different aspects, reflect a profound understanding of spiritual values in regard to Bible study.

The subject ‘How we got our Bible’ involves enquiry into at least two historical questions. The first: by what process did this Book come to be recognised as Scripture, divinely authoritative for Christian life and teaching? The second, how has it been handed down to us in the past centuries? The first has to do with the Canon, the second with the Text of both Old and New Testaments. Problems there are in both, but there is also secure ground for faith to rest on.

The very names applied to the Bible from earliest times remind us that it is a composite volume. Jerome (4th cent.) first called it *Bibliotheca Divina*, the Divine Library. Later in the 13th century the Latin plural ‘The Books’ became by common consent ‘The Book’ (*Biblia*, singular), which has passed into the languages of modern Europe. This Library contains sixty-six books, 39 in the O.T. and 27 in the N.T., a period of four centuries separating the two divisions. The O.T. is composed of writings

collected over a period of approximately 14 or 15 centuries; the N.T. of the writings of one century.

In the O.T. the process of its composition was necessarily divided into stages, and each group of records had its own history. The national Book, which eventually came to be, grew with the slow development of the divine revelation. It was indeed the *history* of this revelation, each stage adding its quota to the total. In the case of the N.T. books the process was somewhat different. Each writer wrote independently of the others, with a variety of ends in view and without any idea of adding either to the previous Scriptures or of making a collection of writings, which subsequently would become a rule of faith. Yet in the Providence of God we now possess all these writings, together with the Old Testament writings combined into one volume and speak of it as the 'Canon of Holy Scripture.'

The word 'canon' is of Christian origin, from the Greek *kanon*, meaning rule or measuring rod by which a thing is measured. From this it came to mean a standard or test of measurement, and then the area or thing measured. As applied now to the Scriptures it signifies a collection of religious writings divinely inspired and hence authoritative, directive, and binding. It implies that these are separated off from all other religious writings—from the Apocrypha, for example, which is accepted in the Roman Catholic Community but rejected by the Christian Church as being uncanonical. They did not derive authority merely by some ecumenical decree of Jews or Christians but because they already possessed a distinctive quality indicative of a supernatural origin which marked them off from all other books.

The Canon of the Old Testament

The familiar division of the Jewish scriptures into (a) the Law—*Torah*; (b) the Prophets—*Nebiim*; and (c) the Holy Writings—*Kethubhim* (or, as in the Septuagint, the *Hagiographa*), probably indicated the three stages in which the O.T. was acknowledged as authoritative by the Jews. The Law included Genesis to Deuteronomy. The Prophets were divided into two classes (i) the *Former* Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings); (ii) the

Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets, Hosea to Malachi, counted as one); (c) the Kethubhim, included the remainder.

(1) The Law, or as it is often called the Pentateuch, was always recognised as the word of Moses the Lawgiver, and seems to have formed the Jewish Bible up to the time of the Captivity. The various laws and decrees were communicated through Moses and accepted by the people as the utterances of God. They were written down by divine command and so preserved for the future instruction of the people, to which they might always turn for guidance (Exod. 24:3, 4; 34:27; Deut. 31:9-12, 24-26). That this continued to be the authoritative guide in the days of Joshua also is suggested by such references as Jos. 1:7, 8; 1 Kings 2:3. But the more positive evidence of the general recognition of these books is found in 2 Kings 22:8-13 (cf. 2 Chron. 34:14) when, in the reign of Josiah, Hilkiah found 'the book of the Law' in the house of the Lord. 'There can be no reasonable doubt' says Dr Westcott, 'that the book of Hilkiah was substantially the Pentateuch which we now have.' That it had been so long neglected is no evidence that it lacked authority in any sense. It had been held in pious regard by the great spiritual leaders of the past such as Samuel, David, Solomon, and Hezekiah. 'It was the recognition of its authority not the issue of a *new* authority, which provoked Josiah's distress upon finding how long it had been neglected' (2 Kings 22:11).

(2) The recognition of the group of writings included in the *Prophets* is not so easy to follow. That other writings were in process of composition after Moses' days is hinted at in Joshua 24:26, 27 and 1 Samuel 10:25 (also Prov. 25:1). The powerful ministry of the prophets during the long period of the kings became increasingly active, specially as the time of the Captivity drew nearer. A considerable amount of this ministry was committed to writing, and if not immediately yet in due time these writings were accepted as given by revelation of God (2 Kings 17:13, Jer. 7:25; Zech. 1:4, 6). Jeremiah himself provides illustration of how the oral message was written down by divine command (Jer. 36; 45:1). Not a single prophet whose writings

are preserved betrays the shadow of a doubt that he was the Lord's spokesman, and his writings bore the seal of approval in the wonderful measure of their fulfilment in subsequent history.

It is well to point out here that the Jews were actuated by a sound motive in combining both the prophetic and the historical books in this second group. 'The prophets were God's witnesses to a divine kingdom among men, and naturally became the commentators of its history, the exponents of its laws, and the heralds of its triumphs. History and prophecy jointly illustrate the principles of God's moral government, and disclose His purposes of grace, the one by narrating the past, the other by linking the past and present with the future.'

The date to which probably we may assign the completion of this second group is the commencement of the 3rd century B.C. The writer of 2 Maccabes (Ch. 11:13, 14) describes how 'Nehemiah founded a Library' of just such books as are included in this section. The reference in Daniel to 'the books' (ch. 9:2) may conceivably have included portions of such a collection. The conquests of Alexander the Great and the influx of anti-Jewish Hellenic philosophy and literature at that time would have provided the impulse to place these records on the same footing as the Law because of their long recognition as the 'oracles of God.' Also, the voice of prophecy had ceased (1 Macc. 9:27) as foretold by Zechariah (13:2-5). It needed no arbitrary decision to accept the books just as they were as 'the Word of the Lord.'

(3) The recognition of the books in the Hagiographa belongs to the last stage of the history, but it is not possible to be exact as to the date of its final recognition as canonical. It is significant, however, that in the book 'The Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach' (or Ecclesiasticus), written about 200-180 B.C., reference is made in chapters 44-49, to all the books of the Law, the Prophets, and some portions of the Writings. It is known that a number of the sacred books of the Jews were destroyed in the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes (1 Macc. 1:56, 57), and a tradition is extant in 2 Macc. 2:14, that Judas Maccabeus (and other loyalists) set on foot a movement 'to gather together all those things (i.e. the Writings) that were lost by reason of the war we had, and they

remain with us.' Three times over in the Prologue to Ecclesiasticus prefixed in 133 B.C. by the writer's grandson to his Greek translation, we find the mention of 'the Law and the Prophets and the *other* Writings.' This is one of the earliest evidences that 'other books' were mentioned in the same class with the Law and the Prophets. This would point to the probability that the three-fold canon has been fixed by this date, though Ryle prefers to place it around 105 B.C., in the more peaceful and prosperous period before the death of John Hyrcanus.

The Christian Era

When the Christian Era opened there was already a fixed body of writings recognised as of divine origin to which the term 'Scripture' was applied. To these Christ and His disciples made constant reference, e.g. Lk. 4:21; 24:27, 44; Jn. 5:39, 46; Acts 1:20; 7:42, etc. 'It is very important to observe,' says Ryle, 'that all the direct citations of the N.T. writers (as well as Philo), are made from the O.T. Canon.' The individual books of Obadiah, Nahum, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, S. of Solomon and Ecclesiastes, though not mentioned in the N.T. were joined with other books which were recognised, which would imply equal acceptance. For example, Obadiah and Nahum indisputably belong to the Twelve Prophets; Ezra-Nehemiah were joined definitely to Chronicles.

Apart from the testimony of the New Testament writers there is the evidence of Josephus, who, writing at the close of the 1st century A.D. (*Contra Apion* 1:8), speaks of 22 (not 24) sacred books of the Jews 'containing the history of all time, books that are justly believed in. And of these, 5 are the books of Moses, which comprise the Laws and the earliest traditions from the creation of mankind down to Moses' death. . . The prophets who succeeded Moses wrote the history of the events that occurred in their own time—13 books. The remaining four documents comprised hymns to God and practical precepts of men.' He is probably following the LXX, and classes the books by subject-matter, joining Ruth to Judges, and Lamentations to Jeremiah. He goes on to speak of other later records 'from the time of

Artaxerxes to our own time.' but says: 'these recent records have not been deemed worthy of equal credit with those which have preceded, because the exact succession of the prophets ceased.' And then he significantly adds: 'But what faith we have placed in our own writings is evident . . . for though so long an interval of time has now passed (i.e. since they were written) not a soul has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable.' Most authorities are agreed on the value of Josephus' evidence. He reflects the popular belief of his age, and voiced the accepted tradition which was universal and undisputed.

We may sum up the accepted findings of scholarship thus: (a) The Law was recognised as authoritative first, about 444 B.C. (b) The Prophetical group assumed equal validity probably about 200 B.C. (c) The Writings were added not later than 100 B.C. It seems clear that their canonicity was recognised primarily on the grounds of the divine inspiration of the *authors*, not on any formal decision of some Jewish Council, although the Synod of Jamnia (near Jaffa) in A.D. 90, may be considered the official occasion when the Jews finally pronounced on the limits of their canon. We may not be able to trace in detail the long process which thus eventuated in the completion of the Old Testament canon, but we can judge the *results* as seen in the volume we hold in our hands. The supreme test of its validity as Scripture is the place it held in the mind of Jesus Himself. What He esteemed as being not merely above suspicion but as actually possessed of divine authority in His teaching or exposition of it we can safely accept.*

(To be continued)

* This whole article is taken from the book THE FAITH by kind permission of the publishers, Messrs. Pickering and Inglis, Ltd., Glasgow and London. The volume is somewhat in the nature of a Symposium of Christian Doctrine in general, and should prove useful to those who would learn something of the Christian and Faith and Practice.

The second part of the above article will deal with "The New Testament Canon." Make sure you get the Magazine for 1958!