



FOUNDATION BIBLE SCHOOL ARCHIVES

TOPIC: CANONIZATION

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V. THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

The first of the Dead sea scroll discoveries occurred in 1947 in Qumran, a village situated about twenty (20) miles east of Jerusalem on the northwest shore of the dead sea. A young Bedouin shepherd, following a goat that had gone astray, tossed a rock into one of the caves along the seacliffs and heard a cracking sound, the rock hit a ceramic pot containing leather and papyrus scrolls that were later determined to be nearly twenty centuries old. Ten years and many searches later, eleven caves around the dead sea were found to contain ten of thousand scrolls fragments dating from the third century B.C to A.D.68 and representing an estimated eight hundred separate works.

The Dead sea scrolls comprise a vast collection of Jewish documents written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek and encompassing many subjects and literally styles. They include manuscripts or fragments of every book in the Hebrew bible except the book of Esther, all of them created nearly a thousand years earlier than any previously known biblical manuscripts. The scrolls also contain the earliest existing biblical commentary, on the book of Habbakuk, and many other writings, among them religious works pertaining to Jewish sects of the time.

The vast majority of the dead sea scrolls were simply copies of books of the old testament from 250-150 B.C. A copy or portion of nearly every old testament book was found in Qumran. The dead sea scrolls were such an amazing discovery in that the scrolls were excellent condition and had remained hidden for so long (over 2000 years). The dead sea scroll can also give us confidence in the reliability of the old testament manuscripts since there were minimal differences between the manuscripts that had previously been discovered and those that were found in Qumran. Clearly this is a testament to the way God has preserved his word down through the centuries, protecting it from extinction and guarding it against significant error.

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Two of the oldest complete (or nearly complete) manuscripts are the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. They are both written on parchment, and have a large number of corrections written over the original text.

Codex Sinaiticus, also known as “Aleph” (the Hebrew letter), was found by Count Tischendorf in 1859 at the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. Portions of the manuscripts were found in the monastery dump, and a larger portion was presented to Tischendorf by one of the monks. It is a large codex, with 400 pages (or leaves) comprising about half of the Old Testament. It has been dated to the second half of the 4th century and has been highly valued by Bible scholars in their efforts to reconstruct the original biblical text. Sinaiticus has heavily influenced the translation work of the Bible versions. Though it is considered by some scholars to represent an original form of the text, it is also recognized as the most heavily corrected early New Testament manuscript.

Codex Vaticanus, also known as “B” was found in the Vatican library. It is comprised of 759 leaves and had almost all of the Old and New Testament. It is not known when it arrived at Vatican, but it was included in a catalogue listing in 1475, and it is dated to the middle of the 4th century.

There are varying theories on how these ancient texts should be viewed by modern scholars.

- On one hand some believe that the most ancient reading should be followed, as it is closest in time to the original.
- On the other hand, some believe that majority should rule. Since there are thousands of ancient manuscripts, they believe we should give precedence to the reading that is presented by most of the documents.

There is much to learn from examining these and other ancient texts, and they should continue to be highly valued by scholars. While there may be differences in opinion as to how they are to be used, one thing is certain even with their textual variations, they show us that God preserved his word through the ages. We may debate the particular wording in a few passages, but the fact remains that over 90 percent of the New Testament is unanimously supported by all ancient manuscripts. In those passages where the proper reading is disputed, there are no major doctrinal changes, and we can rest assured that we have accurate, revealed words of God passed down to us.

CANONIZATION

A. REVIEW OF DIVINE IMPARTATIONS OF SCRIPTURES

- **REVELATION:** that process whereby God reveals to the Bible writers those necessary facts and truths they could not otherwise know.
- **INSPIRATION:** that process whereby God assured his oral revelations were correctly written down by the Bible writers.
- **ILLUMINATION:** that process where God continuously sheds divine light and understanding upon all those who could read his inspired revelation.
- **CANONIZATION:** that process whereby God determined that all (but only) those inspired manuscripts would be both recognized (by man) and included in the divine 66-book collection.
- **PRESERVATION:** that process whereby God has worked in both providential and (on occasion) supernatural fashion to keep intact His holy word from the ravages of time, from the vicious attacks on the part of the wicked men and demons, etc.

B. THE WORD CANON

The word canon (kanon in Greek) means “a rule, a measurement or a standard”. Later was used to refer simply or the list of accepted books that met certain tests or rules and that were considered authoritative.

C. THE CANONICITY OF THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Scriptures themselves bear witness to the historical development of the canon. The earliest collection of written words of God was the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments thus form the beginning of the biblical canon. God himself, wrote in two tablets of stone the words which he commanded his people (Exodus 31:18, 32:16; Deut 4:13; 10:5)

This collection of absolutely authoritative words from God grew in size throughout the time of Israel's history. Moses himself wrote additional words to be deposited beside the ark of the covenant. And after his death, Joshua added to the collection of written words of God. Later others in Israel, usually those who fulfilled the office of prophet, wrote additional words of God.

The content of the old testament canon continues to grow until the time of the end of the writing process.

By the year 300 B.C. (at the latest) all old testament books had been written, collected, revered and recognised as official, canonical books. Many believe Ezra the prophet led the first recognition council.

Jesus said the old Testament revelation spanned from Genesis, the first book in Hebrew bible, which records Abel's murder to 2 Chronicles, the last book in the Hebrew Bible, which records Zechariah's martyrdom (Luke 11:50-51). This is the exact equivalent of our referring to the whole old Testament in English as "from Genesis to Malachi".

Josephus a respected Jewish historian and contemporary of the new testament apostles, said no Hebrews scriptures were added after the time of Persian king Artaxerxes (464-424 B.C), the era of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi (How the bible became a book, p.75)

About AD 90 at Jamnia (or Jabneh, a town near Joppa, Israel), an official council of Jewish leaders ratified the Old Testament Canon, which had already been accepted for nearly 500 years.

D. REASONS FOR REJECTING APOCRYPHA

- The Apocrypha was never included in the Old Testament canon by such recognized authorities as the Pharisees, Ezra the prophet, etc.
- It was never quoted by either Jews or any other New Testament writers.
- The great Jewish historian Josephus excluded it.
- The well-known Jewish philosopher Philo did not recognise it.
- The early church fathers excluded it.
- The bible translator Jerome did not accept them as inspired.
- None of the 14 books claim divine inspirations; in fact, some actually disclaimed it.
- Some contain historical and geographical errors.
- Some books teach false doctrine such as praying for the dead.
- No apocryphal book can be found in any catalogue list of canonical books composed during the first four centuries AD. In fact, it was not until 1596 at the council of Trant that the Roman Catholic church officially recognised these books in an attempt to strengthen its position, which had been weakened by the reformer Martin Luther.

So, with all these view, are translations of the bible inspired and inerrant? The answer is no, they are not. God nowhere extends the promise of inspiration to translations of His Words. While many of the translations available today are superb in quality, they are not inspired by God, and are not perfect. Does this mean we cannot trust a translation? Again, the answer is no. Through careful study of scripture, with the holy spirit guidance, we can properly understand, interpret, and apply scripture. Again, due to the faithful efforts of dedicated Christian translator (of course) the oversight of the holy spirit, the translations available today are superb and trustworthy. The fact that we cannot ascribe inerrancy to a translations should motivate us towards even closer study, and away from blind devotion towards any particular devotion.

IV. THE CODEX SINAITICUS AND THE CODEX VATICANUS

Our knowledge of the original text of the bible comes from ancient hand-written manuscripts. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and the new testament was written in Greek. No one has the original article but thousands of ancient copies have been discovered. Since these copies are handwritten there are variations in spelling, word order, and sentence structure among them. Even though those variations do cause some confusion about the biblical text, most of the manuscript reading in agreement. Out of about 500 pages in the Greek New Testament, the manuscript variations represent only about half of a page.

The majority of ancient manuscripts contains only small portions of biblical text, like a book or a portion of a book. Among these manuscripts there are papyrus fragments, which are the remains of the most ancient scrolls, and typically represents only a few pages of the text. These papyrus fragments have all been discovered during modern archaeological digs. Another group of manuscripts are the Uncials, which use all capital letters and are written on parchment or vellum, which is a smoother writing surface than papyrus, and allows for curved letters. The uncial manuscripts were written between the 3rd and 8th centuries and were often bound as pages in book or codex, rather than scroll. A few of these ancient codices have survived intact, giving us solid view of the bible used by the ancient church.

The Old Testament Hebrew scriptures were painstakingly copied by Jewish scribes. Groups such as Sopherim, the Zogoth, the Tannaim, and the Masoretes had a deep reverence for the text they were copying. Their reverence was coupled with strict rules governing their work: the type of parchments used, the size of the columns, the kind of ink, and the spacing of words were all prescribed. Writing anything from memory was expressly forbidden, and the lines, words and even the individual letters were methodically counted as means of double-checking accuracy. The results of all this was the words written by Isaiah's pen are still available today. The Dead sea scrolls clearly confirms the precision of the Hebrew text.

The same is true for the new testament Greek text. Thousands of Greek texts, some dating back to nearly A.D. 117, are available. The slight variations among the texts "not one of which affects an article of faith" are easily reconciled. Scholars have concluded that the New Testament we have at present is virtually unchanged from the original writings.

This brings us to the translation of the bible. Translation is an interpretative process, to some extent. When translation from one language to another, choices must be made. Should it be the more exact word, even if the meaning of the word is unclear to modern reader? Or should it be a corresponding thought, at the expense of a more literal reading?

Most translations of the bible are done by committee. This helps to guarantee that no individual prejudice or theology will affect the decisions of word choice, etc. Of course, the committee itself may have a particular agenda or bias (such as those producing the current "gender-neutral" mistranslation). But there is still plenty of good scholarship being done, and many good translations are available.

Having a good, honest translation of the bible is important. A good translating team will have done its homework and will let the bible speak for itself.

As a general rule, the more literal translations, such as KJV, NKJV, ASB and NASB, have less "interpretative" work. The "freer" translations, such as the NIV, NLT, and CEB, by necessity do more interpretation of the text but are generally more readable. Then there are paraphrases, such as The Message of the Living Bible, which are not really translations at all, but one person retelling of the Bible.

E. THE CANONICITY OF BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Various books of bible, especially those of the new testament were submitted to certain rigid tests by the early church.

These tests included:

1. Authorship: who wrote the book or the Epistle?
2. Local church acceptance: had it been read by various churches? what was their opinion?
3. Church fathers' recognition: had the pupils of the disciples quoted from the book?
As an example, a man named Polycarp was a disciple of John the apostle. Therefore, one test of a book might be, "What did Polycarp think of it?"
4. Book subject matter (content): what did the book teach? Did it contradict other recognition books?
5. Personal edification: did the book have the ability to inspire, convict and edify local congregations and individual believers?

- 100 AD - Paul's epistle may have been collected at this early date
- 150 AD - Polycarp, the disciple of John the apostle, quoted from two-thirds of the new testaments in a letter.
- 170 AD - Irenaeus, disciple of Polycarp, either quoted from or considered canonical 23 of the 27 NT books.
- 200 AD - By this time all but 11 NT verses were quoted in more than 36,000 citations by the church fathers.
- 363 AD - The Synod of Laodicea forbade the reading of non-canonical books in church service.
- 367 AD - Athanasius of Alexandria was first to declare as canonical all 27 NT books
- 393 AD - The council of Hippo recognised the 27 new testament books as canonical.
- 397 AD - The Synod of Carthage said only the 27 NT books were to be read in churches.
- 419 AD - The council of Carthage reaffirmed in belief supporting the 27 canonical NT books

It absolutely must be understood that the bible is not an authorised collection of books. But rather a collection of authorized books. In other words, the twenty-seven new testament books were not

inspired because the Carthage council proclaimed them to be, but rather the council proclaimed them to be such because they were already inspired.

A.(5). PRESERVATION

I. THE DOCTRINE OF PRESERVATION

The doctrine of preservation in regard to the scripture means that the Lord has kept his word intact as to its original meaning. Preservation simply means that we can trust the scriptures because God has sovereignly overseen the process of transmission over the centuries.

At the same time, we must also be aware that we do not possess the original writings/autographs. What we do have are thousands of manuscripts from which the original writings can be ascertained. By thorough examinations and comparison of those manuscripts, it is determined what original writing stated. This does not mean that there are absolutely no differences between the manuscripts. But the differences are extremely small and insignificant and do not in anyway affect the basic teachings or meaning of God's word. The differences are things like minor spelling variations. We should keep in mind that this would not affect the accuracy of scriptures nor does it mean that God has not preserved His word. God has supernaturally kept or preserved his word.

The prophet Isaiah, through the power of the Holy spirit, stated that God's word would remain forever. "The grass withered and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8). This was reaffirmed in the new testament when Peter quoted the same passage and referred to it as "the word that was preached to you" (1Peter1:24-25). Neither Isaiah nor Peter could make such statements without the understanding of God's preservation of scriptures.

We should keep in mind that when the bible speaks of God's word remain forever. It cannot be referring to it being kept hidden away in some vaults in heaven. God's word was given specifically for mankind, and it would not be fulfilling its purpose if it were not available to us. "For everything that was written in the past was written to

teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Roman 15:4).

Therefore, in other for the gospel message to be proclaimed "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47), the doctrines and truths of the word must be protected.

God inspired the original autographs and us sovereignly protected his word through the preservation of thousands of manuscripts with thousands of slight variations - arguably none of which is doctrinally significant. Taken as a whole, these variations do not negate God's message or His preservation of that message. God has ensured the purity and preservation of his word through thousands of surviving manuscripts spread over thousands of years and miles. These manuscripts shows God's superintending care through the use of imperfect men so that bibles we have today can truly be called God's word.

II. THE THREE POSSIBLE REASONS WHY GOD DID NOT PRESERVED THE ORIGINAL WRITINGS

- 1. TO PREVENT TEXTING FROM BEING TAMPERED WITH
- 2. TO GUARD AGAINST A MISGUIDED WORSHIP
- 3. TO STIMULATE INTENSE BIBLE STUDY

III. THE TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE

The doctrine of the inspiration of the bible teaches that scripture is "God-breathed", that is, God personally superintended the writing process, guiding the human authors so that His complete message was recorded for us. The bible is truly God's word. During the writing process, the personality and writing style of each author was allowed expression; however, God so directed the writers that 66 books they produced were free from error and were exactly what God wanted us to have. See 2 timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21.

Of course, when we speak of "Inspiration", we are referring only to the process by which the original documents were composed. After that, the doctrine of the preservation of the bible takes over. If God went to such great lengths to give us his word, surely, He would also take steps to preserve that word unchanged. What we see in history is that God did exactly that.