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The Canon of the Bible

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ARTICLE EIGHT

THE CANON OF THE BIBLE

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I. Definition of the Word Canon – Charles Ryrie suggests:

1. Its derivation – “The word comes from the Greek word *kanon*, which refers to a measuring instrument. It therefore came to mean a rule of action (Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:16).”
2. History of the use of the word – “In the early church the word canon was used to refer to the creeds. In the middle of the fourth century it came to be used of the Bible (i.e., of the list of accepted books that were acknowledged to make up the Bible).”
3. Its meaning – “Actually the word canon has a twofold meaning. It refers to the list of books that met certain tests or rules and thus were considered authoritative and canonical. But it also means that the collection of canonical books becomes our rule of life” (*Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth*, Moody Publishers, Chicago, 1999, p. 105).

II. Location of the Canonical Books

A. Old Testament

1. Before the Babylonian captivity – Prior to this period (606 B.C.) the Old Testament books were apparently laid beside the Ark of the Covenant in the temple. This is indicated in the following passages:

“And Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the Lord hath said will we do. And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel.... And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient” (Exod. 24:3-4, 7).

“And it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying, Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee” (Deut. 31:24-26).

“And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD. And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the king word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the house of the Lord. And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king” (2 Kings 22:8-10).

“So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord” (Josh. 24:25-26).

“Then Samuel told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the Lord. And Samuel sent all the people away, every man to his house” (1 Sam. 10:25),

2. During the Babylonian captivity – The books were probably carried to Babylon and later collected by Daniel. In 9:2 of his book, the prophet Daniel writes: “In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem” (Dan. 9:2). Here Daniel specifically states he was reading Jeremiah and “the books,” a reference no doubt to the other Old Testament books written up to that time.
 3. After the Babylonian captivity – These books may have been taken back to Jerusalem by Ezra the prophet and kept in the newly completed temple. (See Ezra 3:10-11; 6:15-18; Neh. 8:1-8.)
- B. New Testament – “And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16). “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren” (1 Thess. 5:27).

It seems certain the New Testament books were not kept in the temple area as the Old Testament books were. This was the case for at least two reasons:

1. Some of the New Testament books were written after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.
2. No New Testament book would have been accepted by the Jewish rabbis as an inspired addition to the Old Testament canon – However, from the above verses it

appears various churches may have cared for and circulated among the Christian community the New Testament books.

III. Tests Given to the Canonical Books – The books were subjected to various tests. These included:

- A. Authorship – Who wrote the book or the epistle?
- B. Local church acceptance – Had it been read by the various churches? What was their opinion?
- C. 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?
- D. Book subject matter (content) – What did the book teach? Did it contradict other recognized books?
- E. Personal edification – Did the book have the ability to inspire, convict, and edify local congregations and individual believers?

In closing this section it should be stated it was a combination of these five steps, and not just one alone, which helped determine whether a book was inspired or not. Contrary to what may have seemed vital, canonicity was not determined at all by either the age or the language of a given book. For example, there were many ancient books mentioned in the Old Testament (see Num. 21:14; Josh. 10:3) that were not in the Old Testament canon. Also, some of the apocryphal books (such as Tobit) were written in Hebrew but were not included in the Old Testament, while some books (like portions of Daniel) written in Aramaic were included in the canon.

IV. Disputed Books of the Canon – Some canonical books were at first doubted but later fully accepted. During the first few years of early church history there were some 11 biblical books that were temporarily objected to for various reasons. These were:

A. Old Testament books

1. The Song of Solomon because it seemed to some to be a mere poem on human love.
2. Ecclesiastes because some felt it taught atheism. (See 9:5.)
3. Esther because it did not mention the word God in the entire book
4. Ezekiel because it seemed to contradict the Mosaic Law.
5. Proverbs because it seemed to contradict itself. (See 26:4-5.)

B. New Testament books

1. Hebrews because of the uncertainty about the book's authorship.

2. James because it seemed to contradict the teachings of Paul. (Compare James 2:20 with Eph. 2:8-9.)
3. 2 and 3 John because they seemed to be simply two personal letters.
4. Jude because the author refers to an uncanonical Old Testament book, the book of Enoch.
5. Revelation because of the uncertainty about the book's authorship and because of its many mysterious symbols.

V. The Recognition of the Canon

- A. The Old Testament – By the year 300 B.C. (at the latest) all Old Testament books had been written, collected, revered, and recognized as biblical, canonical books. Many believe Ezra the prophet led the first recognition council.
- B. The New Testament – During the Third Council of Carthage, held in A.D. 397, the 27 New Testament books were declared to be canonical. However, it absolutely must be understood that the Bible is not an authorized collection of books, but rather a collection of authorized books. In other words, the 27 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.

Norm Geisler has suggested the following:

1. "The church is the discoverer of and not the determiner of the canon."
2. "It is the child and not the mother of the canon."
3. "It is the minister and not the magistrate of the canon."
4. "It is the recognizer and not the regulator of the canon."
5. "It is the witness and not the judge of the canon."
6. "It is the servant and not the master of the canon" (*A General Introduction to the Bible*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1986, p. 221).