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Q&A: The Canonization of the Bible

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The Canonization of the Bible:

Question: What general overviews might one use in understanding the canonization process of the New Testament?

Answer: Here are some introductory works:

- F. F. Bruce, The Canon of Scripture (InterVarsity, 1988).
- Geisler, Norm & William Nix, Introduction to the Bible (Moody, 1968).
- Harris, R. Laird, Inspiration & Canonicity of the Bible (Zondervan, 1957).

Question: What about the Apocrypha? Are these texts part of Scripture? Why do so many disagree on what exactly whether these books should be included? Are any Apocryphal books included in the New Testament?

Answer: Formally speaking, those who accept the apocryphal books place them in the Old Testament. There are about 12-14 separate writings, depending on how you count them. A couple of them are no more than an extra chapter in an existing OT book. All three major branches of the church accept the same New Testament canon. As to whether the apocryphal books should be considered as Scripture, in my opinion there are a number of serious problems with accepting these books. For example, they are not very well attested in either ancient Judaism (ignored by both Philo and Josephus, and are never quoted by Jesus in the Gospels), or in the early church (where they seldom pop up until the Fourth Century AD). Further, they were not formerly accepted by church councils until the Sixteenth Century AD. Regardless, they date from the intertestamental period of the OT and have nothing to do with Christianity. So they present no problem for the Christian Gospel.

Question: In both the Old and New Testaments, writers sometimes refer to non- canonical, extra-biblical literature. Can you help clear this up for me?

Answer: Biblical authors frequently quote others. For example, in the New Testament, Paul cites or quotes Greek writers more than once. But quoting someone doesn't mean that the work was thought to be inspired. Obviously, Paul didn't think that these Greek writers were inspired. Not only does Paul never make comments that allow us to move in that direction, but he states that God entrusted his words to the Jews (Rom. 3:1-2). So it seems clear that Paul was citing these sources, meaning either that they were accurate comments, or that he was agreeing with the perspective presented there. This appears to be clear from Luke's account of Paul's teaching before the Greeks in Acts 17:28-29.

Question: What possible path is there from Jesus to the biblical text that we possess?

Answer: Some texts explain that the chief standard for Old Testament books was whether a particular book was written by a prophet, in the broad sense of that term. For the New Testament, the books needed to be authoritative. Since the NT books are about Jesus, was the book written by someone who was close enough to the events to provide a true account? In the NT, we see comments like this regularly. For examples, see Lk. 1:1-4; Jn. 1:14; 19:35; 21:24; Acts 1:1-3; the so-called "we" passages in Acts, 1 Cor. 14:37 and 1 Jn. 1:1-3.

Of course, anyone can (and sometimes did) claim that their accounts were true when they were far from the events or apostolic teachings. So we have to check the data and see if it meets critical criteria. You might say that each book should "pass muster." I think the best way to approach this topic is to ask what Jesus thought about it. If Jesus was raised from the dead (see the questions below), it makes sense that he would speak authoritatively on this and other subjects. Jesus clearly accepted the Old Testament as the inspired Word of God. For instances, see comments attributed to him such as texts like Mk. 12:36; Matt. 5:18; Lk. 16:17; 24:44-47. While someone could question which of these precise comments were actually said by Jesus, even critical scholars regularly recognize that Jesus accepted the inspiration of the Old Testament. There is no good reason to question this, especially since it was such a prominent belief in his time and because we have such a wide variety of texts that claim that this was what he taught.

Further, we are told that Jesus repeatedly taught his disciples that they were/would be his spokespersons (like Matt. 10:14-15, 40-41; Lk. 24:48). John even claims that Jesus said that his disciples would be inspired (Jn. 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). So it is not a far stretch to see the seeds of New Testament writing here, carried further in texts such as 1 Cor. 2:13, 14:37, as writers thought they received their authority from Jesus. So we are back to the early believers making decisions regarding the New Testament books based on criteria like these. In the New Testament there is not much official discussion, since the major branches of the church all agree on the same 27 books. The differences come from the Apocryphal books at the end of the Old Testament. So the 39 unanimously-accepted Old Testament books, plus all 27 New Testament books, would come down with approval.