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People

1940

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Recommended Citation

Pennington, Levi T., "The Canon of the Scriptures and Its Preservation" (1940). *Levi Pennington*. 384.
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The Canon of the Scriptures
and
Its Preservation.

By Levi T. Pennington.

The Canon of the Scriptures, as the term is used in this paper, refers to those sacred writings which are accepted by the Christian Church as the inspired and authoritative rule of the faith and practice of the church, and the record of God's dealings with men through which we learn of Him and of the way of life. As we think of it, the Canon of the Scriptures includes those books now included in our bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, and no others, though we shall see that this limit would not be always and everywhere acceptable.

The word canon comes from the Greek, and originally meant any straight rule or measuring stick, by which other things were measured. It came to have a larger and larger meaning, including a level or plummet by which buildings were tested; a rule by which literature was judged; any sort of guide or model; a type of Christian doctrine, the orthodox or accepted as distinguished from the heterodox or unaccepted by the church; and finally the sacred scriptures as the rule of faith and conduct of the Christian Church.

Before considering the way in which the Canon of the Scriptures came to be, including some religious books and excluding others, it may be well to think for a time of the way in which the books came into existence before they were included in the Canon. And here we need to be both honest and charitable, since we may be on ground in which we shall not all see eye to eye.

Ancient mythology tells of a time when Minerva sprang, full grown and fully armed, from the head of Jove. Milton tells of how Sin burst from the head of Satan, with none but Satan concerned in her birth. Not thus did the bible come, full grown and complete, all at once, with the stamp of God upon it and nothing to do but accept it. However clear it may be that the tables of stone which Moses brought down from the mountain were written with the finger of God, not in the same way and at the same time was written most of our bible.

The bible grew, rising as naturally from the life of the people and God's relationship with them as the plant rises out of the soil when the seed is planted and the sun and rain and other forces of nature play upon it. "Holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost", and this moving was not a matter of hours or days or years merely, but of centuries and almost milleniums.

It is extremely doubtful whether some of the writers knew that they were writing the bible. They knew that they were speaking for God, and probably God did not reveal to them that they were writing for milleniums not their own. But Moses gave the law to the people of his day, and it has been preserved for all time. David sang his songs of praise or of penitence, and God graciously keeps them for us in our day. Solomon sings and prays and we have

his songs and prayers for our day, so far from his. Isaiah and Jeremiah preach righteousness to the people of their race and time, and because righteousness is eternal, we have their preaching and their predictions. Malachi and Matthew, James and John, Peter and Paul and the rest, "each in his part as best he can" speaks for God, and God in His goodness lets us have these treasures of the ages for our own.

Did these all know, when they wrote, that they were writing the bible? I think it extremely unlikely. Would Paul have said, if he had known that he was writing the bible, "To the rest speak I, not the Lord"? I very much doubt it. When he wrote, "The cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus, bring when thou comest, and the books, especially the parchments", do you think he knew he was writing a part of the word of God eternally fixed in heaven? Believe what you will in the matter, but to me the genuineness of the book is all the more attested because I think he did not know nor dream that this was to be a part of the bible. And when Luke writes, "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to draw up a narrative concerning those matters which have been fulfilled among us, even as they delivered them ~~us~~ unto us, who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having traced the course of all things accurately from the first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty concerning the things wherein thou wast instructed", he was revealing some things which we may well think about, as to the way our sacred literature came to be, as well as the way in which that which constitutes the canon came to be separated from the rest, to from which it differs so widely, and to receive that high honor, to which its innate authority gives it a title.

Many in ancient days as in this day wrote on religious subjects, some controversially, some of malice and contention, some helpfully, some under the guidance of God giving good counsel for their day, and some writing under a peculiar and close relationship with the Spirit of God which enabled them to speak not alone to their own day, but to all the men of all the world in all the ages. By whatever means this special guidance of God came, it is this ~~that~~ we mean by inspiration. It does not always mean a revelation of unknown truth to the author -- Luke knew his facts and the writers of the Old Testament histories had studied the records and refer us to the books which they had consulted. But God through inspiration illuminated the hearts and minds of those who wrote the scriptures, and they "spake from God" with a peculiar "Thus saith the Lord" manner, as different from Milton at his best as Paradise Lost is from doggerel free-verse.

Thus the material which we now include in the canon grew, a mass of peculiar literature, phenomenally inspired, whether its writers knew it or not; grew alongside another mass of literature of widely varying excellence; grew and waited God's time for the best to be separated from the better and the good, and the bad and the worse and the worst.

In the ^{story} ~~matter~~ ^{fixing of the} of the Old Testament canon, it is difficult to separate the wheat of truth from the chaff of tradition and legend. That there was a very ancient idea of an authoritative body of

sacred literature is certain; that the canon of the Old Testament was not finally fixed as early as some Jewish legend claims is equally certain, because legend fixes this date clearly before some of the Old Testament was written.

The Pentateuch was very early recognized, as is clear from the record itself. Josiah found it, at least a part of it was read and recognized by priests, prophets and people as authoritative and ancient. It was circulated as a distinct portion of literature in Ezra's day, and we are told that he was a ready scribe in it. About this time, before the schism between Jews and Samaritans became final, the Pentateuch was taken to Samaria.

As the centuries passed, other parts of the book received larger and larger recognition. Joshua, David, Solomon and other political men, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and other prophets, Ezekiel and other priests wrote under divine guidance, and as they passed, their writings were left, so that they being dead yet continued to speak.

Just when the work of establishing the canon of the Old Testament was first undertaken we cannot be certain. Jewish tradition is by no means trustworthy. (For instance, there is a Jewish tradition that when the Septuagint was translated from the Hebrew to the Greek, Seventy translators worked on it entirely independently, and that when they were done, every Greek translation was exactly like every other, to the last word, letter and punctuation mark, a claim which is initially improbable and which the inaccuracy of some of the work of translation makes unbelievable. Surely nobody who has done translating can think of such uniformity being possible without miracle; and surely God would not perform a miracle to bring into existence a translation as full of error as the Septuagint.)

That there was a grouping of the recognized books about two *centuries* B.C. seems clear from some of the writings of Jesus the son of Sirach. The grandson of this same Jesus the son of Sirach speaks of "The law, the prophets and the others who have followed in their steps", and "The law, the prophets and the rest of the writings", the three-fold division of the Old Testament which came to be recognized by the Jews. This was about B.C. 132. There is a passage in 100 B.C. which refers to "the sacred books which are now in our hands". Philo Judaeus, born in Alexandria in 20 B.C. and living till some time in the reign of Claudius, had the present canon, and quotes from nearly all ~~but~~ the books in our Old Testament, but does not quote from the Apocrypha. Josephus, a contemporary of Paul, speaks in no uncertain terms of the twenty-two books of the Jews, contrasting them with books written after the time of Artaxerxes. He gives the contents of the canon as he recognized it as follows: "1. Five (of the twenty-two books which he mentions) belong to Moses, ~~and~~ which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of man till his death. 2. From the death of Moses to Artaxerxes the prophets who were after Moses wrote down what was done in their time in thirteen books. 3. The remaining four books contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life." The first five are of course Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The thirteen which Josephus puts in the second division are probably Joshua, Judges with Ruth,

Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra with Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah with Lamentations, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets. The four books in the last class were probably Psalms, Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

It will probably not be profitable to go at present into the reasons for this to us strange division of the Old Testament. To put such a book as Joshua into the division of the Prophets seems stranger to us than it did to the Jews.

Though there are extensive legends in regard to the fixing of the canon by Ezra, and though there is reason to believe that he may have done a good deal toward fixing certain parts of it, there is practical certainty that the Old Testament canon did not assume its final form earlier than the second century B.C., and it was a fiery trial which had much to do with the final determination of which books were and which were not canonical.

Perhaps that interesting period of Jewish history from Malachi to Matthew is familiar to us all, though this is hardly likely. If it is, we remember that the Syrian empire, one of the four realms into which the empire of Alexander split after the death of this world conqueror and would-be world organizer; that under the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, this plan to unify the whole world, with one race, one language, one government, and one religion, took definite form; that this Antiochus Epiphanes (the Illustrious), sometimes called Antiochus Epimanes (the Mad) determined, as a result of his relations with Egypt and Palestine, that he would no longer have an unassimilated people on the border of his realm; and that he finally gave the Jews their choice between acceptance of Hellenism, with its worship of "gods many and lords many", or the extermination of the whole people of the Jews in Palestine.

In the enforcement of this edict, the Jews were forbidden to meet for religious purposes, to circumcise their children, to conform to the other customs which their law required, and to have in their possession any copies of their scriptures. Of course the loyal Jew could not obey these requirements of a ruthless heathen despot. They continued to hold their meetings in secret, continued to give to their children the seal in the flesh of their membership among God's chosen people, and to keep with jealous care their copies of their sacred writings.

But just here came the final division between the canonical and non-canonical writings. They must keep those books which they recognized as divinely inspired and authoritative, even if keeping them cost them their lives. But there was no reason why they should give their lives for the preservation of other books which were good, though not canonical. And in this time of stress and bitter persecution, even to the death, the canon of the Old Testament as recognized by the Palestinian Jews was finally fixed.

Perhaps it was due to the fact of this bitter persecution of the Jews in Palestine, while the Jews in other parts of the world largely escaped it, that the Palestinian canon of the Old Testament

contained fewer books than seem to have been recognized by the Hellenistic Jews. For while the evidence is not full nor absolutely conclusive, it seems that the Hellenistic Jews quite largely accepted the Apocryphal books, namely: the additions to Esther, the additions to Daniel (i.e., The Song of the Three Holy Children, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon), Baruch, The Epistle of Jeremiah, The Prayer of Manassas, Esdras, I. and II. Maccabees, Ecclesiasticus and The Wisdom of Solomon, Judith and Tobit.

~~RobbhowbragmthamBaibaatthamamamamamam~~

Those who call themselves Christian have never reached an agreement as to the Old Testament Apocrypha. In the Patristic period and throughout the Middle Ages, there were scholars who preferred the Palestinian Canon; but popular usage and church authority adopted the wider Canon of the Septuagint, where the Apocryphal Books were inserted, not in an appendix by themselves, but distributed among the other books, as if of equal authority. Even during the first Christian century there was still debate among the Palestinian Jews as to the canonicity of Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, Esther, Proverbs and Canticles. But the Synod of Jamnia, A.D. 90, seems to have fixed the canon of the Old Testament as we now have it, though the Hellenistic Jews continued apparently to accept the Apocrypha of the Old ~~Testament~~ Testament. And for the most part the Christian church recognized these Apocryphal books until the time of the Reformation. Since that time the Protestant churches have practically limited their Old Testament to the Palestinian Canon, though the Episcopal church still recommends the reading of the Apocrypha for moral instruction, but does not found any doctrine upon the Apocryphal books.

The Catholic church has taken the other attitude, however. At the Council of Trent in 1546 the Church of Rome authoritatively accepted the Canon of the Vulgate, which included most of the Old Testament apocrypha, though not all of it; and the Greek Church arrived at a similar decision at the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672.

Some suggestion has already been given as to the way in which the writings which now constitute our New Testament came into being, contemporary with many others writings some of which are still preserved and some of which have disappeared, with probably no great loss. Matthew and Mark and Luke and John stand first in the order of the books as they appear, though there is no very definite relation between the printed order and the chronological order of the various books and they have not always been listed in their present order.

Of the New Testament writers, three were undeniably members of the Twelve, that close circle about the Master, and these were Matthew and John and Peter. Two more were brothers of Jesus, James and Jude. Paul wrote a larger share of the book than any other writer. Luke wrote the gospel which bears his name, and the Acts. Mark, an associate of Peter and Paul, wrote the shortest of the gospels.

While these were writing, and probably all of them wrote

during the second half of the first Christian century, others were also writing on matters concerning the history, the doctrines and the life of this new Way. Barnabas wrote, we know; we can be practically sure that Apollos wrote; it is quite supposable that Timothy and Titus, Aquila and Priscilla, and others who held large responsibility in the early church wrote much; and we have the positive statement of Luke that many had written of the life of Christ.

Gradually out of the great mass of religious literature of this first century certain writings began to emerge as being in a different category from the others. ~~Before~~ before the end of the century, most of the books which are now included in our New Testament had practically universal recognition and acceptance.

It would not be perfectly frank and honest to blink at the fact that this recognition and acceptance did not come at once. Indeed there has never been a time when all our New Testament was universally accepted, even by the leaders in scholarship in the Christian church. For the first three Christian centuries and a good part of the fourth there was much discussion and no little doubt of the canonicity of the Epistles of James and Jude, the Second Epistle of Peter, the Second and Third Epistles of John, and about the authorship of Hebrews and Revelation.

It is probably unnecessary to go into the evidence for the genuineness and authenticity of the various books in our New Testament. Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Polycarp, the Canon of Muratori, Clement of Alexandria and a mass of other writers and writings make clear the veneration in which the books of our present canon were held, and the authority which was recognized that they possessed.

At the Third Council of Carthage, A. D. 396, the New Testament Canon as we now have it was finally ratified, and has since been recognized, not only by the Latin Church, but later by the Greek Church, and when the Reformation came, Protestantism accepted this Canon, along with the Palestinian Canon of the Old Testament.

Perhaps a word should be said in passing about the contrast between the New Testament as we have it and other ~~many~~ religious writings and writings referring to Christianity in the first and second Christian centuries.

There were writings produced by enemies of Christianity, but in the name of Christianity. These were early recognized as not only spurious but in some cases positively impious and blasphemous. There is a considerable volume of New Testament Apocryphal literature, which while it deals with the life of Christ, especially ^{with} ~~about~~ his infancy and childhood, is clearly not at all of a piece with the genuine gospels. Then there were genuine writings of earnest Christian leaders, good and helpful, widely read and much beloved, but which were not admitted into the Canon on the ground that they did not possess the authority and inspiration of the writings which were accepted as canonical.

And perhaps this further remark should be made about

those writings which were first questioned but were later included in the Canon. The early scholars knew practically all the questions which modern criticism raises, and they considered them carefully, for they were very jealous for the sacred books of the New Way. But they also knew reasons for the inclusion of these books which we perhaps do not know at this long distance in time and space. Accordingly it seems to the writer that we may very well accept the decision of those who fixed the Canon so long ago. Nothing is likely to suffer by our acceptance of the Canon as it now stands and has stood for more than a millenium and a half.

So much, and possibly too much, about the Canon and how it came to be.

And now to consider its preservation. And in this I suppose I am to consider not the preservation of the Canon as a Canon, but the preservation of the Word of God from those enemies who have sought, not to have certain books rejected from the Canon, but to destroy the Bible as a book, to wipe it from the face of the earth, or, failing in that, to deny its authority.

Why should anybody be trying to destroy the Bible? There has never been any effort to destroy the Iliad, or to put the Odessey off the earth, or to stop forever the publication of Beowulf. No one wants to destroy The Cid or wipe out all knowledge of Shakespeare or Spenser. As Mauro says: "Other books arouse no hatred. There may be books which men dislike, and such they simply let alone. But the Bible is and always has been hated to the death. It is the one book which has been pursued from century to century as men pursue a mortal foe. At first its destruction has been sought by violence. All human powers, political and ecclesiastical, have combined to put it out of existence. Death has been the penalty for possessing or reading a copy; and such copies as were found have been turned over to the public executioner, to be treated as was the Incarnate Word. No expedient that human ingenuity could devise or human cruelty put into effect has been omitted in the desperate attempt to put this detested book out of existence." Why this terrible enmity? Because this is the one book which imposes authority on man; which actually gets to him with a "Thou shalt"; "Thou shalt not."

There is not time to go into details concerning these efforts to destroy the Bible. Already we have spoken of the work of Antiochus Epiphanes. The means employed by the loyal Jews to preserve their scriptures were many and clever. A little recess would be made in the seat of a chair, with a perfectly fitting wooden plug to close the opening, and in this would be hidden a portion of the scripture, while the aged and invalid mother would occupy the chair. But in spite of these and many other expedients, many of these loyal Jews were found with portions of the Scripture in their possession, and the cruelest death which Syrian ~~men~~ fiendishness could inflict was the penalty.

The time of such efforts to destroy the Word of God seems to have passed, perhaps forever, though there are those who think that we may see a return of such methods.

A far more dangerous effort to destroy the word is the move-

ment to undermine its authority, whether that effort is made by those who are ~~avowed~~ enemies of Christianity or by those who are its professed friends and who speak in the name of science, advanced scholarship, or what not. None of these can ever overthrow the word, though they may overthrow the faith of some, to their eternal loss and ruin.

But I cannot now speak to such as these, and it is useless to speak about them. I am speaking to the ministers and Christian workers of Oregon Yearly Meeting -- speaking by proxy, it is true, but none the less anxious that I may get to you something that we need, we who are earnest for the preservation of the word of God from all enemies, without and within the church. What can we do to preserve the Scriptures? Permit me to make some suggestions, with regret that I cannot be present if time is taken for the discussion of the thoughts here presented.

And first of all, may I suggest that no effort made to advance the Kingdom of God can be expected to have its full and rightful result which is not made in the spirit of Christ. We cannot preserve the Word of God while we violate its spirit.

And it is not too much to say that sometimes, in our earnestness for the truth, a Jesuitical spirit gets possession of very devoted people, a spirit which seems at least to assume the attitude that "The end justifies the means." "Shall we do evil that good may come? God forbid." Surely the Almighty does not need, for the preservation of His truth and the advancement of His cause, any methods which are at variance with the spirit of the Master. We do not have to go back to the days of the Inquisition, nor even back to the days of the Puritan persecution of the Quakers to find intolerance, lack of charity, misinterpretation, refusal to seek the truth, refusal to hear the truth, and even the dissemination of actual falsehood, and all in the name of an exalted Christianity and zeal for the truth. Not in such a spirit nor by such means can Truth be advanced. If thus we would seek to build up the truth, we shall be tearing it down faster than its open or secret enemies could do.

Another suggestion. We shall advance the cause of truth far more by advocating the truth itself than by fighting its enemies, whether these be actual enemies or "straw men" of our own construction. We are told to "Preach the word", but I do not remember where we are instructed to spend time in demolishing the arguments of our enemies, especially when we have to present those arguments first and then demolish them. I venture the guess that some of the views which most of us would consider unsound have received more publicity ^{among our young people} through those now in this room and those not able to be here though actively engaged in the work of Oregon Yearly Meeting, than through all the advocates of those false doctrines, who have had a chance to speak to our young people. With a full course in college leading to a Bachelor's degree, and a course in the University leading to a Master's degree, and a dozen years of college teaching and administration, I am confident that I have heard more from ministers of Oregon Yearly Meeting on a certain theory which they were opposing than from all the students and teachers in all my college experience. Let us be positive in our work for the Truth, not negative. Let us preach what we do believe, not what

we do not believe. The world and the church have doubts enough. Let's give them something to tie to. There is no man so great that he cannot find full scope for his utmost ability in proclaiming the good news.

But again and again my thought returns to the thing which to me is ~~the~~ vital -- the preservation of the Spirit of Christ in all our attitudes toward life. And as I write, I am seeking to look into my own heart by the help of His Spirit, as I hope that you will look into your own as you hear these words. Is my spirit what it ought to be? Do I have the spirit of Christ? "If any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of His."

God's word is eternally settled in heaven. Our task is to get it accepted and obeyed in the hearts and lives of men. First in our own hearts, fully and forever. Then in the hearts of those about us. And to this end, the means is already prescribed. "Preach the Word."