

# How Did We Get the Bible?

SoCM Class on Christian Apologetics

# Introduction

- It is important that Christians understand that what we have in the 66 books of the Bible is God's word
- How was the Bible formed in church history?
- What criteria were used in the process of establishing the biblical canon?
- Why is the Protestant canon (66 books) different from the Roman Catholic canon (73 books)?

# The Hebrew Scriptures in the Early Church

- From its beginning, the early church had always considered the Hebrew Bible to be the word of God
- **The fact of inspiration:** <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is **God-breathed** and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17)
- **The process of inspiration:** <sup>19</sup> We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. <sup>20</sup> Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. <sup>21</sup> For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were **carried along by the Holy Spirit** (2 Pt 1:19-21)

# The Hebrew Canon in the Early Church

- The writings of the Hebrew Scriptures were already fixed for several centuries prior to the coming of Jesus Christ
- The canon of the Hebrew Scriptures had come to a close since **435 BC** at the time of the writings from Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, because divine inspiration of the prophets had ceased
- The Hebrew canon was again confirmed in **AD 90** at the Council of Jamnia, a meeting of rabbinic scholars
- The Hebrew Scriptures took the form of 24 books and divided in three headings: The Law, The Prophets, and the Writings, which corresponded to the 39 books of the Christian OT

# The Hebrew Canon, AD 90

The Law	The Prophets	The Writings
Genesis	Joshua	Ruth
Exodus	Judges	Psalms
Leviticus	Samuel	Job
Numbers	Kings	Proverbs
Deuteronomy	Jeremiah	Ecclesiastes
	Ezekiel	Song of Songs
	Isaiah	Lamentations
	Twelve Minor Prophets	Daniel
		Esther
		Ezra-Nehemiah
		Chronicles

# The Expansion of the Canon in the Early Church

- Following the resurrection of Jesus, Justin Martyr (AD 100 to AD 165), a Christian apologist, argued that the divine revelation through the Holy Spirit passed from **the Father** → **the Son** → **the Apostles**
- For the first few decades, the early church had only oral stories that it could pass on, and depended on unwritten tradition for the first several centuries of church history
- Only when heresies began to emerge did the church sought to form doctrine (e.g., Nicaea, 325) and establish the biblical canon
- **Question:** Which writings should be included in the expanding biblical canon?
- Irenaeus (130-202 AD) was the first to declare the Bible as OT and NT

# The Expansion of the Canon in the Early Church

- The Pauline writings were widely considered as divinely authority
- What about the letter to the Hebrews?
- How about Mark and Luke, who were not apostles?
- The church used two key criteria to *recognize* and *affirm* those inspired and authoritative writings: (1) **apostolicity**, and (2) **antiquity**
- The first evidence of a biblical canon dates to AD 170 called the **Muratorian Canon**
- It was a fragmentary document discovered in Italy and published around 1740

# Muratorian Canon, AD 170

Canonical Writings	Missing from this List	Rejected Gnostic Writings
The four gospels	Hebrews	Paul to the Laodiceans
Acts of the Apostles	James	Paul to the Alexandrians
Thirteen letters of Paul	1 and 2 Peter	Shepherds of Hermas
Jude	3 John	Other Gnostic writings
1 and 2 John		
Revelation		
Wisdom of Solomon		
Revelation of Peter		



# The Expansion of the Canon in the Early Church

- About this time, another heretical group called Montanism emerged
- Montanus appealed to new revelation given by the Holy Spirit
- The church responded to this emphasis on revelation outside of the Bible by underscoring the closed canon of Scripture
- By AD 250, **Origen**, a theologian from Alexandria, proposed a new canon

# Origen's Canon, AD 250

Canonical Writings	Disputed Writings
The four gospels	Hebrews
Acts of the Apostles	2 Peter?
Thirteen letters of Paul	2 and 3 John
James	
Jude	
1 Peter	
2 Peter?	
1 John	
Revelation	

# Eusebius' Canon, AD 320

By the early 4th century, Eusebius (AD 260 to AD 339), Presbyter of Caesarea, divided his classification of biblical books into four categories

Accepted Writings	Fringe Writings	Questionable Writings	Absurd Writings
The four gospels	James	Acts of Paul	Gospel of Peter
Acts of the Apostles	2 Peter	Shepherd of Hermas	Gospel of Thomas
13 Letters of Paul	2 and 3 John	Didache	Gospel of Matthias
1 John	Jude	Letter of Barnabas	Acts of Andrew
1 Peter	Hebrews	Revelation of Peter	Acts of John
Revelation			Acts of others

# Athanasius' Canon, AD 367

- The first appearance of a list of NT writings that correspond exactly with our known canon was Athanasius' *Thirty-ninth (Easter) Letter* in **AD 367**
- Athanasius was an important church father and Bishop of Alexandria
- Athanasius' NT Canon was officially endorsed by the Council of Hippo in AD 393
- Two other important church meetings endorsed this same list: Third Council of Carthage in 397 and the Fourth Council of Carthage in 419

# The Expansion of the OT Canon in the Early Church

- Although the NT canon was set since the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, that was not the case with the OT canon
- Beginning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible was produced called the Septuagint (LXX)
- This Bible was circulated among Greek-speaking Jews, as the Christianity expanded into Gentile areas
- The Septuagint was much more expansive than the original Hebrew Bible, and the additions were called the Apocrypha (hidden writings)

# The Expansion of the OT Canon in the Early Church

- Beginning in the **2<sup>nd</sup> century AD**, a Latin translation of the entire Bible called the **Vulgate** was produced, reflecting the shift from Greek to Latin as the universal language of the Roman Empire
- St Augustine exerted great influence on accepting the Vulgate as canonical when he expressed his belief that “one and the same spirit” had spoken through both the writers of the Hebrew Scripture and the translators of the Septuagint
- This must have been the case since the apostles cited both the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint
- The Council of Hippo (393), the Third (397) and Fourth Councils of Carthage (419) all ratified Augustine’s Canon

# The Canon in the Reformation

- For over one thousand years, the (Roman Catholic) church read the **Latin Vulgate**, consisting of the OT with the Apocrypha and the NT as its Bible
- The Roman Catholic Church throughout the Middle Ages claimed authority greater than that of Scripture
- This led to the claim that the RCC possessed the authority to determine the canon of Scripture
- In the late **15<sup>th</sup> century**, an important movement called humanism developed with its motto: *ad fontes*—“back to the sources” or the return to the original Hebrew and Greek texts

# The Canon in the Reformation

- The Reformers, influenced by humanism, insisted that the Protestant church followed the shorter Hebrew Scripture (sans the Septuagint which contained the Apocryphal writings)
- The decision was based on the fact that the Hebrew scriptures were used by Jesus and the disciples
- Also, some of the apocryphal writings included incorrect historical information
- Luther insisted that church beliefs and practices were based on the poorly translated Latin Vulgate from Hebrew and Greek
- Thus, it should be abolished



# Conclusion

- We take comfort in the fact that the 66 books of the Bible were vetted through centuries of church history and recognized by many important church council as canonical
- The **Protestant church**, with its roots in the **16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation**, and taking its clues from the early church, embraces a canon of 39 OT writings that does not include the Apocrypha and 27 NT writings
- For all intents and purposes, the biblical canon is **closed today**
- The church regarded apostolicity as the qualifying factor for canonical recognition
- This apostolicity should be understood not strictly in terms of authorship but in terms of content and antiquity

# Discussion Questions

- What is your take on the formation and reliability of the biblical canon as God's word? Why do you think this way?
- What is your response to the Reformers' abolition of the Septuagint (containing the Apocryphal writings) and the Latin Vulgate?

# Suggested Reading

