

Chapter 24
Putting It Together and Seeing It Whole:
The Canon of Scripture

By the time these various theologies had been developed, only one more step needed to be taken before the present Old and New Testaments were completed. That was to decide which books to include in the official canon. Before we look into the process by which this was accomplished, we have to consider the meaning of the word just used: canon.

Originally the word denoted the tall, slender, jointed, bamboo-like stems of the reed plant. The Jewish people used these stems as their measuring length, a reed being the standard length of measure for six cubits. The next step in the evolution of the word was to give it the sense of being a norm, a standard of judgment. When applied to the Scriptures canon, or norm, takes on three connotations of meaning.

The canon first of all was the standard by which certain books were judged acceptable or non-acceptable for inclusion into the Scriptures. It was easy to apply this concept to the New Testament. The norm there was a Gospel and if other writings were to be acceptable to the Church they would have to be consonant with the understanding of Jesus Christ presented in the Gospel. The Christian church accepted four Gospels as normative, that is, as presenting an understanding of Christ that could be accepted by other Christians as valid. There were other gospels written than these four: the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel according to Pilate; but when compared with the four which now stand in the New Testament, it was clear that their picture of Jesus Christ was inadequate, and therefore they were never canonized, that is; they did not meet the standard of validation and so were never included in the canon of the New Testament. For the Old Testament, the question of canonization centered around the book's presentation of Yahweh; if it was consonant with Israel's understanding of their God, it was a candidate for inclusion in the sacred writings.

In the second meaning, the canon became the standard for faith itself. To practice Jewish faith adequately was to consult their authoritative writings, the books of the Old Testament. To become fully cognizant of the Christian way of life, a person was advised to turn to the Gospels, the letters of Paul, and the Book of Acts. These writings became the rule for matters of faith and conduct, the means by which the faith of the community is nurtured.

The third meaning grew out of the other two and became more technical: the canon became the authoritative catalogue of books which in themselves constituted the standard

for belief and practice. While the former two meanings of the word need to be kept in mind as the reason for assembling such a catalogue of the Scriptures, it is the last meaning that set in motion the process for selecting certain books to become part of our canons of the Old and New Testaments: thirty-nine books in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New.

I.

The first portion of the present Old Testament to become a canon was the Book of Deuteronomy in the year 621 B.C. Up to that time there had been no canon in Israel. The Law codes of course had had definitive force for legal and religious practice; the words spoken through the prophets had force as the Word of God for a particular situation; and the narratives of the faith of Israel and Judah had transmitted to future generations the faith of the fathers. But the Book of Deuteronomy was different from these. It was an actual writing, purporting to be from Moses himself, found in the Temple by the priests and used by King Josiah as the basis for his reform of both the nation and the religion of Judah. This was a canon in the second sense described above: a particular piece of writing became the standard for the way people should practice their faith and life.

The next step in compiling the Old Testament took place in the exile. Those exiled leaders of Judah who took the Book of Deuteronomy with them into Babylon began to add other writings to it. The Judahites worked over their original Deuteronomy and re-edited it: They gathered other writings to it, works that became our present Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings. These Deuteronomists also gathered and edited the writings of some of the prophets, especially those who supported their own positions or who were the spiritual fathers of their group: these included Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah of Jerusalem. Under the Deuteronomic movement, a good portion of the present Old Testament was brought together.

The second major movement to make its contribution to the present form of the Old Testament was the priestly movement. They accepted most of the work of the Deuteronomic school, but they made additions to it. Whether or not the present books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy were in roughly the form that we now have them when the priests began their work must remain an open question. We can be certain, however, that the priests edited these works according to their own standards and added them as a frontispiece to the work of the Deuteronomists. They also began their editing of the song book of Israel into the Book of Psalms. By the time Judah left Babylon to return to their homeland, they took with them the major books of law and history, the book of their worship, and some of the prophecies of pre- exilic and exilic times.

The writings of the prophets came from more schools of thought than these two, and those books that were finally included in the prophetic canon provide clues to the

underlying plurality of Israelite faith. As indicated, Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah were drawn from the Deuteronomic underground; Ezekiel was one of the leading priests; Haggai and Zechariah represented the intense desire of later priests to rebuild the Temple when the people returned to Jerusalem and were a bridge between the priestly movement and the subsequent work of the Chronicler. Jeremiah represented a different strand of prophetic thought. Standing in determined opposition to the Deuteronomic movement as being too mechanical in its approach to faith —its Deuteronomic code may very well be the "covenant written on stone" that Jeremiah deplored — his prophecies were the possession of the Jewish community that had remained in Jerusalem while its leadership had gone into exile, and the poems of Lamentations, the possessions of the same group, became attached to Jeremiah's work. The addition of this prophecy to the others shows the ecumenical spirit of Old Testament Judaism: they brought into their canon writings from diverse groups within their faith and proclaimed thereby that each movement was an authentic witness to the work of Yahweh among them. Daniel, dated from the beginning of the Maccabean movement, was included for the same reason: it declared that the God who had established the kingdom under David was still preserving it under the hand of the sons of Maccabeus. The provenance of other books of prophecy like Joel, Obediah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Malachi is not so clear; some may have been chosen primarily to ascertain that the scroll of the Minor Prophets would contain the sacred number of twelve. Perhaps as we learn more of the situations around which these were written, each will be seen as representative of a particularly significant movement within Jewish faith.

After the exile, various other additions were made to the sacred writings. The work of the Chronicler brought the history of Israel up-to-date. These books--First and Second Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah--seemed to round out the Deuteronomic-Priestly collection and were soon added to the standard history. The song book continued to develop songs of the earlier Temple had been used when the second temple was built by Zerubbabel; but new songs for the occasion of worship were also composed and these were added to the authorized copies of Israel's psalms. Other strains of writing continued in Israel as well. Wisdom writings were collected into Proverbs; Wisdom Psalms found their way into the song book. Job and Ecclesiastes, one life-affirming and the other life-denying, each in its own way was representative of philosophic changes taking place in the scribal schools of the Mideast. The Song of Solomon, a wedding hymn and the most sensuous writing in the Old Testament, came to stand halfway between Israel's songs and her wisdom literature.

Tracts for the times were being composed. Ruth was one of these; it spoke against the exclusiveness of the post-exilic community by pointing out that this ancestress of David was not herself a pure Jew. Jonah, another of the tracts, also underscored God's care for those who were not of the Jewish faith. Esther took another position, showing how God confounded the enemies of the Jews and providing a Scriptural basis for the celebration of

liberation of the Jews in the feast of Purim. With Daniel, a whole new genre of literature entered the canon: it was an apocalyptic book--the word meant "revealing what is hidden"—and its odd imagery prove an acceptable methodology for presenting to besieged peoples a coded message which, if spoken plainly, would have been unacceptable to the powers then ruling the land of Judah.

This explosion of literary production, reaching out to include many kinds of literature and many lines of thought, caused a problem: which writings should be normative for Jewish faith and which not. To begin to develop an answer to the question, the various books had been organized into certain classes.

First were the books of the Law: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Containing the laws by which the Jews were increasingly regulating their lives, these books were easy to classify and to accept as authoritative.

A second classification was the prophets, which were divided into the Former and the Latter Prophets. Former Prophets included what in our time we consider to be the histories of Israel: the books of Joshua, Judges, Kings (in the Hebrew Bible Kings includes all of what in the English Bible is Samuel and Kings), Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. The Latter Prophets were also divided into two categories, the Major and Minor Prophets. The Major prophets were called such primarily because their writings were longer than the others; included in this category were Isaiah (both Isaiah of Jerusalem and Isaiah of Babylon bound into one scroll), Jeremiah and the Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel. The Minor Prophets were bound together into a single work entitled "The Book of the Twelve," and they included the twelve prophecies found there today.

The third category, the Writings, included the Psalms and the Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, Job, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, and Esther. These books were difficult to classify, and this intensified the debate over their position in the canon.

As the centuries passed and adherents to the Jewish faith became more certain of the necessity for an agreed-upon canon of Scripture, debate over what was to be included revolved around two questions. Should all major classifications of the books be accepted as authoritative? and should all the books within each classification be incorporated into the sacred writings? By the time of Jesus, a number of positions were being held in respect to these questions.

The Samaritans had the simplest answer: they claimed that only the five books of the Law were authoritative for faith and practice. They may have read the others for their guidance and instruction, but they did not turn to them for authoritative direction.

The Sadducees, by this time the ruling class of Judea, made the same distinction: to them

only the five books of the Law (considered since about 400 B.C. to have been written by Moses and called the Books of Moses) were authoritative: they were the conservatives of the age, and their respect for antiquity would not permit them to add new or later writings to their canon.

The Pharisees claimed them all as canon, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Essene library, uncovered at Qumran, included books and commentaries from the three major categories of Jewish writings, and we may assume that this monastic group also included the broader number in their canon. Since Jesus quoted from books in each of these three classifications, it may safely be said that he too sided with the Pharisees and Essenes in this matter.

The issue came to decision in the generation following the ministry of Jesus. When the Roman armies laid siege to Jerusalem in the decade of the 60s A.D, the leaders of Pharisaic Judaism decided to leave the Holy City and made their way west of Jerusalem to the seacoast town of Jamnia, pronounced in Hebrew Yavneh. There they re-established their schools; and slowly these Jewish scholars moved toward a consensus as to which books were to be part of the canon. These rabbis decided for the broadest inclusion possible. They included as Scripture the Law, over which there was no contest; both the Former and Latter Prophets; and the Writings. There was never a formal vote taken among the rabbis; that was foreign to the Jewish ways of making such important decisions. Within two decades after the rabbinic community at Jamnia was founded, by about A.D. 80, the decision had been made and since that time all these documents have been a part of the Jewish Scriptures.

II.

The Christian Church was also engaged in a struggle over which books to include in their emerging Scriptures.

The initiatory event for the writing of the material later included in the New Testament was, of course, the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The explosion of literature caused by this event was unprecedented in biblical times. To find anything that matched it, we have to go back to the Golden Age of Israel under Solomon, or to the time of the Babylonian exile; in scope and volume, however, the writings occasioned by the ministry of Jesus Christ were greater yet. There were letters, Gospels, narratives of the life of the early church, there were apocalypses. So much was written that the question quickly arose, which is authoritative? Tracing the answer to the question is a fascinating process.

The development of the New Testament canon differed from that of the Old in one major feature: the Christian churches already had a Scripture which predated any writings of their own. They accepted the Scriptures of the Old Testament as their own. Having recognized

that Jesus himself had accepted as canonical the broadest possible number of Old Testament books, the Christian community followed his lead on this. The question before them was not whether they should have a Scripture; they already had that. Their question was which if any of their own writings they should elevate to canonical status.

The letters of Paul became the first to be granted this rank. Not only were these the earliest writings of the Christian movement; Paul also had in mind that they should be read in church gatherings during worship. Being read in the services alongside the accepted Scripture gave them an authoritative aura; and since Paul was the founder of many of the churches to which he wrote, his writings had a special appeal to the Christians to whom they were addressed.

The appeal was so special, in fact, that someone set himself to the task of collecting and editing these writings of Paul. This editor came into possession of a letter Paul had written to the churches of Galatia; one he wrote to the church in Thessalonica (and another addressed to Thessalonica that had been written by friends of Paul using some material that had come directly from Paul); he found at least four letters in the archives of the church at Corinth; a lengthy and informative letter to the church at Rome; some material written by Paul and his friends to the Christian community in Philippi; a letter in the possession of the Colossian church; some letters written under Paul's inspiration to scattered individuals; and a prized letter in his own possession that he added to the end of the collection. Taking this material, he arranged it in a way that seemed most appropriate to him--for instance, he compressed the four letters to the Corinthians into two but kept most of the substance of the four; he put the longest letters first and added the others roughly in descending scale of size: and he circulated this volume of letters among the churches. This collection, coming both from the pen of Paul and from his party in the Christian church, was the first major addition made by Christians to the canon of the Old Testament.

Another body of material began to gather around the name of "John" and was treasured by the community of Christians of which this person was the center. The Gospel of John was the heart of this group of writings. To it were added a series of letters, written perhaps by "John" or more likely by another member of his community at a time after the Gospel had been completed; the Johannine church was facing a crisis as a portion of the community was withdrawing from the parent group, and the letters were written in an attempt both to win back the schismatics and to strengthen the faithful. The letters used words and ideas common to the Gospel, but they appear to have employed them in a manner somewhat different from that of the Gospel-writer, as if the strong and sharp ideas expressed there have been diluted in the passage of time. This Gospel, plus the three letters written during the crisis in the community, became part of the heritage of the Johannine wing of the Christian church and were among those writings from which a canonical Scripture could later be

chosen.

Whether the "Revelation to John" was from this same community is a debated point. Some scholars see resemblances in ideas and concepts despite the fact that the form of the writing was so completely different from what is found in the rest of the Johannine writings. Others say that the form is so different from genuinely Johannine material that it could not possibly have been written by the same hand or come from the same community. I find in this composition enough similarity of concepts to those used in the Johannine community to believe that it was circulated in that Christian center in Ephesus; and the writing itself came from Patmos, an island just west of the harbor for Ephesus. Revelation appears to be an apocalyptic drama written by someone in the Johannine community to encourage the church as it faced times of persecution; in the writing, this author used ideas current in the Johannine church but, because of the dangers facing this community in too open an expression of hostility to Rome, he chose to formulate his message in the apocalyptic terms which had first been used in the time of the Maccabees when Daniel was written and which had been used a number of times since to express similar esoteric messages.

Other communities also had writings that were significant to them. The missionary church at Antioch, for instance, had copies of Paul's letters, to which was added the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The community at Rome treasured the Gospel according to Mark, and since the Galilean ministry of the Twelve with Peter as their head is the center of that Gospel, it is possible that the Letters of Peter were also the treasure of the Roman church (Jude would also fit here, since it was copied in chapter two of Second Peter). Matthew was the Gospel of a Jewish-Christian community, most likely, as suggested before, the one located in Alexandria, that most crucial city in the continuing struggle between Christians and Jews for control of the synagogue; and James and Hebrews, the only writings of the New Testament not yet assigned to a source, appear also to be the product of the Alexandrine church. If so, the four major communities noted above would account for all the writings that make up our present New Testament.

There were other writings that were not to be included in the New Testament: Barnabas, The Shepherd of Hermas, First Clement, The Acts of Peter, the Revelation of Peter, the Didache, The Gospels of Peter and Thomas and Pilate and The Hebrews, and The Letters of Ignatius and Polycarp. The ministry of Jesus had caused an explosion in writing, and a process had to be set up by which the better writings were included in the canon and the more mediocre were rejected.

III.

The incident that forced the church to decide which of its writings were canonical and which were not was the impact made by a man named Marcion. Born in the eastern

part of the Roman Empire Marcion as a young man inherited a great deal of money, and he was entrepreneur enough to add to his own fortune. He was converted to Christianity and about A.D. 150 went to Rome to live. A strong-minded person, he decided that Christianity as he knew it in Rome was not as it should be, and he set out to revise it more to his liking. One of his revisions was to erase from Christianity anything that smacked of Jewish influence. This meant that the Old Testament could not be canonical for Christianity of course; it meant also that a number of other writings could not be used as representative of Christian faith and life. There were in fact only twelve books that Marcion would permit as legitimate and authentic Christian documents: Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, First and Second Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. These were the books that centered around Paul and his missionary work, and they alone were to be used, because they downplayed Judaism and were the most radically Gentile. Marcion's knife-wielding act caused the Christian church to think seriously about its own canon.

Very quickly a basic consensus was reached. The letters of Paul listed above were quickly accepted as canonical. More orthodox Christians, wanting to retain their Old Testament heritage and hence more favorable to Judaism than Marcion was, included three letters that Marcion did not: the two letters to Timothy and the one to Titus. The four Gospels we have now were also included: by this time they had been bound into a single volume, and as an additional affirmation of their Jewish heritage, Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospels, was placed first in the group. The Book of Acts was separated from its companion volume but was not lost from the canon; it was definitely to be included as an authentic witness to the spirit of Jesus Christ. The Letter to the Hebrews was added, too, since its Jewish background provided a solid witness against the Marcionites. Letters of John had little trouble gaining acceptance because they were tied in with the well-beloved Gospel of John. Beyond this, consensus had not yet occurred.

The problem was that Christianity in this era had more than one center, and no group could make a decision that was binding on the others. Well-established in Rome, Christianity was just as deeply entrenched in important areas like Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, Asia Minor and the Greek Peninsula. While each of the centers accepted those writings over which there was consensus, some of them had individual compositions which they considered canonical but which the other centers did not.

In Rome, for instance, an archaeological find called "The Muratorian Fragment" and dating from around 200 A.D. listed three books that the church in Rome accepted. It included Jude and the Revelation to John but did not include James and Second Peter. Irenaeus, writing in Lyons in Gaul about A.D. 185, recognized only one or two of the Johannine letters and the book called "The Shepherd of Hermas." Tertullian, writing from Carthage about the same time, accepted one of Peter and one of John. The consensus was marred by disagreement.

The argument continued until A.D. 367, when it ended in a strange way. In that year Athanasius of Alexandria followed his annual custom of sending an Easter letter to the congregations of his area. He decided to direct this letter to the question of the canon of the New Testament. He said, in effect, that the question of which books were authoritative had bothered the church for too long a time; it was time to make a decision. He listed twenty-seven books as his choice, the very ones which have become the New Testament that we know today. Why, in saying this, Athanasius was able to win widespread acceptance for this particular twenty-seven was somewhat unusual. Part of it stemmed from the authority of his own person; he was the greatest Christian preacher of his day and a leader respected by others. A large part of it however was the exhaustion that had resulted from the struggle; a decision had to be made and his seemed to be as good as any other. So, after 250 years of argument and debate, the matter was ended. The canon was closed.

But not quite. Martin Luther was almost tempted to open it in the 16th century. When he was going about his work of reformation, he developed a distaste for the book of James which said, "Faith without works is dead," and threatened to undercut Luther's theological position. He did not like the Revelation to John, either, because it was open to too many misinterpretations. But Luther was a conservative as well as a radical Christian, and the weight of the centuries was too much for him to overthrow; in the end he too opted for the traditional twenty-seven. The Roman Catholic Council of Trent, meeting in the half century after the beginning of the protestant movement to establish a counterforce to the reformation, went beyond Luther: it added to its canon the intertestamental books of First and Second Esdras, Tobit, Judith, The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, the First and Second Maccabees. Protestants, however, ratified Luther's decision at the Westminster Assembly meeting in England in the 1640s. The Confession of Faith that emerged from that Assembly listed in the canon of the New Testament the twenty-seven books of the historical consensus. Since that confession was important to English-speaking Christianity throughout the world, its decision is in force today. There had been no serious attempt in recent years to add or to subtract any of the historic books. So, the canon of the New Testament is as it is today, and these books remain, in the words of the official statement of The Presbyterian Church USA, "The unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal and by the Holy Spirit God's word to us."

