

Lesson 6

THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The word “canon” means a rule or list and speaks of the right of a particular book to a place in the Bible.
- B. The Hebrew Bible (Masoretic Text) of the Old Testament contains 24 books (some say 22 books), being divided into the Law, Prophets and the Writings. These 24 books actually contain books within books, so they have been divided into the 39 books of the Old Testament, which we find in our modern Bible.

II. INSPIRATION AND AUTHORITY DETERMINE CANONICITY

- A. Most of the Old Testament books were written by Jewish leaders who held either a religious or a civil responsibility: Moses, prophets, priests, kings, etc. Many of these writings would be taken immediately to the temple and deposited as inspired scriptures. There was a natural tendency by the people to accept the Old Testament books because they were written by religious or civil leaders who were recognized as God’s messengers.
- B. When the books of the Old Testament were written, they became scripture, and, because they were spoken and written by God through men, they were considered as possessing absolute authority. Since God inspired the books, they were considered canonical at the moment they were written. In Old Testament times no general council or synod ever declared that the Old Testament was divinely authoritative. The books of the Old Testament, being of divine inspiration, were consequently authoritative and were recognized as such from the time of their appearance. NOTE: The original manuscripts were not canonical because they were collected, they were collected because they were canonical. This does not mean, however, that all the books were immediately accepted (cf. Jeremiah 36:1-32).

III. THE COMPLETION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

- A. The Hebrew Old Testament was probably completed some 400 years before the time of Christ and could have been completed no less than 100 years before the Christian era.
- B. Some scholars feel that the canon of the Old Testament was fully collected and recognized by the time of Ezra in the 5th century BC (Neh. 8-10).
- C. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, written around 200 BC, accepts all 24 books as canonical.
- D. The Apocrypha, which is literature written by the Jews between the Testaments covering a period of 400 years, speaks of the Law, Prophets and writings being in existence.
- E. Jesus Christ Himself acknowledged the existing canon (Luke 24:44 cf. John 10:25). Christ freely quoted from many of the Old Testament books and these quotations are recorded in the Gospels. Christ brought a curse upon the Pharisees of His day and said that upon them should “come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias.” (Matt. 23:35). Abel is mentioned in Genesis, the first book, and Barachias is mentioned in 2 Chronicles 24:20-21, the last book of the Old Testament in the Hebrew text. This is an obvious acknowledgment of the Hebrew canon by Christ.
- F. At the Synod of Jamnia (90 AD), which was a group of rabbis, it recognized the books of the Old Testament but some questioned Esther, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. This was not a determination but a confirmation of the canon.
- G. Every Old Testament book is quoted in the New Testament except Esther, Ecclesiastes, Ezra, Nehemiah, Obadiah, Nahum and Zephaniah.
- H. Josephus, a Jewish historian (100 AD) acknowledges the Hebrew canon.

- I. Conclusion: “Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah nor the men of the Great Synagogue nor the Council of Jamnia canonized the Old Testament nor any part thereof. Rather all the evidence supports the position that the books of the Old Testament, being of divine inspiration, were consequently authoritative, and were recognized as such from the time of their appearance.” (Carl F. Henry, *Revelation and the Bible*).

IV. THE APOCRYPHA

- A. The Apocrypha are books written by Jews during the 400 year period between the Old and New Testaments. These books are Apocrypha (hidden) because they are unrecognized or uncanonical.
- B. There are 14 or 15 apocryphal books which are: 1 and 2 Esdras, Obadiah, Judith, Addition to Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Prayer of Azariah, Susanna, and the Dragon, Susanna, Prayer of Manasseh and 1 and 2 Maccabees.
- C. The Apocrypha give a record of Jewish history between the Testaments, however most of the books must be classified as religious novels, pious fiction, abounding in repetitions and trivial details. They contain doctrines that are unscriptural, and stories that are fantastic and incredible. There are many obvious historical, chronological and geographical errors in these books. For example, Judith 1:5 calls Nebuchadnezzar king of the Assyrians and declares that he reigned in Ninevah. But we know that he was king of Babylon (Dan. 4:4-6), and history bears this out.
- D. The Apocrypha were never a part of the Hebrew canon but crept into the Bible through the Septuagint (LXX) which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. The LXX was done by Hebrew scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, and was called the Septuagint because the translators numbered 70 (LXX). The date for the LXX is 200 BC, but the oldest existing manuscript that we have today of the LXX is 400 AD. During this 600-year period the Apocrypha crept into the text.
- E. The problem arises because the Roman Catholic Church acknowledges all the Apocrypha to be inspired literature, except 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Azariah. The books of Esdras were rejected by the Roman Catholic Church because they speak against prayers for the dead, which is official Catholic dogma. From the Apocrypha, the Roman Catholic Church supports certain doctrines, like purgatory (2 Maccabees 12:40-45). POINT: The Roman Catholic Church never officially pronounced the Apocrypha as canonical until the Council of Trent (1546 AD) which is nearly 2000 years after the Hebrew canon was completed and closed. The real reason for the addition of the apocryphal books to the Bible by the Roman Church is to be found in connection with events at the time of the Reformation. The Reformers vigorously attacked doctrines which they regarded unscriptural. The doctrine of purgatory in particular was in need of defense, so the Roman Church made the Apocrypha inspired scripture.

V. REASONS FOR REJECTING THE APOCRYPHA AS INSPIRED SCRIPTURE

- A. There are many historical, chronological and geographical errors in the Apocrypha. Therefore it is not reliable in matters of faith and practice.
- B. While the authors of the New Testament quote from the Septuagint many times, they never once quote from any of the Apocrypha and only the 24 (Hebrew) or 39 (modern) books are quoted. NOTE: They did not acknowledge the Apocrypha as scripture because they did not intend those legendary books to become part of the Bible.
- C. The Old Testament canon of 24 books was accepted at the time of Christ and Christ gave His approval to this canon.
- D. The Jews in Palestine and Alexandria (Alexandria being the place where the LXX was translated) never accepted the Apocrypha.
- E. Josephus, the noted Jewish historian, about 90 AD gave a list of the books of the Jewish law and prophets, but he did not include the Apocryphal books.
- F. Some of the Church Fathers quoted from the Apocrypha and treated it with high regard. For instance, Augustine uses the Apocrypha freely but he never knew Hebrew and had little respect for the language of the Hebrew canon. However, not all church fathers accepted the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha was rejected by Origen, who is generally acknowledged to have

been the most learned man in the church before Augustine; by Tertullian, an outstanding scholar in the 3rd century; by Athanasius, the champion of orthodoxy at the Council of Nicea; and by Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate, which became the authorized Roman Catholic Bible. (Jerome was finally persuaded to translate the Apocrypha, but made it clear that he did not believe them to be scripture). Melito, Bishop of Sardis (170 AD) gives his list of canon and none of the Apocrypha are listed. POINT: Probably most of the church fathers accepted the 24 books as canonical and the Apocrypha as having ecclesiastical value but not as inspired scripture.

- G. Originally the Eastern Church did not accept the Apocrypha but later yielded to pressure. However no official pronouncement has ever been made on the Apocrypha.
- H. All the reformers accepted the Hebrew canon of 24 books. Today the Lutherans and the Church of England include the Apocrypha in their church manuals for ecclesiastical value but do not consider it to be inspired scripture.
- I. The Apocrypha were never accepted officially by the Roman Catholic Church until the Council of Trent (1546 AD) and this was done out of reaction to the Reformation. There were some within the Council of Trent itself who did not want to accept the Apocrypha.
- J. The Apocryphal books do not claim to be the Word of God or the work of prophets.
- K. Conclusion: “So, we find that at the time of Christ there were two versions of the Old Testament current in Palestine, the more liberal Alexandrian Septuagint, including the Apocryphal books, in Greek, and the more conservative Hebrew version which included only the canonical books of the Jews, and that the Roman Catholic Bible follows the Alexandrian while the Protestant Bible follows the Hebrew version” (L. Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*).