

# DOCTRINE OF THE BIBLE

## The Test of Canonicity

### Lesson #5

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We learned in a previous lesson the collection of books believed to be inspired are called the Biblical Canon. The word canon means a reed, rod, or rule which is used for measuring (see II Cor. 10:13-15 and Gal. 6:16). The Biblical canon contains the books of the Bible which passed the measuring rod of scrutiny and which are recognized as inspired by God. But the question often arises, How do we know what books are supposed to be in the Bible? Another similar question is, How did the books of the Bible first get included into the Bible? In this lesson we will learn how the books of the Bible were chosen to be included in the canon of Scripture and how those books were chosen.

The first link in the chain of revelation, From God to Us is inspiration, which concerns *What* God did, namely, that he breathed out (spirated) the Scriptures. The second link in the chain is canonization, which relates to the question of *which* books God inspired. Inspiration indicates how the Bible received its authority, whereas canonization tells how the Bible received its *acceptance*. It is one thing for God to give the Scriptures their authority, and quite another for men to recognize that authority.<sup>1</sup>

## I. CRITERIA FOR THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

### A. Books that Defile the hands

The Rabbis considered certain books to be so holy that no one could touch them without defiling their hands. These certain books did not defile with uncleanness but with holiness. They believed that a person had to wash their hands after handling the holy writings just like the law required washing after handling other holy things.

By declaring that the Scriptures made the hands unclean, the rabbis protected them from careless and irreverent treatment, since it is obvious that no one would be so apt to handle them heedlessly if he were every time obliged to wash his hands afterwards.<sup>2</sup>

1. Lev. 6:27-29 Anyone who touches its flesh will become consecrated; and when any of its blood splashes on a garment, in a holy place you shall wash what was splashed on. 28 Also the earthenware vessel in which it was boiled shall be broken; and if it was boiled in a bronze vessel, then it shall be scoured and rinsed in water. 29 Every male among the priests may eat of it; it is most holy.
2. Lev. 16:23-28 Then Aaron shall come into the tent of meeting and take off the linen garments which he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. 24 He shall bathe his body with water in a holy place and put on his clothes, and come forth and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people and make atonement for himself and for the people. 25 Then he shall offer up in smoke the fat of the sin offering on the altar. 26 The one who released the goat as the scapegoat shall wash his

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<sup>1</sup>Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pg. 204.

<sup>2</sup>Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism*, pg. 280.

clothes and bathe his body with water, then afterward he shall come into the camp. 27 But the bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp, and they shall burn their hides, their flesh, and their refuse in the fire. 28 Then the one who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body with water, then afterward he shall come into the camp.

## B. The Test of the New Testament s Confirmation of the Old Testament

As one reads the New Testament, they frequently encounter allusions and quotations from the Old Testament. Phrases such as, just as the Holy Spirit says or just as it is written or the Lord spoke followed by a quote from the Old Testament. This tells us that the New Testament writers believed that the Old Testament was the inspired Word of God and that it was authoritative for believers even in the New Testament era.<sup>3</sup>

1. Mt. 21:42 Jesus said to them, Did you never read in the Scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, This became the chief corner stone; This came about from the Lord, And it is marvelous in our eyes ?
2. Jn. 10:35 If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken),
3. Acts 17:11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.
4. Rom. 16:25-26 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, 26but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith.

## II. CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING THE BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

- A. ***Apostolic Authority***, is one of the criteria used from New Testament canonicity. A book had to be written directly by one of the Apostles (as are most of the books of the New Testament) or had to be written by a close associate of an apostle, such as in the case of Mark, who wrote under Peter s authority, and Luke who wrote under Paul s authority. This insured that there was a three-fold witness to the things being written, i.e. the witness of the Holy Spirit, the affirmation of an Apostle who was an eye witness, and the affirmation of the author, who may have received his information partly from an Apostle, partly from oral tradition, or partly from other eye witnesses.

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<sup>3</sup> There are many additional New Testament references that refer to the Old Testament as Scripture. See Mt. 22:29; 26:54, 56; Lk. 24; Jn. 5:39; Acts 17:2; 18:28; Rom. 1:2; 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; 15:4; I Cor. 15:3-4; Gal. 3:8, 22; 4:30; I Tim. 5:18; II Tim. 3:16; I Pet. 1:20-21; 3:16.

- B. **Antiquity of the writing** is another criteria used to determine the canonicity of a book. The Apostles all died before the end of the first century. This then would eliminate any so called sacred writing which was written after the first century no matter what it claimed. The church, upon investigation, would not be able to find any first century copies of the writing or any believers who had read it in the first century, if indeed it was a later work. They would then be safe to conclude that the writing was uninspired.
  
- C. **The test of tradition** was also used as a test of authenticity. One might think that tradition is not a very strong argument for canonicity, but, in reality, it is the pillar in Biblical canonicity. Believers, who love the Lord, are serious about knowing and obeying His Word. Any generation of believers would have clearly taught the next generation what books were sacred. Surely there would have been no sacred works that would have been ignored and passed over by an entire generation of believers. Believers would have a strong confidence about what books were inspired and would not tolerate someone trying to add false writings to the Word of God.
  
- D. **Recognition by the Early Church** is another means by which the early Church Fathers recognized which books were accepted as authoritative. Although there was a constant barrage of false writings trying to be fobbed off as authentic, the church, as a whole, knew which books were authentic and which were not. Even though some inspired books were questioned by a few, they were accepted by the majority. The early church Fathers quoted from the books of the New Testament calling them Scripture. Eventually all 27 books, which we presently have in our New Testament, were accepted as canonical.

<b>Early Church Fathers Who Affirmed the Books of the New Testament</b>		
Polycarp	115 AD	Quotes New Testament as Scripture
Clement	155-220 AD	Quotes New Testament as Scripture
Justin Martyr	100-165 AD	Quotes Gospels as Scripture
Irenaeus	100 AD	Irenaeus, who was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostle John, mentions the four gospels, Rom., I & 2 Cor., Gal., Eph., Phil., Col., I & II Thess., I & II Tim., Titus, I Pet., I Jn., and Revelation as inspired canonical books
Athanasius of Alexandria	367 AD	His writings contain the earliest list of N.T. books
Jerome	345-419 AD	Confirm the 27 books of the N.T.
Augustine	354-430 AD	Confirm the 27 books of the N.T.
Council of Hippo	393 AD	Confirm the 27 books of the N.T.

E. ***The Signature Writing of Paul*** is another means by which the early church determined the authenticity of a book. Remember that Paul met the criteria of an apostle as he had a personal encounter with the Lord (Acts 9), was taught by the Lord directly (Gal. 1:11-12), saw the resurrected Lord (I Cor. 15:7-8), and performed the signs and miracles that accompany an apostle (II Cor. 12:12). Paul's writings were also recognized as Scripture by the Apostle Peter (II Pet. 3:14-16). From what we can learn from the New Testament, Paul used a secretary (Greek - amanuenses) to write his letters. But it seems that often, if not always, he would write the last part with his own hand as a verification of authenticity. Thus, those who personally knew Paul would immediately recognize his hand writing, and know that the epistle was written by Paul the Apostle, that it was not a forgery, but was inspired by God. Paul also sent faithful men, that both he and the recipients knew and trusted, to deliver his letters. Hence a hand-delivered letter by a trusted friend verified authenticity.

1. I Cor. 16:21 The greeting is in my own hand Paul.
2. Gal. 6:11 See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.
3. Col. 4:18 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.
4. II Thess. 3:17 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write.
5. Philemon 1:19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

### III. **CRITERIA FOR THE BOOKS OF BOTH THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS**

Some tests of canonicity can be applied to both testaments. These criteria were not formally applied by all but they have been used by some to determine the authenticity of the books of the Old and New Testaments. As one reads the writings of those who loved the Scriptures, you can see that they knowingly or unknowingly applied these principles.

A. ***Test of Orthodoxy*** is one of the tests used to determine canonicity. Orthodoxy is a word used to describe the fundamental teachings of Christianity. The test of doctrinal orthodoxy is the test to determine if a book is doctrinally sound. God, being perfect, could not contradict Himself and so His Word cannot contradict itself either. If a supposedly sacred writing contradicted another book which passed the test of Canonicity, its authenticity would be rejected. For example, this is why some have questioned the epistle of James. They believed that James was not inspired because, in their estimation, James taught justification by works not grace in ch. 2. James seems to say the exact opposite thing as Paul does in Romans ch. 4. Paul says Abraham was justified by faith, James

says he was justified by works (Rom. 4:1-3, 9, 13, 16 cf. Jam. 2:18-24). Upon closer examination one discovers that Paul is talking about how one gets saved, while James is talking about what saving faith does.

When prophets, for example, claimed to speak in the Lord's name it became necessary to discern the spirits by which they spoke. Some members of the church were given the spiritual gift of being able to judge what was from the Lord and what was not i.e., the distinguishing of spirits (I Cor. 12:10). According to Paul, the decisive criterion to apply to the prophets is their testimony of Christ: no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:3). Somewhat later, John suggests a more specific test; every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God (I Jn. 4:2). Such tests anticipated the later insistence on orthodoxy as a criterion of canonicity.<sup>4</sup>

1. I Cor. 12:3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, Jesus is accursed; and no one can say, Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit.
2. I Cor. 12:10 and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues.
3. I Jn. 4:2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God;

When previously unknown gospels or books started to circulate which supposedly had apostolic authority, the most important question to ask was: What does it teach about the person and work of Christ? Does it maintain and support what the apostles taught about the person, work, and authority of Jesus Christ?<sup>5</sup>

- B. ***The Test of Divine Sanction*** is another test of canonicity. Those works which are truly inspired usually carry with them divine sanction. They begin with, The Word of the Lord to . . . or The Lord spoke . . . or Paul, called as an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, etc. Inspired books usually contain many phrases such as, thus says the Lord, or hear the Word of the Lord. They claim to record the very words of God and make no apology about it. This test, in and of itself, does not verify that a work is canonical but it is one of many criteria which help build a case for the authenticity of a book being inspired. In the chart below, the frequency of certain phrases, which appear in the Bible, are pointed out.

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<sup>4</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, pg. 255.

<sup>5</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, pg. 260.

<b>Common Phrases of Divine Origin of the Scriptures</b>	
Lord has spoken	30 times
God said, says, or spoke	56 times
Lord spoke	133 times
The word of the Lord	256 times
says the Lord	501 times

C. ***Apostolic Sanction*** is another test of the inspiration of a book. It is important to remember that the Apostles themselves gave sanction to their own writings, to each other's writings, and to the writings of the Old Testament.

1. I Cor. 15:3-4 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,
2. II Cor. 13:3, 10 since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you.  
10 For this reason I am writing these things while absent, so that when present I need not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me for building up and not for tearing down.
3. II Tim. 3:15-16 and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.  
16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;
4. Heb. 1:1-2 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.
5. II Pet. 1:20-21 But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

D. ***The Test of Life Transforming Power*** also provides verification of the inspiration of a book. The Scriptures themselves claim that the Word of God is living and active, that it is attested by the Holy Spirit, that it leads us to salvation, that it transforms us by the power of God, and does not return without accomplishing what God sent it to do. The ability to save and sanctify is a quality that only the Word of God possesses. Any work which does not produce dynamic life-changing results in the lives of God's people would be seriously questioned.

1. Psa. 19:7-8 The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. 8The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
2. Isa. 55:10-11 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; 11So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.
3. Jer. 23:29 Is not My word like fire? declares the Lord, and like a hammer which shatters a rock?
4. II Cor. 3:14-18 But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. 15But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; 16but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 18But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.
5. Heb. 4:12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
6. I Pet. 1:22-23 Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, 23for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.

E. ***The test of importance by the people of God*** is another significant test of canonicity. As one examines the Scriptures, it is apparent certain books of the Old Testament were considered to be more important or more foundational than others. For instance, Deuteronomy 17:18-20 required that every king of Israel write out the entire law by hand. This was required of no other books. We also see, for example, that a copy of the law was kept in the Ark of the covenant. Surely the law was not the only thing written at that time, but it was the only thing written that deserved a place in the sacred Ark. Even after the temple was built, only certain writings were considered sacred enough to have a permanent copy sealed in the wall of the temple. We see this in the reign of Josiah when Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law as the temple was being remodeled (II Kings 22:8-13).

1. Deut. 17:18-19 Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. 19 It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes,
2. Deut. 31:24-26 It came about, when Moses finished writing the words of this law in a book until they were complete, 25that Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying, 26 Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you.

3. II Kings 22:8-13 Then Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan who read it. 9Shaphan the scribe came to the king and brought back word to the king and said, Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the Lord. 10Moreover, Shaphan the scribe told the king saying, Hilkiah the priest has given me a book. And Shaphan read it in the presence of the king. 11When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. 12Then the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam the son of Shaphan, Achbor the son of Micaiah, Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah the king's servant saying, 13 Go, inquire of the Lord for me and the people and all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found, for great is the wrath of the Lord that burns against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.

#### IV. **SUMMARY**

In this lesson we have attempted to list the majority of the criteria used by the believers through the ages to determine the canonicity of a book. Entire books have been written on the subject of canonicity. These books present many proofs which encourage us to trust in the veracity of that one great book which we call the Bible. What must not be forgotten is that the human authors of the Biblical books were usually well-known prophets or apostles. They wrote their books in contexts which left no room for doubt. For instance, no one doubted that God spoke to Moses. When Moses presented the Law of God to the people, there was no question that what he wrote was from God. The same is true, for instance, with the Apostle Paul. Paul put his signature on many, if not all, of his works and also sent his letters by trusted and well-known companions. So from the beginning, most books were never questioned at all and imposters were quickly discovered and rejected.