

*From God to Us:
How We Got Our Bible*
by
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Chapter 6

The Characteristics of Canonicity

Which books belong in the Bible? What about the so-called missing books? How did the Bible come to have sixty-six books? These are the kinds of questions covered in the next few chapters. This subject is called canonicity. It is the second great link in the chain from God to us. Inspiration is the means by which the Bible received its *authority*; canonization is the process by which the Bible received its final *acceptance*. It is one thing for prophets to receive a message from God but another for that message to be recognized by the people of God. Canonicity is the study which treats the recognition and collection of the books given by God's inspiration.

DEFINITION OF CANONICITY

The word *canon* is derived from the Greek *kanon* (a rod, ruler) which in turn comes from the Hebrew *kaneh*, an Old Testament word meaning "measuring rod" (cf. Eze 40:3). Even in pre-Christian usage the word was broadened to indicate a standard or norm other than a literal rod or ruler. The New Testament employs the term in its figurative sense to indicate a rule for conduct (Gal 6:18).

Early Christian Usage of the Word "Canon"

In early Christian usage the word *canon* came to mean the "rule of faith" or the normative writings (i.e., the authoritative Scriptures). By the time of Athanasius (fl. c. 350) the concept of a biblical canon or normative Scriptures was developing. The word *canon* was applied to the Bible in both active and passive senses. In the active sense the Bible is the canon by which all else is to be judged. In the passive sense, canon meant the rule or standard by which a writing was judged to be inspired or authoritative. This double usage causes some confusion which we will attempt to clarify. First, let us look at what is meant by a canon of Scripture in the active sense. Then we will look at its meaning in the passive sense.

Some Synonyms of Canonicity

The existence of a canon or collection of authoritative writings antedates the use of the term *canon*. The Jewish community collected and preserved their Holy Scriptures from the time of Moses.

Sacred Scriptures. One of the earliest concepts of a canon was that of sacred writings. That the writings of Moses were considered sacred is indicated by the holy place in which they were stored beside the ark of the covenant (Deu 31:24-26). After the temple was built, these sacred writings were preserved in it (2 Ki 22:8). The special accord granted to these select books alone indicates that they were considered to be canonical or sacred writings.

Authoritative writings. The divine authority of Scripture is another designation of its canonicity. The authority of the Mosaic writings was impressed on Joshua and Israel (Jos 1:8). Each king of Israel was exhorted to "write for himself in a book a copy of this law. . . . and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God" (Deu 17:1-19). Since the books came from God they were invested with His authority. As authoritative writings they were canonical or normative for the Jewish believer.

Books that defile the hands. In the teaching tradition of Israel there arose the concept of books so holy or sacred that those who used them had "defiled their hands." The Talmud says, "The Gospel and the books of the heretics do not make the hands unclean; the books of Ben Sira and whatever books have been written since his time are not canonical" (Tosefta Yadaim 3:5). The books of the Hebrew Old Testament, by contrast, do make the hands unclean because they are sacred. Hence, only those books which demand that the user undergo a special ceremonial cleansing were regarded as canonical.

Prophetic books. As previously discussed (chap. 3), a book qualified as inspired only if it had been written by a prophetic spokesman of God. The works of false prophets in nonprophetic books were rejected and not collected in a holy place. In fact, according to Josephus (*Contra Apion* 1:8), only those books which were composed during the prophetic period from Moses to Artaxerxes could be canonical. He wrote, "From Artaxerxes until our time everything has been recorded, but has not been deemed worthy of like credit with what preceded, because the exact succession of the prophets ceased." Only the books from Moses to Malachi were canonical since only these were written by men in the prophetic succession. During the period from Artaxerxes (fourth century B.C.) to Josephus (A.D. first century) there was no prophetic succession; hence, it was not part of the prophetic period. The Talmud makes the same claim, saying, "Up to this point [fourth century B.C.] the prophets prophesied through the Holy Spirit; from this time onward incline thine ear and listen to the sayings of the wise" (Seder Olam Rabba 30). In order to be canonical, then, an Old Testament book must come from the prophetic succession during the prophetic period.

DETERMINATION OF CANONICITY

These descriptions of canonicity will help clarify what is meant by canonical Scripture. The confusion between the active and passive senses of the word *canon* have occasioned ambiguity in the issue of what determines the canonicity of a book.

Some Inadequate Views On What Determines Canonicity

Several views of what determines the canonicity of a writing have been suggested. All of these positions confuse the canons or rules by which one discovers a book to be inspired (passive sense of the term *canon*) with the canon of normative writings which is discovered (active sense of the term *canon*). As such, these theories are inadequate in their notions of what determines the canonicity of a book. Let us examine them briefly.

The view that age determines canonicity. The theory that the canonicity of a book is determined by its antiquity, that it came to be venerated because of its age, misses the mark for two reasons. First, many very old books, as the Book of Jasher and the Book of the Wars of the Lord (Jos 10:13 and Num 21:14) were not accepted into the canon. Further, the evidence is that books were received into the canon immediately, not after they had aged. This was true of the books of Moses (Deu 31:24-26), of Jeremiah (Dan 9:2) and the New Testament writings of Paul (2 Pe 3:16).

The view that Hebrew language determines canonicity. Also insufficient is the view that those books written in the "sacred" language of the Hebrews were considered sacred books and those not written in Hebrew were not put in the canon. The fact of the matter is that not all books written in Hebrew were accepted, as some of the rejected Hebrew apocryphal books as well as other earlier nonbiblical writings indicate (see Jos 10:13). In addition, there are sections of books which were accepted into the canon that were not written in Hebrew (Dan 2:4b-7:28 and Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26 are in Aramaic).

The view that agreement with the Torah determines canonicity. Another inadequate view is that a book's canonicity was determined by whether or not it agreed with the Torah (Law of Moses). It goes without saying that books known to contradict the Torah would be rejected, since it was believed that God would not contradict Himself in subsequent revelations. But this theory misses two important points. First, it was not the Torah which determined the canonicity of everything after it. Rather, it was the same factor determining the canonicity of the Torah which determined the canonicity of all Scripture, namely, the fact that all of them were divinely inspired. In other words, the view that agreement with the Torah determines canonicity is inadequate because it does not explain what determined the canonicity of the Torah. Secondly, the theory is too broad. Many

other books which agreed with the Torah were not accepted as inspired. The Jewish fathers believed their Talmud and Midrash agreed with the Torah but never pronounced them canonical. The same is true of many Christian writings and the New Testament.

The view that religious value determines canonicity. Still another suggestion is that the religious value of a book was determinative of its position in the canon. Here again the cart is before the horse. It is axiomatic to say that a book without some kind of spiritual value would be rejected from the canon. It is also true that not every book with spiritual value is automatically canonical, as a wealth of both Jewish and Christian literature, including the Apocrypha, evidences. The important thing, however, is that this theory confuses cause and effect. It is not religious value which determines canonicity; it is canonicity which determines the religious value. More precisely, it is not the value of a book which determines its divine authority; it is the divine authority which determines its value.

Canonicity is Determined by Inspiration

The books of the Bible are not considered God-given because they are found to have value in them; they are valuable because they are given of God--the source of all value. And the process by which God gives His revelation is called inspiration. It is the inspiration of a book which determines its canonicity. God gives the divine authority to a book and men of God receive it. God reveals and His people recognize what He reveals. Canonicity is determined by God and discovered by man. The Bible is the "canon" or rule by which all else is to be measured because it possesses God-given authority. Whatever rules (canons) may be used by the church to discover precisely which books have this canonical or normative authority should *not* be said to "determine" their canonicity. To speak of the people of God, by whatever rules of recognition, as "determining" which books are divinely authoritative confuses the issue. Only God can give divine authority and, hence, canonicity to a book.

The primary notion of the word canon as applied to Scripture is the active sense, i.e., that the Bible is the ruling norm of faith. The secondary notion, that a book is judged by certain canons and receives recognition as inspired (the passive sense), should not be confused with the divine determination of canonicity. Only inspiration determines the authority of a book to be canonical or normative.

THE DISCOVERY OF CANONICITY

The people of God have played a crucial role in the process of canonization through the centuries, albeit not a determinative one. Upon the believing community lays the task of discriminating and deciding which books were from God. In order to fulfill this rule they

had to look for certain earmarks of divine authority. How would one recognize an inspired book if he saw it? What are the characteristics which distinguish a divine declaration from a purely human one? Several criteria were involved in this recognition process.

The Principles for Discovering Canonicity

False books and false writings were not scarce (see chaps. 8 and 10). Their ever-present threat made it necessary for the people of God to carefully review their sacred collection. Even books accepted by other believers or in earlier days were subsequently brought into question by the church. Operating in the whole process are discernible some five basic criteria: (1) Is the book *authoritative*--does it claim to be of God? (2) Is it *prophetic*--was it written by a servant of God? (3) Is it *authentic*--does it tell the truth about God, man, etc.? (4) Is the book *dynamic*--does it possess the life-transforming power of God? (5) Is this book *received* or accepted by the people of God for whom it was originally written--is it recognized as being from God?

The authority of a book. As indicated earlier (chaps. 3 and 4), each book in the Bible bears the claim of divine authority. Often the explicit "thus says the Lord" is present. Sometimes the tone and exhortations reveal its divine origin. Always there is divine pronouncement. In the more didactic (teaching) literature there is divine pronouncement about *what believers should do*. In the historical books the exhortations are more implied and the authoritative pronouncements are more about *what God has done* in the history of His people (which is "His story"). If a book lacked the authority of God, it was not considered canonical and was rejected from the canon.

Let us illustrate this principle of authority as it relates to the canon. The books of the prophets were easily recognized by this principle of authority. The repeated, "And the Lord said unto me," or "The word of the Lord came unto me," is abundant evidence of their claim to divine authority. Some books lacked the claim to be divine and were thereby *rejected* as noncanonical. Perhaps this was the case with the Book of Jasher and the Book of the Wars of the Lord. Still other books were *questioned* and challenged as to their divine authority but finally accepted into the canon, such as Esther. Not until it was obvious to all that the protection and therefore the pronouncements of God on His people were unquestionably present in Esther was this book accorded a permanent place in the Jewish canon. Indeed, the very fact some canonical books were called into question provides assurance that the believers were discriminating. Unless they were convinced of the divine authority of the book it was rejected.

The prophetic authorship of a Book. Inspired books come only through Spirit-moved men known as prophets (2 Pe 1:20-21). The Word of God is given to His people only through His prophets. Every biblical author had a prophetic gift or function, even if he was not a prophet by occupation (Heb 1:1).

Paul argued in Galatians that his book should be *accepted* because he was an apostle, "not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal 1:1). His book was to be accepted because it was apostolic--it was from a God-appointed spokesman or prophet. Books were to be *rejected* if they did not come from prophets of God, as is evident from Paul's warnings not to accept a book from someone falsely claiming to be an apostle (2 Th 2:2) and from the warning in 2 Corinthians about false prophets (11:13). John's warnings about false messiahs and trying the spirits would fall into the same category (1 Jn 2:18-19, and 4:1-3). It was because of this prophetic principle that 2 Peter was disputed by some in the early church. Until the fathers were convinced that it was not a forgery but that it really came from Peter the apostle as it claimed (1:1), it was not accorded a permanent place in the Christian canon.

The authenticity of a book. Another hallmark of inspiration is authenticity. Any book with factual or doctrinal errors (judged by previous revelations) could not be inspired of God. God cannot lie; His word must be true and consistent.

In view of this principle, the Bereans accepted Paul's teaching and searched the Scriptures to see whether or not what Paul taught them was really in accord with God's revelation in the Old Testament (Ac 17:11). Simple agreement with previous revelation would not ipso facto make a teaching inspired. But contradiction of a previous revelation would clearly indicate that a teaching was not inspired.

Much of the Apocrypha was rejected because of the principle of authenticity. Their historical anomalies and theological heresies made it impossible to accept them as from God despite their authoritative format. They could not be from God and contain error at the same time.

Some canonical books were *questioned* on the basis of this same principle. Could the letter of James be inspired if it contradicted Paul's teaching on justification by faith and not by works? Until their essential compatibility was seen, James was questioned by some. Others questioned Jude because of its citation of inauthentic Pseudepigraphal books (vv. 9, 14). Once it was understood that Jude's quotations granted no more authority to those books than Paul's quotes from the non-Christian poets (see also Ac 17:28 and Titus 1:12), then there remained no reason to reject Jude.

The dynamic nature of a book. A fourth test for canonicity, at times less explicit than some of the others, was the life-transforming ability of the writing: "The word of God is alive and powerful" (Heb 4:12). As a result it can be used "for teaching, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Ti 3:16-17).

The apostle Paul revealed that the dynamic ability of inspired writings was involved in the *acceptance* of all Scripture as 2 Timothy 3:16-17 indicates. He said to Timothy, "The holy scriptures . . . are able to make thee wise unto salvation" (v. 15, KJV). Elsewhere, Peter

speaks of the edifying and evangelizing power of the Word (1 Pe 1:23; 2:2). Other messages and books were rejected because they held out false hope (1 Ki 22:6-8) or rang a false alarm (2 Th 2:2). Thus, they were not conducive to building up the believer in the truth of Christ. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32). False teaching never liberates; only the truth has emancipating power.

Some biblical books, such as Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes, were questioned because they were thought by some to lack this dynamic edifying power. Once they were convinced that the Song was not sensual but deeply spiritual and that Ecclesiastes was not skeptical and pessimistic but positive and edifying (e.g., 12:9-10), then there remained little doubt as to their canonicity.

The acceptance of a book. The final trademark of an authoritative writing is its recognition by the people of God to whom it was initially given. God's Word given through His prophet and with His truth must be recognized by His people. Later generations of believers sought to verify this fact. For if the book was received, collected, and used as God's work by those to whom it was originally given, then its canonicity was established. Communication and transportation being what it was in ancient times, it sometimes took much time and effort on the part of later church Fathers to determine this recognition. For this reason the full and final recognition by the whole church of the sixty-six books of the canon took many, many years (see chap. 9).

The books of Moses were immediately *accepted* by the people of God. They were collected, quoted, preserved, and even imposed on future generations (see chap. 3). Paul's epistles were immediately received by the churches to whom they were addressed (1 Th 2:13) and even by other apostles (2 Pe 3:16). Some writings were immediately *rejected* by the people of God as lacking divine authority (2 Th 2:2). False prophets (Mt 7:21-23) and lying spirits were to be tested and rejected (1 Jn 4:1-3), as indicated in many instances within the Bible itself (cf Jer 5:2; 14:14). This principle of acceptance led some to *question* for a time certain biblical books such as 2 and 3 John. Their private nature and limited circulation being what it was, it is understandable that there would be some reluctance to accept them until they were assured that the books were received by the first-century people of God as from the apostle John.

It is almost needless to add that not everyone gave even initial recognition to a prophet's message. God vindicated His prophets against those who rejected them (e.g., 1 Ki 22:1-38) and, when challenged, He designated who His people were. When the authority of Moses was challenged by Korah and others, the earth opened and swallowed them alive (Num 16). The role of the people of God was decisive in the recognition of the Word of God. God determined the authority of the books of the canon, but the people of God were called upon to discover which books were authoritative and which were not. To assist them in this discovery were these five tests of canonicity.

The Procedure for Discovering Canonicity

We should not imagine a committee of church Fathers with a large pile of books and these five guiding principles before them when we speak of the process of canonization. No ecumenical committee was commissioned to canonize the Bible. The process was far more natural and dynamic. The actual historical development of the Old and New Testament canons will be discussed later (in chaps. 7 and 9). What is to be noted here is how the five rules for canonicity were used in the process of discovering which books were inspired of God and therefore canonical.

Some principles are only implicit in the process. Although all five characteristics are present in each inspired writing, not all of the rules of recognition are apparent in the decision on each canonical book. It was not always immediately obvious to the early people of God that some historical books were "dynamic" or "authoritative." More obvious to them was the fact that certain books were "prophetic," and "accepted." One can easily see how the implied "thus says the Lord" played a most significant role in the discovery of the canonical books which reveal God's overall redemptive plan. Nevertheless, the reverse is sometimes true; namely, the power and authority of the book are more apparent than its authorship (e.g., Hebrews). In any event, all five characteristics were involved in discovering each canonical book, although some were used only implicitly.

Some principles operate negatively in the process. Some of the rules for recognition operate more negatively than others. For instance, the principle of authenticity would more readily eliminate noncanonical books than indicate which books are canonical. There are no false teachings which are canonical, but there are many true writings which are not inspired. Likewise many books which edify or have a dynamic are not canonic, even though no canonical book is without significance in the saving plan of God.

Similarly, a book may claim to be authoritative without being inspired, as many of the apocryphal writings indicate, but no book can be canonical unless it really is authoritative. In other words, if the book lacks authority it cannot be from God. But the simple fact that a book claims authority does not make it ipso facto inspired. The principle of acceptance has a primarily negative function. Even the fact that a book is received by some of the people of God is not a proof of inspiration. In later generations some Christians, not thoroughly informed about the acceptance or rejection by the people of God to whom it was originally addressed, gave local and temporal recognition to books which are not canonical (e.g., some apocryphal books; see chaps. 8 and 10). Simply because a book was received somewhere by some believers is far from proof of its inspiration. The initial reception by the people of God who were in the best position to test the prophetic authority of the book is crucial. It took some time for all segments of subsequent generations to be fully informed about the original circumstances. Thus, their acceptance is important but supportive in nature.

The most essential principle supersedes all others. Beneath the whole process of recognition lay one fundamental principle--the prophetic nature of the book. If a book were written by an accredited prophet of God, claiming to give an authoritative pronouncement from God, then there was no need to ask the other questions. Of course the people of God recognized the book as powerful and true when it was given to them by a prophet of God. When there were no directly available confirmations of the prophet's call (as there often were, cf. Ex 4:1-9), then the authenticity, dynamic ability, and reception of a book by the original believing community would be essential to its later recognition. On the other hand, simply establishing the book as prophetic was sufficient in itself to confirm the canonicity of the book.

The question as to whether inauthenticity would disconfirm a prophetic book is purely hypothetical. No book given by God can be false. If a book claiming to be prophetic seems to have indisputable falsehood, then the prophetic credentials must be re-examined. God cannot lie. In this way the other four principles serve as a check on the prophetic character of the books of the canon.

Geisler, Normal L., Nix, William E. *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.
Note: No change of any kind has been made to the text.