

The Origin Of The Bible

The Canon of Scripture

It's mind-boggling! The Bible is not one book, but a library of many books written over a 1500-year period in 3 languages by 40 authors living in 10 different countries. The authors' works include history, mystery, romance, poetry, prose, and even humor! A cast of 2,930 characters are depicted in 1,551 places. How did this amazing collection ever come about?

God revealed Himself through His Hebrew prophets. The Jews revered the writings of the prophets and carefully preserved them. These sacred writings became the Scriptures of the first Christians. Christians recognized these Scriptures contained promises of the coming of Jesus. Inspired writings from the earliest church were later added to the Hebrew sacred books to make up a canon of Scripture.

The Greek word canon (quite different from the Latin cannon - used in warfare!) meant a rule, measuring rod, or standard. By the fourth century the Christians conclusively recognized that there was a Christian canon - the collected writings which set forth the standards of Christian truth as first taught by the apostles. In part, this finalization of the Christian canon came about because of the rise of various heresies.

Internal Threat

The Gnostic heretic Marcion, about 140 A.D., was the first to make a list of what books he thought were repositories of the truth. Marcion believed the God of the Old Testament was evil, so he rejected the entire Old Testament! He only accepted parts of the gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's epistles as true. Surprisingly this false teacher was performing a valuable service.

By listing the books he thought were evil and wrong, the church leaders were forced to carefully consider and confirm what Christian writings were true and authoritative.

Irenaeus, a church father writing about 180 A.D., and only two generations from the apostle John, attacked Marcion's Gnostic heresies. Irenaeus affirmed the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, as true because in them were the many prophecies fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He also used quotations of many of the New Testament writings to show the error of Marcion's teachings about the person and salvation work of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the second and third centuries the church fathers constantly quoted the early apostles and the gospels to explain Christian teaching to believers and to wage war against heretics. These Scriptures were a canon or rule to both measure truth and resist error; the early church was in strong agreement as to which writings were sacred.

Scriptures Burned

In 303 the Roman Emperor Diocletian sponsored the last empire-wide persecution of the Christians. His edicts demanded that churches be destroyed and the scriptures burned. Some Christians themselves were burned because they refused to turn over their sacred books.

Soon after the Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity a legal religion in 313 A.D., he requested that Eusebius of Caesarea produce 50 copies of the Scriptures for use in the capital city of Constantinople. Of the many Christian writings available, Eusebius was to collect only the sacred ones and combine them into one volume. This is the first reference to all the writings of the New Testament being brought into one book. Previous to this, the various writings of the New Testament were in separate scrolls or smaller collections of writings.

A Sorting Out Process

There were many other Christian writings in circulation in the fourth century. Some were good reading but obviously not inspired; others claimed to be inspired but were actually written by heretics and false teachers.

Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in Egypt was concerned about the influence these heretical writings were having on his people - some believers were even preparing astrological charts showing the stars named after the saints!

A number of the false books, such as the Gospel of Thomas, had names similar to Scripture but were full of error. Athanasius realized that the best defense against heresy was a clear understanding of Scripture. In his Easter letter of 367, Athanasius set before his people "the books included in the Canon and handed down, and accredited as Divine." Athanasius' list of the names of the inspired books of both the Old and New Testaments was the first list of Biblical books which corresponds to the 27 books we have in our Bibles today. In writing about them, Athanasius said, "These are the fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. . . Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these."

Final Confirmation

Two North African church councils, at Hippo Regius in 393 and at Carthage in 397, also accepted the 27 books listed by Athanasius as comprising the New Testament canon. Subsequently, other councils throughout the Christian world also ratified these books, so that by the 5th century this "New Testament" canon of Scripture was accepted by all.

The Canon



Of The Scriptures