

Know the Scriptures - Part One

by Pastor Elton Hallauer

“The Canon”

Every child of God considers it a miracle of divine grace that he is permitted to stand in the same crowd with young Timothy and hear the apostle of the Lord say to him, **“You have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation” (2 Timothy 3:15)**. Many of us recognize and appreciate the added measure of His love in permitting us to know those Scriptures **“from childhood,”** reminding us of our toddling days when we heard those first simple stories of Jesus’ love at the feet of our devout and devoted parents. In succeeding years, our knowledge of the Scriptures grew right along with our bodies. The Spirit of God enlightened us through the patient efforts of consecrated teachers, pastors, and professors, working with the Word to make us **“complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16)**.

When we see the word “Scriptures”, we think of that form of God’s writings with which we are most familiar. For most of us we can assume that this will be an English translation. Not a few among us were nudged to spiritual adulthood by the German version of the Bible. Those of us who have been trained and called to **“shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28)** in a public way will include also the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. The language of translation really doesn’t matter so much. It is extremely important, however, that what we have is truly Holy Scripture. How this has been determined, how the Bible has descended to us in its present forms, what is the message of the writers, there are some of the questions we shall endeavor to answer in the coming months.

Many Writings

The books which comprise the Book of Books were not the first known writings in the world. Some Egyptian and Babylonian inscriptions date back a few thousand years before the birth of Christ and even before the days of Moses. Surely, they were hewn in stone, scratched into soft clay, or inked upon whitewashed boards; they may have been crude, but they were writings. This silences those skeptics

who have held that writing was unknown in the days of Moses and that, therefore, he could not have written the first five books of the Old Testament.

We can also assume that some of these ancient writings were of a religious nature; that is, they often expressed beliefs of their authors and perhaps of an entire community or nation. We know that during the period from Moses until the death of St. John, about 1600 years, many religious books were written. Which of all these writings rightfully belong to the Bible, and which do not? On what basis are some writings classed as Holy Scriptures and others not? Which are the canonical books?

The word “canon” comes from a Hebrew root meaning “reed”; it soon came to mean also a guide or rule, then a list or index. When the word is used in connection with the Bible, it means that list of books which are accepted as Holy Scripture, having divine authority, in contrast to those which are the writings of men. A book receives its authority the moment it is divinely inspired, but it becomes a part of the canon only after its general acceptance as a product of God. No man, nor council of men, can give a book this authority. It has its authority long before men accept it or are obliged to admit it.

The Old Testament

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the good were eventually separated from the bad so that, by the time of Christ, the Old Testament canon had been established for all practical purposes. Officially, the Hebrew canon was not acted upon until about 90 A.D., even though Jesus and His apostles quoted from the “Scriptures” in their day as consisting of the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. The Old Testament that Jesus knew is the same as the one we know today, although the order of listing and divisions of some books were different. According to tradition, the Old Testament books were collected into the canon under the supervision of the Prophet Ezra some time before 400 B.C. The original writings (autographs) of the inspired writers were destroyed at the destruction of Jerusalem (586 B.C.), but the Jews had made copies (manuscripts) of them, which they carefully preserved. Already about 285 B.C., the entire Old Testament was translated into the Greek

(Septuagint Version). There is added evidence for the canonicity of our Old Testament from Josephus, a historian of the first century, and from such church fathers as Origen and Jerome of the third century.

Some Apocrypha

Those writings which are printed in some versions of the Bible but are generally omitted from the list of accepted books, – they number about 15 – are called Apocrypha. They were rejected especially by Luther and others of the Reformation era because of the false doctrine they contained, such as, prayers for the dead, the end justifies the means, etc. Furthermore, not a single evangelist or apostle quotes directly from the Apocrypha; yet the Roman Catholic Church recognized those faulty books as Inspired at the Council of Trent in 1546.

There are also in existence about nine “false writings” dating from a few centuries before to a few after Christ, books which have never been included in the canon. They are called false, it seems, because they were named after well-known Jewish men (Moses, Isaiah, Enoch) instead of their true authors. These writings, in general, encouraged the Jews to look forward to a happy future.

The New Testament

While the Old Testament Scriptures were written during a span of 1000 years, the evangelists and apostles did their work in the brief period of 50 years before 100 A.D. Again, under the providence of God, their writings were gradually collected to form the New Testament canon. It followed quite naturally that the early Christians would have as much respect for the inspired writings of those men whom their Lord had chosen as His personal ambassadors as they did for their oral teachings. Consequently, already 50 years after the death of the last of the apostles, their letters were being read, together with the writings of the prophets, by the Christians in their regular worship services.

By the last half of the second century, listings of New Testament books began to appear, but the content of the various listings was not always the same, occasionally because some of the books we now accept were not included and at other times because part of the list had been lost. Perhaps this explains to some extent the reason for the hesitation on the

part of some to accept the 27 books at first. In the third century, for example, Hebrews, James, 2nd and 3rd John, and Jude were questioned by some. In the next century the letters of James, 2nd Peter, 2nd and 3rd John, Jude and Revelation were still being suspected by a few, although they were accepted by the majority. Later in that century (367 A.D.), Athanasius published a list of 27 books, that were accepted in his day, and these are the very ones that are recognized today.

Gradually, then, the New Testament took form. The writings having divine authority were recognized as Holy Scriptures by Christian men. It should be stated, however, that the New Testament canon of some church bodies even today differ from that which we accept and which is included in our Bible, notably those of the Roman and Greek Catholic, the Ethiopic and a portion of the Syriac Church.

More Apocrypha

At least 15 books or writings of that period were not accepted by the early church as having divine authority. Essentially, although some of these presumed to be of historical value, they are legends and fanciful tales about such things as the childhood of Jesus, His resurrection, His mother, and the like. A few, such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas, were considered to be of some value; but these were never above suspicion and, even though men may have read them they were seldom regarded as having divine authority.

One Scripture

A few tests of the contents of a given religious writing help to determine whether or not it is Holy Scripture or non-scripture:

- ✓ Do Jesus or the apostles refer to some part of it?
- ✓ Does it point to Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of all men, the Sum and Substance of every man’s faith and hope?
- ✓ Does it agree with the whole of the Scriptures?

There are more. One of the stronger evidences of the canonicity of the 66 books of the Bible is the fact that they are there, that Christians use them, treasure them, and accept them as the supreme authority for faith and life.