



“Understanding the Bible”

Section 2: How Did We Get the Bible?

Unit 2.4: Clearing Up Concerns About the Canon



I) Doubts Over Documentation

- In the last two units of this section, we argued that the people of God did not *declare* biblical books to be divinely inspired, but they simply *discovered* them over time. Critics often have a hard time trusting in this process of canonical discovery because they claim there is not enough documented proof of how the canon came into formation. There are several factors, however, that these critics have never taken into consideration. Throughout this unit, we will be clearing up concerns about the canon by examining several historical documents that offer strong support for **trusting** in the canon of Scripture we have today.

II) From a Sacred Place to a Sacred Book

- As we begin addressing concerns about the Old Testament canon, we must first acknowledge there are two legitimate reasons we don't have original documents detailing how the canon was formed. First, Old Testament Scripture was written and later collected several thousand years ago and we don't have any original documents in our records that date back that far. Second, we need to consider the impact of disastrous events throughout the history of Israel. When the Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, forced the Israelites into exile around the time of the prophet Jeremiah in 600 BC, they burned the temple in Jerusalem down to the ground and plundered all their goods. Any ancient documents that would have explained the early canonical process of the Old Testament would have been kept in the temple and therefore been destroyed along with the temple itself. The actual Scriptures survived the temple destruction because faithful scribes had already copied and distributed scrolls of the books that were part of the early canon (the final prophets of the Old Testament had yet to speak for God at this point in history).
- Ironically, the reason that we don't have documentation for the Old Testament canon is the very same reason that the people of Israel later became so intentional about forming a standard collection of inspired writings to begin with. Since Israel no longer had a temple to gather in for daily worship, gathering around a preserved collection of sacred writings became critically important. **Daniel 9:2** says, *“In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.”* When Daniel says, “in the books,” he was talking specifically about the books recognized by the Israelites as Holy Scripture. This reveals to us that a canon was forming progressively from the very early stages of Israel's history leading up to the arrival of Jesus Christ.

III) Recapturing the Earliest Records

- Although we don't have original documents, we do have ancient historians who have given us reliable evidence of Israel's universal agreement over the books of Scripture. Flavius **Josephus** (AD 37-100) was a first-century historian who confirmed that the Hebrew canon consisted of exactly 22 books (representing the same material as the 39 books we have today). He also confirmed that there was not another inspired book from God written after Malachi in 425 BC, and that the Israelites were in such agreement over these sacred books that they were willing to die for them. Josephus explained, *“...how firmly we have given credit to those books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them or take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it becomes natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willing to die for them.”*

IV) A Showcase of Twentieth Century Support

- A final historical discovery that gives us the most recent support for the Old Testament canon is the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls were first discovered in the small village of Qumran just outside of Jerusalem in 1947. A young Bedouin shepherd named Muhammad Ahmad el-Hamed followed a goat that had gone astray into a desolate cave. El-Hamed tossed a rock into one of the caves and heard a cracking sound of a ceramic pot. He soon discovered this pot contained leather and papyrus scrolls that were later determined to be nearly twenty centuries old. Over the next decade that followed, eleven caves around the Dead Sea were found to contain thousands of scroll fragments dating from the third century B.C. to A.D. 68, representing an estimated eight-hundred separate works. Most importantly, these fragments include portions of every book in the Hebrew Bible except the Book of Esther, and all of them were created nearly one thousand years earlier than any previously known biblical manuscripts.

V) Calling Out the Counterfeits

- As mentioned in Unit 2.2, the Pseudepigrapha (books written between 200 BC – 300 AD) and the Apocrypha (books written in 400-year span between the two testaments) are two collections that some critics of the Bible claim should be a part of our current canon. Most scholars are quick to refute any divine quality of the books of the Pseudepigrapha, because these are books that contain many historical errors and inconsistencies with the biblical story. They are simply books that have been given titles of famous Bible characters (ex. “The Book of Adam and Eve; The Assumption of Moses) to try and gain notoriety, but most scholars dismiss them as mere fiction. The books of the Apocrypha are more difficult to refute because the Catholic church has included these writings as part of their canon. Some of these books contain helpful material that documents Israel’s history between the two testaments. However, these books also contain many theological heresies, including 2 Maccabees, which teaches on the heretical doctrine of purgatory. Perhaps the strongest case against any Apocryphal books being included is the almost universal agreement among Jewish and early Christian leaders that God ceased to speak after the time of Malachi around 425 BC until Christ’s incarnation. Since the Apocryphal books were all written in this timeframe, they should never be considered divinely-inspired of God.

VI) Debunking the Da Vinci Code

- Shifting our focus to the New Testament canon, the most prominent argument that we have faced in recent history has stemmed from the movie “The Da Vinci Code” based on the fictional book written by Dan Brown. According to this movie and book, the canon was something manipulated by the Roman Emperor Constantine for political reasons in 325 AD when he attended the Council of Nicea. The truth is that the canon of Scripture was never discussed in this council, but rather the humanity and deity of Jesus Christ. From this council, the “Nicene Creed” was birthed and it has been helpful in giving the church a clear statement about Christ’s human and divine nature as the Son of God.

VII) Further Confirmation of a Canon

- There have been multiple discoveries throughout church history that continue to confirm the New Testament canon is as equally reliable as our Old Testament canon. These discoveries include the writings of Papias of Hierapolis (a first century church father who first confirmed all four gospels), The Muratorian Fragment (a seventh century Latin manuscript copy that contains a listing of the New Testament books from a text that is dated around AD 170), and the Easter letter of Athanasius (a letter written by the bishop of Alexandria in AD 367 that confirms all 27 New Testament books as Scripture).

VIII) Taking the Road Most Traveled

- The best way to draw this discussion of the biblical canon to a close is to revisit the illustration of Harvard professor Arthur Darby Nock. Nock pointed to the self-authenticating qualities of the biblical books themselves as the ultimate proof of their divine nature. He compared them to the roads of Europe when he said, “*The most traveled roads in Europe are the best roads; that is why they are so heavily traveled.*” Like European roads, our biblical books have a well-worn path that speaks for itself.