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Why Sixty-Six Books? The Development of the Canon

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The past few decades have witnessed a resurgence of criticism against the authority of the canon of Scripture. Books like *The da Vinci Code* seek to undermine the foundations of Christianity by shedding doubt on the cornerstone of its structure: the Word of God. Sadly, these critiques generally invent lies and falsify information to create “persuasive” arguments against the authority of Scripture, and one of the most common areas in which this occurs is the canonization process of the Bible. Yet, as this lesson demonstrates, the early church faced similar problems and struggles as they received God’s Word, and the wisdom He granted them to confront these problems and the faithfulness He demonstrated during their time should instruct and encourage us in our own day.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Joshua 1:8–9; Luke 24:13–49; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; 2 Peter 3:16

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

1. To explain the difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism on the process of canonization
2. To demonstrate how Scripture and the early church affirmed the Old Testament as inspired and authoritative
3. To illuminate the canonization process of the New Testament
4. To demonstrate how Scripture and the early church affirmed the New Testament as inspired and authoritative

QUOTATION

But Hermas wrote The Shepherd very recently, in our times, in the city of Rome, while bishop Pius, his brother, was occupying the chair of the church of the city of Rome. And therefore it ought indeed to be read; but it cannot be read publicly to the people in church either among the Prophets, whose number is complete, or among the Apostles, for it is after their time.

—An excerpt from the Muratorian Fragment

LECTURE OUTLINE

I. The Development of the Canon

- A. The word “canon” derives from the Greek word *kanōn*, meaning “measuring rod, standard.”
- B. Protestants and Roman Catholics think differently about the issue of canon.
 - i. In Roman Catholicism, the Roman Catholic Church *establishes* the canon.
 - ii. Protestants substitute the word “establishes” for the word “recognize.”
 1. The process of canonization is the process of the church recognizing which books are canonical and which are not.
 2. The difference between these two positions is substantive.
- C. Scripture establishes the canon of the Old Testament (containing thirty-nine books) internally.
 - i. The first section of the Old Testament is the Law, the first five books of the Old Testament (a.k.a Torah or Pentateuch).
 1. Joshua 1:8–9 refers to the Book of the Law as the center of Israel’s life.
 2. The prophets refer to the Law in this same manner, constantly pointing back to it and the covenant contained within to instigate Israel to live properly before the Lord.
 3. These passages and others demonstrate the inspiration and authority of the Law.
 - ii. Jesus also understands the Old Testament and its components as authoritative.
 1. Jesus quotes from the book of Proverbs, attributing His quotes to God.
 2. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus reveals all that was written about Him in the Old Testament, beginning with Moses and the prophets (Luke 24:13–35).
 3. Jesus reveals Himself to the disciples and explains that “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44).
 - a. This passage refers to the three sections of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), the Tanakh.
 - b. Tanakh is an abstraction from the three Hebrew words for the three sections of the Hebrew Bible: Torah (“ta”; “law”), Nevi’im (“na”; “prophets”), and Ketuvim (“kh”; “writings”).

- c. Jesus' and the other New Testament authors' use of these three sections of the Old Testament demonstrates that they are inspired and authoritative.
- D. The New Testament does not provide a firm list of the thirty-nine Old Testament books.
- i. Although the Jews recognized the Old Testament and its thirty-nine books as authoritative, the influence of Greek philosophy led some to rescind this authority and remove some, if not all, of the books.
 - 1. A central tenet of Greek philosophy viewed the physical as inferior to the spiritual, and sometimes even evil.
 - 2. Marcion (circa AD 150) employed this philosophy when he formed his list of canonical books and rejected the Old Testament.
 - ii. Melito, the bishop of Sardis, among many others, denounced Marcion and issued a list of the canon containing the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, affirming the Jewish tradition of hundreds of years.
- E. The canonization of the New Testament featured a different process.
- i. The New Testament authors explicitly verify the inspiration and authority of much of the New Testament.
 - 1. The epistles of the New Testament quote from the gospels and refer to their content as authoritative (e.g. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, in regards to the Lord's Supper).
 - 2. Peter refers to Paul's epistles as authoritative and on the level of Scripture (2 Peter 3:16).
 - ii. The bishops and churchmen of the early church refer to much of Scripture as authoritative in their own writings and communications (e.g. Polycarp of Smyrna).
 - iii. By roughly AD 100, the four gospels, the letters of Paul, Acts, and some of the general epistles are recognized as canonical—around eighty-five percent of the New Testament we have today.
 - iv. Outside of this eighty-five percent, a number of works existed that did not receive universal acceptance but still existed and circulated in the ancient church.
 - 1. Works like the Gospel of Judas and the Apocalypse of Peter, originating in the second century and beyond, circulated at this time.
 - 2. Some, like Bart Ehrman, believe that their presence legitimates their place as canonical and authoritative.
 - 3. This reasoning is unfair to the data, as it denounces the particular orthodox view from the ancient time period by virtue of its preeminence alone.
 - v. The Muratorian Fragment, discovered by Ludovico Antonio Muratori, sheds light on the process of canonization in the early church.
 - 1. The fragment demonstrates that the church used three criteria for recognizing a canonical work.

- a. The book had to be written by an apostle.
 - 1) Apostles were eyewitnesses, an important feature of legitimate testimony in the ancient world.
 - 2) Apostles had an authority of office and spoke from God.
 - 3) The Muratorian Fragment mentions the work *The Shepherd of Hermas*, probably written by Hermas. It commends the work, but it does not attribute authority to it because Hermas was not an apostle.
 - b. The book must have appropriate theological content.
 - 1) The book must not contradict other Scripture.
 - 2) The Fragment renounces many Gnostic works, similar to the Gospel of Judas, for its contradictory message.
 - c. The work must be accepted by the church.
 - 1) The church receives the work. It does not establish it.
 - 2) The church must view the book as canonical.
- F. In AD 367, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, writes a letter confirming the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and in AD 397, the Synod of Carthage convenes and agrees to the list of Athanasius for the New Testament and reaffirms Melito's list of the Old Testament.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does the Greek word *kanōn* mean?
 - a. "cannon"
 - b. "dignified"
 - c. "testimony"
 - d. "measuring rod"
2. What are the three sections of the Old Testament?
 - a. Law, Epistles, Writings
 - b. Creation, Law, Prophets
 - c. Law, Prophets, Writings
 - d. Law, Prophets, Apocalypse
3. The early church sided with Marcion and his canonical list over and above Melito.
 - a. True
 - b. False
4. The Muratorian Fragment supported *The Shepherd of Hermas* as a canonical work.
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. The Council of Carthage was the first council of the church to confirm officially the entire biblical corpus.
 - a. True
 - b. False

BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do Roman Catholics and Protestants think differently about the process of canonization?
2. How does the New Testament legitimize the authority of the Old Testament already known and accepted by the Jews for centuries? Why did some in the early church discredit this authority, and how did the church respond?
3. How does the New Testament explicitly testify to its own authority? What other support exists in the early church for the authority of Scripture? Roughly how much of Scripture was seen as canonical circa AD 100?
4. Why do some, like Bart Ehrman, want to legitimize all the ancient works claiming authority in the early church? Why is this unfair?
5. What is the Muratorian Fragment? What criteria does it list for a canonical work?