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THE RULE OF BOOKS

DURING the last great persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, early in the fourth century, a believer in Sicily was brought before the governor. He was charged with possessing a copy of the Gospels.

"Where did these come from?" asked the judge, pointing to the books.

"Did you bring them from your home?"

"I have no home," replied the prisoner, "as my Lord Jesus knows."

Once again pointing to the Gospels, the judge said, "Read them!"

The Christian opened the Gospels and read, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

He turned to another place and read again, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

That was too much. The judge ordered his prisoner away—to death.

Roman officials came to see that the suppression of Christianity demanded the destruction of the Scriptures. So the last great persecution of Christians included the burning of the Scriptures.

To this day we find it almost impossible to think of the Christian faith without the Bible. It is the foundation of Christianity's evangelism, its teaching, its worship, and its morality. When we look back over Christian history, we find few—if any—decisions more basic than those made during the first three centuries surrounding the formation of the Bible. The Scriptures served not only as the inspiration for believers facing martyrdom, but as the supreme standard for the churches threatened by heresy. If catholic Christianity was orthodox, the Bible made it so, for the constant test of any teaching was, what do the Scriptures say?

We need to ask, then, how did we get the Bible?

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THE BASICS OF THE BIBLE

The name itself—*Bible*—suggests that Christians consider these writings special. Jerome, the fourth century translator, called them “the Divine Library.” He wanted to stress that the many books were, in fact, one. Greek-speaking believers made the same point when they shifted from the early plural form *Biblia*, meaning “The Books,” to *The Bible*, meaning “The Book.”

Long before, Jews had faced the same problem when they spoke of *The Scriptures* and *Scripture*. That explains how, in time, the *Bible* and *Scripture* came to mean the same thing in Christian circles, the sixty-six books that Christians consider the written word of God.

Today, we find the Scriptures grouped under *Old Testament* (or *Covenant*) and *New Testament*. In the ancient world a “testament,” or more often a “covenant,” was the term for a special relationship between two parties. Occasionally we still speak of the “marriage covenant,” which binds husband and wife to each other.

Used in the Bible, the term stands for the special relationship between God and man, initiated and sustained by the grace of the Lord God. The old covenant was first between the Lord and Abraham, then between God and Abraham’s descendants, the children of Israel. Later years knew them as Jews. So the Old Testament contains the books that tell the story of the Jews and their ancient worship of God.

Early Christians believed that Jesus of Nazareth was God’s promised Messiah, who established a new covenant with his new people, the church. So the New Testament stands for the books telling the story of Jesus Christ and the birth of the church.

The Bible contains two portions: the Old Testament, which the early Christians claimed—along with the Jews—and the New Testament, which the early Christians produced—in spite of the Jews. The Old Testament promised; the New Testament fulfilled.

The word for the special place these books occupy in Christianity is *canon*. The term from the Greek language originally meant “a measuring rod” or, as we might say, “a ruler.” It was a standard for judging something straight. So the idea transferred to a list of books that constituted the standard or “rule” of the churches. These were the books read publicly in the congregations because they had a special authority of God upon them.

Since the first Christians were all Jews, Christianity was never without a *canon*, or as we say, *Scripture*. Jesus himself clearly accepted the Old

Testament as God’s word to man. “Scripture cannot be broken,” he said. “Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled” (John 10:35; Luke 24:44).

Jesus believed the statements of Scripture, endorsed its teaching, obeyed its commands, and set himself to fulfill the pattern of redemption it laid down. Early Christians were simply heirs of this attitude. Had not the hopes and plans of the old covenant come true in Jesus? Had not the promised messianic age dawned in him?

Early believers went to exaggerated lengths to make the Old Testament into a Christian book. Their interpretations of Scripture often kept to the historical pattern of promise and fulfillment used by the New Testament writers. But some resourceful writers went far beyond this basic theme. They soon developed a method of interpretation that discovered Jesus Christ and the Christian message all over the Old Testament. We call this allegorical interpretation, because it turns seemingly actual events, such as the crossing of the Jordan River, into a symbol of baptism or some other Christian truth.

By the third century the church had sophisticated scholars who could defend the Christian claim to the Old Testament by the use of allegory. The most influential was a teacher at Alexandria named Origen, who spoke of the different levels of Scripture:

“The Scriptures were composed through the Spirit of God, and have both a meaning which is obvious, and another which is hidden from most readers. . . . The whole law is spiritual, but the inspired meaning is not recognized by all—only by those who are gifted with the grace of the Holy Spirit in the word of wisdom and knowledge.”

Christian appeals to allegory infuriated pagan critics of the faith because their case depended on their taking the Old Testament at face value. The move remained popular, however, since it enabled Origen and other believers to find the Christian message just beneath the surface of the Old Testament.

THE QUESTION OF THE APOCRYPHA

When Christians retained the Old Testament for their own use, they did not settle completely just which books this included. To this day Christians differ over the inclusion or rejection of the so-called Apocrypha in the Old Testament list of books. The term stands for twelve or fifteen books,

depending upon how you group them, that Roman Catholics accept as canonical and most Protestants reject.

The question is extremely complicated, but the debate centers around the fact that Jews in Palestine in the early years of Christianity had a canon corresponding to the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament. Jews referred to this list when he spoke of the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms (Luke 24:44). The evidence seems to indicate that neither Jesus nor his apostles ever quoted from the Apocrypha as Scripture.

Beyond Palestine, however, Jews were more inclined to consider as Scripture writings not included in this list of books. The Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint was especially influential in making known certain books of the Apocrypha because it included these books along with the Old Testament books accepted in Palestine.

Early Christians also differed, then, over the question of the Apocrypha. Believers in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire, nearest Palestine, tended to agree with the Jews in that area. In the West, however, Christians under the influence of Augustine, the well-known bishop of Hippo, usually received the Apocrypha as part of the canon of Scripture. During the sixteenth-century Reformation most Protestants accepted the view of early eastern Christians and rejected the Apocrypha as canonical. The Roman Catholic church, following Augustine, accepted the books. And that is how the churches differ to this day.

From the beginning, however, Christians had more than the Old Covenant as their rule for faith. During Jesus' life on earth they had the Word made flesh, and after Jesus' departure they had the living leadership of the apostles. The reverence for the apostles' message, whether oral or written, as the authentic channel to the will of the Lord Jesus, is reflected throughout early Christian literature.

During the days of the apostles congregations often read letters from the companions of the Lord. Some of these letters were obviously intended to be read in public worship, probably alongside some portion of the Old Testament or with some sermon.

Churches also relied on accounts about the life of the Lord Jesus. The first Gospels were not written before A.D. 60 or 70 but their contents were partly available in written form before this. Luke tells us that many had undertaken some account of the events of the life of Jesus.

The question is, out of this growing body of Christian literature, how did the twenty-seven books we know as the New Testament come to be set apart as Scripture? How and when did they cross the line between books

regarded as important and even authoritative, and books regarded as holy and the Word of God? To put it in one word, how did they become canonical?

Several factors were at work in this process. Some were internal characteristics of the developing life of the churches, others were external, threats to the gospel arising from historical events and pagan influences.

First, the books that are Scripture and are truly the Word of God have about them a self-evidencing quality. They carry their uniqueness on their face. They have always exercised, and still exercise, an unparalleled power upon the lives of men.

For example, as a young man Justin Martyr searched energetically for truth in a variety of philosophical schools: first as a Stoic, then a Pythagorean, then a Platonist. But none of them satisfied him. One day, while meditating alone by the seashore, perhaps at Ephesus, he met an old man. During their conversation the stranger exposed the weaknesses of Justin's thinking and urged him to turn to the Jewish prophets. By reading Scripture, Justin became a Christian. Scores of other men and women in the early days of the church had a similar experience: Tatian, Theophilus, Hilary, Victorinus, Augustine.

One of the primary reasons, then, behind the adoption of the New Testament books as Holy Scripture was this self-authenticating quality.

Second, certain Christian books were added to Scripture because they were used in Christian worship. Even in the New Testament itself there are signs that the reading of Scripture was very much a part of Christian congregational life. The apostle Paul urged the Colossians: "After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea" (Col. 4:16, NIV).

Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century, gives us the first description of a Christian service: "On the day called the Day of the Sun all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray." Thus, we see by Justin's time *The Memoirs of the Apostles*, which was his title for the Gospels, were a central part of Christian worship.

The mere act of reading a book in Christian worship did not assure the writing an eventual place in the canon. We know, for example, that Clement, Bishop of Rome, wrote a letter to the church at Corinth about A.D. 96 and eighty years later it was still the custom in Corinth to read Clement's

letter at public worship. Yet Clement's letter was never added to the canon. Books read at the worship of the church had a special position and had started on the road that led to entrance into the canon of Scripture—but some did not make it.

Third, and perhaps the fundamental reason behind a Christian book's acceptance into the New Testament, was its ties to an apostle. This was the test of a book's validity: Was it written by an apostle, or at least by a man who had direct contact with the circle of the apostles?

In the early church the apostles held a place that other men simply could not fill. Early believers always regarded them as men who had a unique relationship with the Lord. Did not Jesus say: "He who receives you receives me" (Matt. 10:40)?

Clement of Rome reflects this general attitude of Christians when he writes: "The apostles were made evangelists to us by the Lord Christ, Jesus Christ was sent by God. Thus Christ is from God, and the apostles from Christ. . . . The Church is built on them as a foundation" (1 Clement 42). Any gospel or letter, therefore, that could make a strong claim to apostolic authorship stood a good chance of acceptance as Scripture.

A LIST OF CHRISTIAN BOOKS

Given enough time the churches, under the influence of these factors, and perhaps others, probably would have drawn up a list of canonical Christian writings. But certain events forced the hand of the churches.

About A.D. 140 a wealthy and much-traveled shipowner from Sinope on the Black Sea came to Rome. His name was Marcion. Although the son of a bishop, Marcion fell under the spell of the gnostic teacher Cerdo, who believed that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The God of the Old Testament, he said, was unknowable; the Christian God had been revealed. The Old Testament God was sheer justice; whereas the God of the New Covenant was loving and gracious.

Marcion developed Cerdo's distinction. He held that the Old Testament God was full of wrath and the author of evil. This God, he said, was only concerned for the Jewish people. He was prepared to destroy all other people. In contrast, the Christian's God was a God of grace and love for all who disclosed himself in Jesus Christ, his Son.

Because he believed that the God of the Old Testament loved the Jews

exclusively, Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and also those New Covenant writings that he thought favored Jewish readers—for example Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Hebrews. He also rejected other Christian writings that appeared to him to compromise his own views, including the Pastoral Letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). So he was left with only a mutilated version of Luke's Gospel (omitting the nativity stories) and ten letters of Paul. The Apostle to the Gentiles, it seems, was the only apostle who did not corrupt the gospel of Jesus.

Marcion's garbled Christian views were firmly repudiated by the church in Rome, and Marcion was excommunicated from the church in A.D. 144. Before long, however, Marcionite churches appeared, modeled on orthodox congregations. They had their own ministers and rituals. For example, they did not use wine at communion, as a result of the ascetic emphasis of their teaching. Some of the Marcionite beliefs spilled over into the various gnostic sects, and Marcionites were themselves affected by gnostic views. Their ideas spread, however, throughout Italy, and as far afield as Arabia, Armenia, and Egypt. In the East they exercised a considerable influence for many decades. A number of Marcionite villages existed near Damascus as late as the fourth century.

Most importantly, however, Marcion presented the orthodox churches with a twofold problem: his list of New Testament books, shaped in the image of Paul, and his rejection of the Old Testament.

Marcion's worship of Paul was little short of idolatry. As he saw it, Paul was the great enemy of the law and the great spokesman for the gospel. He was in fact the supreme figure in the church. Marcion believed Christ had descended from heaven twice, once to suffer and to die, and once to call Paul and to reveal to Paul the true significance of his death. In heaven, said Marcion, Paul sits at the right hand of Christ, who sits at the right hand of God.

As the North African lawyer Tertullian put it, Paul had become the apostle of the heretics! Of course, Marcion had to misinterpret Paul to make the apostle fit his beliefs, but that didn't make the churches' problem any less real: how could they accept Paul's letters as God's word without endorsing Marcionite teaching?

In the end Paul meant too much to the church to dismiss him because of Marcion's extreme views. The apostle's letters were too well known and too widely used to discard them. The church chose, instead, to restore the Pastorals and the letters of the other apostles and to link all the letters to four Gospels by using the Book of Acts as the bridge. While the church

treasured the grace of God preached by Paul, it realized that jettisoning the Old Testament was suicidal. Does the New Covenant make sense without the Old?

By retaining the Old Testament the church scored two important points. First, it insisted that faith for the Christian would have to reconcile both the wrath and the love of God. Marcion's message was too easy. By eliminating the Old Testament he hoped to make the love of God central for the Christian. But love that never faces the demands of justice is not Christian love. It was not the love Marcion's hero knew! Paul found in the Cross not only a demonstration of God's love but a display of his righteousness. Christ's death, he said, allowed God to be both just and the justifier of all who believe in Jesus (Rom. 3:25, 26). That is the marvel of the grace of God Marcion missed.

Second, by retaining the Old Testament the church underscored the importance of history for the Christian faith. Christianity is a historical religion not just in the sense that it comes from the past or that it is associated with a historical character named Jesus. It is historical because it stems from the belief that within history itself, in a particular place, at a particular time, God himself took a hand in human affairs. And that means that living by faith for the Christian includes facing the puzzles of human existence—all of the "why, Lord?"s of life—and still believing that God has some good in mind.

If Marcion, a heretic, nudged the churches into thinking about forming a New Testament, another troublemaker, Montanus, forced the churches into thinking about closing it.

FRESH VOICES FROM GOD

Christianity has always been a religion of the Spirit. According to the fourth Gospel Jesus had promised to his people the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, to guide them (John 16:13–15). How, then, did there ever come a time when the church declared that all the inspired books that could be written had been written, and that nothing more could ever be added to the written word of God? How did it come about that, as Tertullian bitterly put it, "the Holy Spirit was chased into a book"?

In the second half of the second century a change was coming over the church. The days of enthusiasm were passing and the days of ecclesiasticism were arriving. The church was no longer a place where the Spirit of proph-

cy could be heard. More and more people were joining the churches, but the distinction between church and world was fading. The church was becoming secularized; it was coming to terms with heathen thought and culture and philosophy. The way of the cross was no longer rough and steep.

Into this situation, sometime between A.D. 156 and 172 Montanus appeared, a voice in the wilderness of Asia Minor. He came with a demand for a higher standard and a greater discipline and sharper separation of the church from the world. Had he halted there, he could have done little but good, but he went much further. He and his two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla, went about prophesying in the name of the Spirit, and foretelling the speedy second coming of Christ. That in itself was not extraordinary. But these new prophets, in contrast to prophets in biblical times, spoke in a state of ecstasy, as though their personalities were suspended while the Paraclete spoke in them. Montanus was convinced that he and his prophetesses were the God-given instruments of revelation, the eyes across which the Spirit swept to play a new song. With that Montanus' super-spirituality went too far.

Clearly the church had to act. The greatest problem was disorder. Montanus as a herald of a new spiritual vitality and a new challenge to holiness was one thing; but when Montanists insisted that opposition to the new prophecy was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, many churches split over the question.

Montanus' doctrine of the new age of the Spirit suggested that the Old Testament period was past, and that the Christian period centering in Jesus had ended. The prophet claimed the right to push Christ and the apostolic message into the background. The fresh music of the Spirit could override important notes of the Christian gospel; Christ was no longer central. In the name of the Spirit, Montanus denied that God's decisive and normative revelation had occurred in Jesus Christ.

In the face of this challenge how could the church keep the gospel central? It had to make all later Christian worship, teaching, and life center in Christ and the apostolic witness. Free utterances of the Spirit would not guarantee that; Montanism was making this clear. The best way to make the original apostolic gospel basic was to set apart the apostolic writings as uniquely authoritative. This would require all later faith and action to be judged in the light of that central message.

It was not that the church had ceased to believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. The difference was that in the first days the Holy Spirit had enabled men to write the sacred books of the Christian faith; in the later days the

Holy Spirit enabled men to understand, to interpret, and to apply what had been written.

One of the reasons we know that the church assumed this position lies in the appearance of lists of New Testament books. One of the first is a document written about A.D. 190. We call it the Muratorian Canon, from its discoverer L. A. Muratori, who first published it in 1740. The document is damaged at the beginning, and actually begins with Luke, but its list of books is as follows: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Romans, Philemon, Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy, Jude, 1 and 2 John, the Apocalypse of John (that is, the Revelation), the Apocalypse of Peter, and The Wisdom of Solomon. The last two, we know, did not remain on the approved list. But by A.D. 190 the churches clearly accepted the idea of Christian Scriptures alongside Jewish Scriptures, one fulfilling what the other promises.

By the early third century only a handful of books continued to create any question. Hebrews faced some opposition in the western regions of the empire and Revelation was unpopular in the east. At the outset of the fourth century Eusebius, the church historian, summed up the situation and indicates that James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude were the only books "spoken against" by some while recognized by others. Revelation, however, continued to bewilder him.

The first complete list of books, as we have them today, came in an Easter letter written in 367 by Bishop Athanasius from Alexandria. Shortly thereafter councils in North Africa at Hippo (393) and at Carthage (397) published the same list.

In one sense, of course, Christians created the canon. Their decisions concerning the books were a part of history. In another sense, however, they were only recognizing those writings that had made their authority felt in the churches. The shape of the New Testament shows that the early churches' primary aim was to submit fully to the teachings of the apostles. In that purpose they shaped the character of Christianity for all time. The faith remained catholic precisely because it was apostolic.

The New Testament As It Gained Acceptance by the Early Church

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| 190 | New Testament used in the church at Rome (the "Muratorian Canon") | 200 | New Testament used by Origen | 250 | New Testament used by Eusebius | 300 | New Testament fixed for the West by the Council of Carthage | 400 |
| Different parts of our New Testament were written by this time, but not collected and defined as "Scripture." Early Christian writers (for example Polycarp and Ignatius) quote from the Gospels and Paul's letters, as well as from other Christian writing and oral sources. | Paul's letters: Acts, Paul's letters: Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Philemon, James | Four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters: Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, 1 & 2 John, Revelation of John | Four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters: Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation of John (authorship in doubt), Disputed Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude | Four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters: Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation of John, Disputed but well known | Four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters: Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation of John, Disputed but well known | Four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters: Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation of John, Disputed but well known | Four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters: Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation of John, Disputed but well known | Four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters: Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation of John, Disputed but well known |