

Canonization of scriptures essay



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The ancient world was not the world of railways, airplanes and radio; it greatly differed from nowadays. Today's trip in few hours could take months and, even, years. The earliest collections of the Bible were incomplete and a tiresome work of scribes could not cover the needs of citizens. Moreover, the sacred scriptures had to be hidden in the times of persecutions. There were no councils and conferences, where Christians from all over the world could gather and compare letters and notes they had. Therefore, the earliest collections of the Bible, especially the books of the New Testament, greatly differed in various places and the process of canonization was slowed down by the lack of time and communication.

The origins of the Old Testament

One of the smallest nations, which numbers 0.02 percent of world's population, is, however, the only one that has preserved the origins of traditions, culture, language and genealogy of forefathers. Jews, known for their accuracy and perseverance, are carrying the fire of God's promises to their nation starting from Abraham, the first Jew, till today. God had chosen them to give the sacred book to the whole world that was premised on the Mount Sinai in Ten Commandments.

The Bible, as it is known today, is a collection of books that, traditionally, were ascribed to the leaders, who have become famous in the Jewish history. Among them are – Moses, Samuel, David, Solomon. However the scholars of the Old Testaments had proved that many books represent the latest compilations of ancient traditions and documents. For example, the Book of Genesis contains the fragments that have been written in 10 B. C. and dated

from 800 years' oral prescription, but the entire book was, probably, written not earlier than 5 B. C.

Till the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A. D., the canon of Jewish Scriptures was not clearly defined. Ancient scrolls, known as Scripture, circulated in synagogues; however, the center of their religion was the Temple and its ceremonies, where sacred scriptures were protected by priests. Nevertheless, the complete version of all ancient writings is dating from the 3rd B. C. Seeking for refuge, Jews had fled to different parts of the empire, forming the Hellenic dynasty and losing the Hebrew language.

During the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus – the follower of erudition and initiator of the great Alexandrian Library, 70 (or 72) Jewish scholars had made the Greek version (Septuagint, which means seventy in Latin, by the number of translators) of the Old Testament from Hebrew and Aramaic original manuscripts in Alexandria, Egypt between 300-200 B. C. Eventually the Septuagint came to be regarded as a kind of inspired paraphrase by teachers in the churches, mainly because the apostles had used it, and partly because they suspected that the Jews had deliberately corrupted the Hebrew text in anti-Christian ways since it was translated. (Marlowe, para. 12)

The Septuagint differs from the Old Testament canon (a Greek word that means rod or ruler), which consists of 39 books, and contains apocryphal books that were written in the gap from the last prophet, Malachi, till the coming of Jesus. These writings include Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon, First and Second Maccabees, the two Books of Esdras,

additions to the books of Esther and Daniel, and the Prayer of Manasseh. Protestants and Orthodox Jews do not consider them as books inspired by God and, therefore, do not include them in the canon of the Old Testament.

Michael Marlowe in “ Our Reception of the Bible” had stated that “... it is evident that most of us receive certain books and reject others not because we have personally evaluated them in any way, but because we trust that someone else has evaluated them and decided rightly concerning this matter, so that all scripture and nothing but scripture is between the covers of our Bibles” (para. 1). For centuries, the copies of the scriptures’ text were accurately examined by Jewish scribes, who were given the name Masoretes, or transmitters, after the period of the second temple. So, the Masoretic text became a standard of Hebrew bible and a sample for future scholars. Their doubts, concerning the accuracy of Greek translation, faded out with the discovery of the Scrolls from Qumran. The five-percent differences between the texts proved that the true meaning was not affected: “ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40: 8).

The Jewish canon of the Old Testament is called the TaNaKh:

- Torah (tor-AH) – the Law, or the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy);
- Nebiim (neh-veh-EEM) – the Prophets (The former prophets – Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings; the latter prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve (minor prophets) starting from Hosea to Malachi);

· Ketubim (keh-tu-VEEM) – the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles).

This list of Old Testament books was not composed in an eyewink and the process of canonization had been lingered over till 1000 A. D. Yet, the words of Jesus, recorded by His disciples, indicate that a list of sacred scriptures had already existed at Jesus' time. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke we read:

“ Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” (KJV, Matthew 5: 17, 18). “ These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the Law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning Me”. (Luke 24: 44).

In “ Biblical Foundations for Freedom”, Paul J. Bucknell had stated three major aspects of canonization:

The Church has not established the Biblical canon; it has rather denoted the writings that had authority among God's people and had been considered to be divine revelation. The date and the person, who had composed the books of the Old Testament in one is undefined. Jewish scholars agree that in the day, when the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra (Nehemiah 8: 13), the canon of the Old Testament was approved by this ‘ great synagogue’.

At Easter time each year, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria from 328-373, who kept the Church from paganism, sent a letter to the Egyptian churches. His 39th Festal Letter, written in 367, provides the oldest list of the 27 books of the New Testament canon that we have today (“ Athanasius”, p. 91). This list of the Biblical writings was approved by the elders and fathers of the Church and, therefore, was considered to be the canon for the whole Bible.