

Doctrine of Scripture

Part Three

In our home I like to pretend sometimes that I know Spanish so I will walk around using the few Spanish words I know and then throwing in other words that I just make up because, in my own disturbed little way, they *sound* Spanish to me. And one of the things that I will often do is refer to the Bible and, instead of using the word for “Bible” - because I don’t know what it is - I use the only word I know that *sounds* close - biblioteca. And so I will say something silly like “Donde esta la biblioteca?” when I’m looking for my Bible.

And usually when I say that my wife - who majored in Spanish - or my kids - will take delight in reminding me that “biblioteca” doesn’t mean “bible” it means “library”. And, of course, they are right. But then I always like to remind them that even though I’m using the wrong word, there is a very real sense in which I am absolutely correct in referring to the Bible not as a “libro” or “book” but as a library. Because, in fact, that is exactly what the Bible is - it is a collection of “books” and “letters” - some short, some long - written by different authors, over a period of about 1500 years. It’s a portable library.

Nevertheless, as we have seen over the past couple weeks, while there have been a variety of authors, and a number of different books - there has also been one *supreme* author behind every single book - the Holy Spirit of God. We understand that it was through the *superintending* work of the Holy Spirit that the various individual sections of the Bible were produced. Another way of talking about all this is to say that every book of the Bible has *two* authors - the Holy Spirit who oversaw the writing project, and then the different persons through whose human abilities and personalities the actual words were penned and preserved.

But how did all of this come about? If the Bible was written over a period of time then obviously it has to have a *history* of composition. The earliest books would have been written and preserved among God’s people and then, as God continued to work through the prophets and apostles, other books were added to the growing “collection” until it arrived in the state which we have it in today - 66 books - 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament.

But how exactly did all this happen? How did people recognize certain books as being inspired by God and, conversely, how is it that *other* books - the so called “missing” books or the *apocryphal* books - How and why were these set aside as not having the same stamp of authority or authenticity? Who made these decisions?

To those sorts of questions we will be giving our attention this morning as we look at the subject of *canonicity* - which I will explain further in a moment. But the plan, at this stage, is to deal with this subject in two parts. One this morning, and the second part in a couple weeks time. Before we go any further this morning, however, let’s pause and ask God for his wisdom and guidance during our time together....

Dear Father in Heaven...It is good to gather again this morning as your people and to become the temple of your Holy Spirit together, in a way that we are not when we are apart. The fact that we are here is evidence of your goodness and mercy toward us already and yet we would humbly ask for more grace this morning - grace to love others as you have loved us, to be prepared to give, to be prepared to serve, to be consumed with a desire that the things we do in this place will be honoring to YOU and pleasing to YOU and meaningful for YOU. Help us to remember the Gospel this morning, to believe the Gospel this morning, and to live the Gospel - both here and when we leave from here. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I FIRST MOVE - As we are looking at the subject of the canon of Scripture in two parts, we will only be trying to accomplish two things this morning. Firstly, we will think about some preliminary or preparatory ideas regarding the matter of *canonicity* and, secondly, we will begin to think about the Canon of Scripture itself with a brief look at the Old Testament. Firstly, then, let's just run through some preliminary thoughts about this whole idea of a *canon*.....

For starters, let me just say what the word "canon" means, in case it is unfamiliar to you. . Canon is a word which refers to the idea of *measurement*. A synonym for the word "canon" might be "rule" or "ruler", perhaps. As applied to the Scriptures, the idea is that the "canon" is the established list of authoritative writings which are the rule - or the measuring rod - of faith and life for the people of God.

Having then considered what the word "canon" refers to, it is good to think once again about this whole matter of God giving *revelation* to his people since that is ultimately what the "canon" of Scripture contains - the collected, written revelations of the One, True God.

Now, once you embrace this concept - that God has deliberately revealed himself to his people in order to be known by them - then you have to recognize that one of the unique things about God's revelation of Himself is that it is *self-attesting*. It is self-authenticating. It's legitimacy is not proven by some outside source, or by something else to which it might be compared.

By definition, no thing and no one else is or could be in a position to definitively evaluate a revelation of God because that would mean that the person who was making this definitive evaluation would have to be in a god-like position, in order to make that call. Now, that points us to another important reality with regard to Scripture - but we'll come back to that in a moment.

In addition to noting the self-attesting nature of God's revelation, it is important to also grasp its *self-consistency*. If the Scriptures are, ultimately, the revelation of the One True God then they are the product of a *common mind*, a mind that is not schizophrenic but whole and perfect and infinitely wise such that its revelations - whenever they come, and however far apart they may be in time - will always be consistent with one another. God will not and cannot contradict himself - by definition.

A further thing to note is that God's revelation of himself also comes to us through both *historical* and *creaturely* means. Firstly, God's revelation is historical - that is, it comes to us over a period of time, rather than all at once. Why is that? Well, because God's revelation to us is not just a revelation of His thoughts, but also of his *actions* and the *meaning* of those actions. And the actions of God in human history have taken place over a long period of time.

Along with being *historical* God's revelation is also *creaturely* in that it has come to us as the result of God using mere human beings as His instruments to produce a written revelation for His people, a process called *organic inspiration* - which we looked at last week. So, if you put these two ideas together - a historical process and a creaturely means - you see that God's word is a reflection of those realities. It *had* to come to us over a period of time both because of the *nature* of what was being revealed AND because of the means by which God chose to provide it for us. And so we should not be surprised or taken aback by the discovery that God's Word was "assembled" or "collected" over a period of many years. In the nature of the case, *it could not have happened otherwise.*

Now, as you think about the fact that the Scriptures were "collected" and "assembled" over time, that brings us back to a question asked in the introduction, "How did that collection happen? Were there certain criteria that a book had to meet? Was it just a random decision? How did it actually come about?"

The short and simple response to those sorts of questions is to say that the collection of the various writings that comprise the Scriptures was NOT a consequence of the church going through some random or arbitrary process of deciding which writings were going to be authoritative and which ones weren't. The early church fathers didn't get together one day and pile all the possible candidates for inclusion into the Bible onto a table and then start weeding them out until they only had a certain number left.

On the contrary, rather than the Church choosing the individual books of Scripture, it is far more accurate to say that the various books of Scripture *chose themselves* or perhaps, *caused themselves to be chosen*. To put it another way, the Church did not create or invent the Scriptures, *the Scriptures created the Church* as those writings which bore the clear mark of God's inspiration were recognized for what they were by the people of God. This is what the Apostle Peter was talking about when he wrote,

1 Peter 1:22-25 ²² *Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,* ²³ *since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;* ²⁴ *for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls,* ²⁵ *but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*

Peter addresses his words to the people of God, who have been brought into existence through the *preaching* of the Word, as God, speaking through His revelation called them into being and into a community.

Which brings us back to what we saw previously - the self-attesting nature of God's revelation. Ultimately, it is God alone who can verify His Word. Now, happily, God wants us to see and embrace his Word for what it truly is and so He *mediates* that verification to US through the work of His Holy Spirit. Through His Spirit, God gives his people both the *ability* and the *willingness* to receive the Scriptures AS the Scriptures. This is what Paul is talking about when he writes in 1 Corinthians 2,

1 Corinthians 2:12-14 ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.¹ ¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

The Spirit's role, among other things, is to enable us to receive and understand the things freely given to us by God.

However, while God does reveal Himself, and His revelations come through time and through creaturely means, and they are consistent and self-attesting - notwithstanding all of that - the reality is that God's revelation always comes to us *in the midst of a fallen and broken world*. It comes to us in a world that is populated with people who love Him and people who do not. One of the consequences of that is that God's true revelation has always been accompanied by falsehood, by *counterfeit* revelation, by things which claim to be of God, but which are nothing of the sort. We see this reality reflected in both the Old and the New Testaments. For example, listen to Moses' words in Deuteronomy,

Deuteronomy 13:1-4 "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ² and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' ³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ⁴ You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him.

Moses writes to his people to warn them about the danger of false prophets who are identified, at least in one way, by the fact that what they have said is a departure from God's previous revelation. What they are saying say is not consistent with what God has *already* told his people. Listen as well to a NT reference,

Galatians 1:6-8 *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - ⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.*

Both the Deuteronomy passage and the Galatians passage (and there are others) demonstrate that in both the OT and the NT eras the provision of true revelation was always accompanied by a competing, and counterfeit, revelation.

Which only serves to underscore the fact that we *need* a Canon of Scripture. We need a standard, a rule, a point of reference by which we can sort out one thing from another. And so, when you think about it, the very *idea* of a having such a “canon” is, ultimately, *not* an invention of the Church but is, in fact, God’s creation. Indeed, to use Bahnsen’s language, we see the prototype of this very thing in the early portions of the Bible itself...

Remember how on Mt Sinai, Moses was given the Law, written on tablets of stone? In that event, in those early days when the people of God were first constituted *as* the people of God, we see the foreshadowing of the means by which God was going to guide them, both presently and in the future - by means of a written standard of revelation. These same tablets, you may recall, were later placed inside the Ark of the Covenant which, was a focal point for God’s people to worship him. The Ark was the thing that was placed in the most special, the most holy part in the entire tabernacle.

Which is fascinating when you think about it because it means that in the heart of this most holy place was not an image or an idol but *words*. Every other religion in that day had their idols and images at the core of who they were. But God’s people had *words*. *Revealed words from God*.

Let’s move on from thinking about these pre-liminary and background sorts of ideas to think about the Canon itself – the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and for our purposes this morning - the Old Testament in particular.....

The various books of the OT, as we have seen, came to us over time and through a long and necessary process. The first five books of the OT - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus Numbers, Deuteronomy - these all came to us by the hand of God’s servant Moses who was the first writing prophet. And if Moses was the writer of those first books, then the *first readers* or *recipients* of those Scriptures AS Scripture would have been the people of God who were *with* Moses. And, most likely, it was near the *end* of Moses’ life, when they had finished their 40 years of wilderness wandering, but before they went in to take over the Promised Land, under Joshua’s leadership.

So, at that point, the “Bible” such as it was - for God’s people - would have been exactly five books long. And by that revelation, unfinished as it was, they nevertheless would have learned a great deal about who God is and what He was doing and where they came from as a people, and what God expected from them.

And so, following this, God later on used other people along the way to provide other revelation - people like Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.- and so the various “books” which became the OT were written. Which meant that for quite some time, God’s people had an “open” canon.....

Well, this process continued until about 400 BC, when the last of the OT books was completed. The 39 books at that point became a recognizable collection or “set” of material and were identical to the ones which we have in our Bible today - with one exception. The *books* are the same - but the *order* of the books is different - a fact which, believe it or not - is quite useful to know. Let me explain why.

The arrangement of the Jewish canon of the OT divided the Scriptures into three main parts - The Law, the Prophets, and The Writings. Their arrangement was more topically driven whereas our order is more *chronologically* driven - although not strictly so. And so, in the Jewish OT, the order of the books went something like this:

- THE LAW: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
- THE PROPHETS: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, the twelve minor prophets.
- THE WRITINGS: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

Now you might say, “So what?” Well, here’s the so what: As one scholar has very astutely point out - the *Jewish* order of the canon helps us to make sense of a comment that Jesus made in Luke 11,

Luke 11:49-51 ⁴⁹ Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' ⁵⁰ so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, ⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation.

When Jesus says “from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah” he is reinforcing his previous point that the people in his day would one day be held responsible for the shed blood of ALL the prophets. But the problem is: when you look at the OT *as you and I have it*, you see that Abel is in the book of Genesis, and Zechariah is in the book of Chronicles, but then he is followed by a lot of other prophets whose blood was shed. And you might think, “If Jesus wanted to include all the prophets, shouldn’t he have said, “from Abel to *Malachi*”?”

But here’s the thing. The reason that Jesus said what he did was because the Scriptures that he would have had access to in that day would have reflected the order found in the *Jewish* canon of the Old Testament - not the order in our Bibles. And in the Jewish ordering of the OT - Genesis comes first and Chronicles comes last. And so Jesus’ reference to both Abel and Zechariah makes more sense. It is a reference to the OT Scriptures - from beginning to end.

And this, really is the more helpful thing to note in what Jesus says - that his words demonstrate that there was a completed "body" of gathered writings that began with Genesis and ended with Chronicles. There was a completed and recognized collection that both the Jews and the Christians recognized as having the imprimatur of God upon them. Jesus' own perspective on this is clear in a number of places,

Matthew 5:18 ¹⁸ *For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*

Luke 24:44-45 ⁴⁴ *Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."* ⁴⁵ *Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.....*

And so we see from Jesus' own comments, and from the fact that even his Jewish opponents never challenged him about the Scriptures from which he frequently quoted - we see from these things that the collection of OT writings that was completed 400 years earlier - was still intact in Jesus' day and was regarded by both the Jews and Christians as the inspired Word of God.