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HOW THE
BIBLE CAME
TO BE

A HISTORY OF THE
CANON OF SCRIPTURE

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Introducing the Canon

This little book is all about the canon of the Bible. In it we will look at how the books we hold in the Bible today came to be, how they are compiled, how they were chosen, why they have authority, and why we believe what they say. This will be an in-depth look at how each section of Scripture, from the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—to the New Testament, were canonized and deemed part of an authoritative unit of Scripture.

In this introduction, we are going to talk about the three foundational elements of understanding the Bible itself: inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility. We are going to study scriptures that support the Bible as authoritative and look at the church history surrounding each section of Scripture that was canonized. I think this book will be extremely helpful in your conversations as you defend your faith, as I believe how Scripture came to be is going to be one of the hot topics this generation will face. Even in the church now with the movements of progressivism and deconstruction, we are seeing a lot of people questioning of the authority of Scripture, specifically as it pertains to the sexual ethic. For this reason, and many others, it is essential for us to understand where the

Bible came from, why we believe it, and what makes it holy Scripture rather than just tablets that fell out of the sky with no accountability. Understanding how the Bible came to be helps us to know why and how we can trust it, and *that* makes this topic so vital to Christians today.

WHAT IS CANON

Canon is a set of books that is accepted as authoritative, specifically in a religious context. To Muslims, the Quran is a canon of Scripture, meaning it is an accepted set of authoritative writings. For Christians, the Bible is accepted as our canon of Scripture. Canon provides a measure that says that no more books can be added or taken away; it is what is accepted and embraced by the church and considered to be authoritative.

The word canon comes from the Greek word *kanon*, which references an Egyptian reed that grew alongside the Nile and was used as a standard of measure. When we say this is the canon of Scripture, we're saying that our standard of measure for what constitutes Scripture is fulfilled in these books.

Gary Habermas, the premier apologist for the Resurrection and a professor at Liberty University, has a wonderful discussion of the importance of our canonicity in context of the resurrection. In this book we are going to take just a few of his principles as we discuss the Bible and its authority.

In order for any historical text—whether about Moses or Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar—to be deemed trustworthy, you need two things: early documents and eyewitness documents. The closer to the date the better and the closer to the eyewitness the better, because the more time that passes, the more things can be forgotten or changed; and the fewer eyewitnesses, the higher the risk of untruth or changing of the story.

One thing Habermas points out in his defense of the resurrection and the authority of Scripture is that the stories of Jesus and His Resurrection have more early eyewitness documents than anything on Alexander the Great and on some of our Caesars. In fact, there are 18 non-gospel documents that are written about Jesus or mention Jesus within the first 100 years of his life. That's amazing! The best documents we have on Alexander the Great are 400 years after his death. Early eyewitness accounts are vital in helping determine what documents are trustworthy. This is especially true for the Bible, which would become an authoritative text for spiritual lives. And that is what we have in the form of both the New Testament and the Old Testament.

In this book we are going to deal with each section of Scripture individually. We will first look at the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible. We will talk about who wrote them, why we can trust they were written by their author, and who was an eyewitness. We will then move on to the historical narrative books, prophecy, and wisdom literature. Then we will get to the New Testament. The fundamental issues we will be looking at each time is as follows: *How close to the event was the document written? Who wrote it? Were they involved in the event? Are they writing to someone involved in the event?* These questions were all taken into account by the early Church Fathers who were deciding canonicity. Let's look at a few of these Church Fathers.

The Church Fathers below all primarily lived before 400 AD. These gentlemen are some of my favorite people to read, and this is what they had to say about the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. Clemente said, "Scripture is true, and is given by the Holy Spirit, nothing unrighteous or counterfeit is written in them." Irenaeus said, "Scripture is perfectly consistent." Justin Martyr said, "I am entirely convinced no Scripture contradicts another." Tertullian said, "The statements of

Scripture never contradict the truth.” Athanasius said, “There is no disagreement within Scripture.” Augustine said, “The authors were completely free of error.” These are some of the founding fathers of the Christian faith, and they are all saying that this word is inspired. Athanasius was one of the first people to send out a full list of books that constituted the Bible, and one of his Festal letters to the churches listed the books that we have in the Bible today. That was around 380 AD, and we see similar lists even earlier than that.

This gives us enough information to see that the Church Fathers affirmed the authority, inerrancy, and infallibility of Scripture, so maybe we should—as Nathan Finocchio says—check our chronological snobbery and stop thinking we know so much better than these guys. There is a lot that comes with that kind of arrogance and setting ourselves up as if we know better than these Church Fathers who helped give us the foundation we have today.

INSPIRATION

If you ask any evangelical Christian (or even any Catholics or Protestants) what the Bible is, they will tell you it is inerrant and infallible, inspired by God and written down by men. Those are the words we use to describe it. However, many people don’t know what these words actually mean. They know they are supposed to believe them, but they do not know how they function.

There are two types of inspiration. Verbal inspiration means that the entirety of the Bible—every single word—was directly inspired by God Himself and was communicated from God to men. Plenary inspiration means that the entire thing—the wholeness of the Bible itself—is also inspired. It is not just the words; the whole thing from beginning to end is inspired by God.

We also know from Scripture that the writers of Scripture believed what they were writing was inspired by God. If we look at 2 Timothy 3:16, a verse you are likely familiar with, we see Paul is writing to Timothy, and he says something that is pretty foundational to our faith. Paul says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” This tells us the essential nature of Scripture for spiritual maturity and growth. We cannot be competent and equipped for every good work apart from the Word of God. If we want to be mature Christians, then we need to know the Word of God.

This Word is able to change us because, as Paul says, it is breathed out by God. The significance of the phrase ‘breathed out’ has to do with the Holy Spirit, because the word for Holy Spirit literally means breath. The very Spirit of God inspired these words and made them profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. To say it in other words, it is for the purpose of growing people up in what is good. The only way we can know what is good is through this Scripture that is inspired by God.

2 Peter 1:21 also speaks to this: “No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Here is another founding father of our faith, Peter, writing the exact same thing as Paul. He says all of Scripture is inspired by God and led by the Holy Spirit. It was written by men, but it wasn’t by their own will that they did this. It was because of God’s inspiration. God worked through the instrument of human personality and guided what they wrote. We still note that these men were in specific historical contexts with specific personalities and writing styles. In fact, we see distinct differences in writing styles between Peter and Paul and between Moses, Joshua, and

Samuel. God allowed for those differences while still inspiring what was written.

Oftentimes when we read things like this, we can tend look at the verses that say all Scripture is breathed out by God and think, “Well, that’s just the Old Testament. Those verses were talking about the Old Testament because that’s all they had at the time.” That is true. Peter and Paul were talking about the Old Testament, which is what would have been accepted as authoritative by the Jews at this time. We will get into this more later, but at the time of Jesus, there was a three-part Hebrew Scripture that started in Genesis and ended in Chronicles. When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated to Greek (the Septuagint), there was some rearranging from the original order into a chronological order.

You may remember when Jesus was talking to the Pharisees He said that the blood of the prophets was on their hands, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah (Luke 11:51), or essentially from the beginning of the canon to the close of the canon. The canon He was reading and working from at the time had the death of Zechariah at the end. This tells us that the Old Testament was canonized and authoritative in its completion at the time of Jesus, just in a different order.

Why does this matter? Because when people say that these statements about God inspiring Scripture only apply to the Old Testament, they are ignoring some very significant passages. So we are going to look at a few passages that prove that the New Testament writers had equal authority, inspiration, and inerrancy to the Old Testament writers.

We will look first at 1 Corinthians 14:36-37. We know in 1 Corinthians Paul was writing to the Church at Corinth, and in this verse he asked them a rhetorical question. He started by saying, “Was it from you that the word of God came?” Obviously they know it was not, but Paul was challenging them and addressing their arrogance here. He said, “Or, are you

the only ones that it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.” Then, he went on to talk about prophecy, saying if they did not acknowledge his words as authoritative—as a command of God—then they had no seat at the table. This is pivotal to those who question the writings of Paul. There is a huge movement in progressivism that questions the writings of Paul as authoritative—even saying he did not write many of them—mainly to get rid of what he said about gender and sexuality.

This, along with another reference we will look at, proves to us that this is a command of the Lord that was accepted by the churches and recognized not just by Paul, but also by Peter. In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter wrote about Paul. He said, “Just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all these letters, when he speaks in them of these matters, there are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction as they do the other scriptures. You therefore Beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability, but grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

This is a relevant passage for us today because this is still happening. Paul’s letters are hard to understand, and the ignorant and unstable still twist those words to their own destruction, just as they do other Scriptures. But note that Peter held Paul’s commands on equal level with the other Scriptures and essentially said, “You owe them the same kind of reverence and obedience. Don’t be caught into this trap; don’t allow yourself to be deceived.” Inspiration was for the Old Testament, but it was also for the New Testament. There is equal authority there. It is important for us to understand this and embrace it

as a foundational element as we move forward in our study of the canon.

INERRANCY

Inerrancy means that something is not in error. When speaking of Scripture this means that it makes good on its claims; it achieves what the authors were aiming for. It does not mean that there was never a copy-editing error or a discrepancy between two documents, but it does mean that none of those discrepancies ever changed the meta-narrative, the redemptive narrative, or the doctrine. They were simply copy errors or slight variances in the documents that had nothing to do with doctrine. The Scripture we have today is without error; it makes good on its claims.

INFALLIBILITY

The other word we use to describe the Bible is infallible, meaning unable to deceive. It does not mean someone cannot take Scripture and twist it and deceive people; unfortunately that is perfectly possible, just like Peter warned against. But the Bible itself in its plain form is unable to deceive. There is a difference between infallibility and inerrancy, but as the Chicago Statement of inerrancy says, “These two things may be distinguished, but they cannot be separated.”

THE TRANSLATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

Especially important when we are having this discussion is translation. As the Bible is translated, people can mess with that translation, which can result in heresy. For instance, the Passion “translation” is a paraphrase developed by one man

who has lied about his history as a translator with New Tribes Missions. He changed much of the terminology in the Bible to reflect the new Apostolic Reformation language, so there is a lot of anointing and kingdom language in this translation. While those themes are present in Scripture in some parts, they are extremely expanded with the Passion Bible. In fact, it is not a translation, but a paraphrase by one man rather than a committee of scholars (which is how authoritative translations are created). This means infallibility and inerrancy may not apply to the Passion Bible. Why? Because the actual Greek and Hebrew that were supposed to be handled rightly and with integrity were messed with and changed.

When this happens, doctrines can be pulled out of the text that are not consistent with Confessional Christianity, or what the church has traditionally confessed. This is why when we talk about infallibility and inerrancy, it really goes back to the original composition of Scripture—in the original languages as found in the original infallible and inerrant documents. It is our job to do the very best we can to translate them accurately into the languages of the modern day.

THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE SCRIPTURES

It is important to note that the original Hebrew Bible—the one Jesus would have been speaking and teaching out of—would have looked different than our Hebrew Bible.

When we look at our Bible, we see a pretty big list of Old Testament books. There are a lot more books in the English Bible than were in the original Hebrew Bible that Jesus had. He had either 22 or 24 books. There are two different supposed canons that are discussed among the Early Church Fathers. The reason for that is not because we added books to Scripture, but because they were arranged differently. One of the biggest arrangement differences is that the 12 minor prophets were all

one scroll, or book. Then, you had 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, which were also one scroll, and 1 and 2 Chronicles on one scroll. That makes 24 Old Testament books, but there are multiple books within the books. In the 22-book canon, Jeremiah and Lamentations are one book, and Ruth was combined with Judges. So you can see it is not that we have fewer books, rather it is that the information is compiled differently.

Over time, there were changes in language and culture too. Greek influences emerged when Alexander the Great conquered the territory the Jews were living in. This is when the very first translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek—the Septuagint—was created. The Septuagint was called so because the word means 70. It is supposed that 70 Greek scholars worked on this translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew to the Greek. This was the first time that there was a division by genre, and eventually a division into past, present, and future.

You will notice when reading your English Bible that there is a chronological ascension before the end in Revelation (the Septuagint ended in Daniel). That kind of chronological reading was the result of the Greek cultural approach to ordering books. They separated out some of the books, ordering them differently, and when the Septuagint was translated into the Latin Vulgate, it was essentially in the same order we now have in our English Bibles today (because most translations of English Bibles came from the Vulgate).

WHY THIS MATTERS

This background is helpful to know because if you were to look at what is in the Hebrew Bible originally and what we have in our English Bibles today, you might wonder why they had so few books and why it is different today. The reason is

the impact of culture and time and the rearranging of the exact same information.

This is a lot of information, and it might be a little overwhelming. It might be helpful for you to re-read this chapter and take notes so you have a foundation as we move forward in our discussion. But I am excited to build on this as we start to dive into how the Old Testament was canonized, how it was decided what books to keep, how there are different ideas and theories about authors, and what all this means for us today. The important thing to know is that this stuff matters immensely. This is not impractical information, because at the end of the day everything you believe about Jesus goes back to the Gospels, and the Gospels go back to the Old Testament prophecies, and the Old Testament prophecies go back to the covenants, which go back to Genesis. All of it is necessary, and when you start trying to take things out or change it to make it more palatable instead of truly understanding the authorial intent and the historical content, what you end up with is a faith without foundation.

The authority of Scripture is an essential doctrine to Christianity. You cannot unite with people who deny the authority of Scripture. That is why we are looking at how the canon came to be, because the more we understand it, the more confidence we have to stand upon the truth that God has revealed to us.

