

August 15, 2021

You Asked For It: Who Decided What Would Be in the Bible?

Psalm 119:9-16, 105

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Sermon and Scripture

***Title Slide**

Today's text is from Psalm 119:

How can young people keep their way pure?

By guarding it according to your word.

¹⁰With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.

¹¹I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.

¹²Blessed are you, O Lord;
teach me your statutes.

¹³With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.

¹⁴I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.

¹⁵I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.

¹⁶I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.

¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

***Today's Question Slide**

I chose this psalm as the text this week because, in it, the psalmist celebrates the word of God to God's people and acknowledges the power what we read, hear, and experience has to direct our lives and to change us if we will allow it. This is how I understand the Bible. If we

read it and learn about it and talk about it with one another, the stories and ideas contained in it will help us become the people God created us to be. I don't think the Bible is the only way God speaks to us. I think it is one way.

Talking with people this week, I was surprised by the range of reactions to today's question, "Who decided what would go be in the Bible?" There were a good number of people who firmly believe today's sermon will be the most boring one of the summer, maybe the most boring ever. A couple of people were excited because they consider themselves history geeks and this topic sounds right up their alley. Mostly people were like, "I wouldn't even know where to start to answer that question, but I guess that's why you went to school." In preparation for today's sermon, I asked some friends, who grew up in a variety of Christian traditions, what they have heard about how the Bible came to be.

Here are some of their responses:

Honestly, I was never taught in the church setting how exactly the Bible became 'The Bible.' I was always just taught this is "God's word." And to not question it. It wasn't until I was older that I started researching on my own and then was shamed for questioning 'The word of God'.

Each word was "God-breathed." Moses wrote Genesis through Deuteronomy, there was no dispute on who wrote any of the books, and to question one word would mean doubting God completely and risking the pits of Hell.

I grew up (still am) UM. I was taught that the Bible was God-inspired, which in my mind meant he told the disciples, mainly Paul, what to write. I was five.

Another person said they were taught the Bible was “dropped from the sky by the hands of God,” and one person said his grandma told him God gave the Bible to Moses and then to Jesus in a dream.

What I have learned over the years is this topic tends to make people uncomfortable because when we begin to see the fingerprints of human beings all over the texts, it becomes harder to imagine that God had anything to do with it and if God had nothing to do it, then it can't be authoritative in our lives. I hope this sermon both answers the question asked and gives us confidence that God is, indeed, still speaking to us from the pages of our sacred texts.

Let me begin by saying, there is not a place where it is written exactly how the Bible came to be. There is not complete agreement by scholars about why certain texts made it in and others were left out. If you are really curious, there is much written about the formation of the biblical canon.

***Canon definition slide**

The word canon, when we are talking about the *biblical* canon, means “a collection or list of books accepted as genuine.” If you are sitting there wondering why we should care about how the biblical canon came to be, consider this example I have used with youth over the years.

Imagine you just moved to a new house, and you come home from your first day at your new school and notice the corner of a piece of paper sticking out from under the welcome mat, which came with the house. You pull back the mat to see what the paper is.

***I Love You slide**

On it is written, “I love you.”

How would that note make you feel?

Inevitably, when I asked this question of a group of teens, they hesitated to commit. They would say, “I would want to know who wrote the letter. How long had the letter been hidden under the mat? For whom was the letter written?”

So many questions.

Was it a note from a parent to the student coming home from school? Was it a note written by the crush of the young man who lived in the house previously? Was it from the teen that delivers the newspaper who happened to notice the new residents? Who knows?

In the same way, without knowing where the Bible came from, who wrote it, when it was written, or who the original audience was, it is difficult to figure out what it really means. So, let’s take a look at what’s in the book, beginning with the Hebrew Bible.

It is generally agreed that Israel (the people not the country) had acknowledged the authoritative and sacred nature of some writings at least by 621 BCE, following the discovery and reading of what was called, “book of the law,” which was likely the book of Deuteronomy. 2 Kings 22: 8 talks about this, “The high priest Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.” When Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it.” This was the beginning of sacred scripture being centered in the tradition of Israel. The Hebrew Bible consists of 3 parts: Torah (or Law), Prophets, and Writings.

***Torah scrolls**

The Torah is the first five books of what most Christians call the Old Testament. In Israel, the Torah was recognized as sacred text no later than 400 BCE. As early as the first century CE, these 5 books were

written on one scroll, signaling they were understood as one unit. However, they are not one *book* in the modern sense. Each book of the Torah is a composite, reflecting many traditions and a number of sources. There is not a single author for the books of the Torah. Moses did not write them.

***Former Prophets Slide**

Somewhere between 300 and 200 BCE, the prophetic tradition became authoratative. Although, it's important to note at this point in history, the canon was still pretty fluid. Beyond the Torah, there was not widespread agreement about which texts should be classified as sacred. Different faith communities found different texts more or less useful in the life of their communities. Biblical scholar Robert Pfeiffer writes that the Former Prophets and some of the Latter Prophets were adopted in Israel's sacred collection because of their recognized value for "enhancing national pride and the hopes for a better future." This is true, and biblical scholar Lee Martin McDonald adds three more reasons the texts were welcomed:

- They extend Israel's story of God's activity among the Jewish people.
- They were recognized as having intrinsic worth in the worship and religious instruction of the Jewish people.
- And they gave Israel an identity and knowledge of the will of God that enabled them to renew themselves as a people of God and to rebuild the nation following exile.

The Biblical Canon, Lee Martin McDonald, p, 79.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Prophets include the books listed on the slide.

***Latter Prophets Slide**

And all of the ones on this slide.

Along with the Prophets, a body of literature, some of which was written well before 200 BCE, and some perhaps later, circulated widely among Jewish communities. The name given to this group of writings was simply, the “Writings.”

***Writings Slide**

Like the Prophets, this was a very fluid group of texts, based on what individual communities found meaningful. In the second century, perhaps around the time of the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, rabbis began to give shape to the Hebrew Bible in its final form, precisely defining and ordering it. In the end, the rabbis included in their canon 24 works. From their perspective, this literature defined and reflected the meaning of Israel...once again, not the country of Israel, but the people.

Before we move on to the New Testament, a word about the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament. I was taught that, out of respect for the Jewish tradition, we should refer to the collection as the Hebrew Bible. They contain the same books but they are arranged in a different order. The books of Old Testament are ordered according to the Septuagint.

***Septuagint slide**

The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It is often abbreviated with the Roman numerals for 70...LXX. There is a legend that says 70 Jewish scholars translated the original Hebrew Torah to Greek in the 3rd century.

The Septuagint, though, contains *more than* the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible. It contains the “Apocrypha.”

***Apocrypha slide**

Apocrypha refers specifically to a collection of pre-Christian writings dating from roughly 300 BCE to 70 CE. They were included in the Septuagint but excluded from the Hebrew canon. They are recognized

by the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Churches as later additions to the canon but are excluded from the Protestant canon.

There is nothing wrong with the writings in the Apocrypha. In fact, the First and Second Books of Maccabees contain the most detailed stories of the battles of Judah Maccabee and his brothers for the liberation of Judea from foreign domination. These books also include within them the earliest references to the story of Hanukkah and the rededication of the Temple. I studied the Apocrypha in seminary...I assume most mainline seminarians do. Our Catholic siblings read them as part of their 3-year liturgical cycle in which all scripture is read. My study Bible includes them. Your Bibles at home likely include them. I encourage you, if you haven't read them, to consider doing so.

And now, we turn to the New Testament. The earliest Christian community did not possess a fixed canon of specifically Christian texts. Many early Jesus followers were Jewish, therefore they relied heavily on the Jewish tradition. The Jewish sacred texts were not the driving force behind the early church though.

***Jesus slide**

The driving force was Jesus.

His words, his deeds, and his fate were interpreted over and over again within early Christian communities. The stories of Jesus were passed down orally at first. None of the New Testament writings were written while Jesus was alive. The first written Christian documents did not begin to appear until the last half of the first century and it was only in the last couple of decades of that century that the writings began to have a significant impact on the life of Christian communities.

The gospel writings were the first to get general recognition. It is important to note that early Christians decided to include more than one gospel in their canon for good reasons. First, churches in different

regions and cities used the gospels that were connected to their history and traditions. In addition, the acceptance of more than one gospel came to be seen as a sign of the unity within the early tradition.

Over the years, people have pointed out the inconsistencies found in the different gospels as a way of critiquing Christianity. The early Christians were aware of these inconsistencies, but because they understood that the texts were not meant to be a literal history of Jesus's life, it was not a problem. In addition, the inclusion of more than one story was a direct response to Gnosticism which taught that the heavenly messenger had revealed secret knowledge to one particular disciple and only he was the true interpreter of the message. One such Gnostic gospel that you may have heard of is the Gospel of Thomas. The stories of Jesus and his followers were meant for everyone, not just Thomas or any one person to interpret.

In the first four or five centuries of Christianity there were dozens perhaps even hundreds---most of them now lost---of gospels and writings about Jesus and his early followers. It is not true, however, that such writings were trying to find their way into the canon and the Church suppressed them. The truth is that the non-canonical gospels fall into two categories...some are Gnostic Gospels...each of which were considered scripture by a particular group and that group rejected all others and therefore had no interest in including theirs in a canon with the others. The others generally include stories that reflected a pious Jesus. The church never rejected these stories, in fact many of them continued to be read in Christian communities for centuries.

***White Mary and parents slide**

It isn't uncommon to find depictions of those stories, like the one on the screen, in medieval cathedrals. One example is the story of Mary's parents, found in the *Protoevangelium of James*, which is a second century gospel telling of the miraculous conception of Mary.

In addition to the gospels, Paul's letters were being circulated among churches. While Paul's letters were written to specific Christian communities, there is evidence copies of the letters were read in other communities. The practice of sharing letters in various churches probably took place near the end of the first century. One scholar I read this week suggests that Paul, himself, was responsible for circulating a collection of his letters. And that made me laugh, only because, as you know, Paul and I have a tense relationship.

The canonical gospels and writings of Paul reached the status of scripture for many Christians late in the 2nd century. Although, there were other writings circulating that were treated similarly by Christian communities. Throughout the 2nd-4th centuries some key people played important roles in the process that led to canonization. Some of those people were Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, and certainly Emperors Diocletian and Constantine.

Constantine not only made it possible for Christians to worship without fear of persecution, but he was also pretty involved in the affairs of the church. He gathered various councils to resolve theological disputes, reconvening the council when the decisions weren't to his liking. He was not as concerned about theology as he was about unity and peace. He thought one way to ensure those things was for there to be a common collection of sacred scripture. He ordered the production of 50 sacred books (his predecessor, Diocletian, destroyed churches and burned sacred texts). The sacred books were made, but even then, there was not complete agreement on what ought to be included.

There is no surviving literature that spells out the New Testament canonization process. It was a very gradual process, with lots of people, mostly men, involved. We do know that as writings were looked at by

Christian communities and church leaders for inclusion in the canon, the following criteria were considered:

***NT Criteria slide**

Was the writing attributed to an apostle? Please know, though, that there is credible evidence that in some cases, there were things written anonymously that got assigned to apostles so the church could justify its use. For example, the gospels were written anonymously, but in the mid to late 2nd century names of apostles and those who assisted them began to be attached to these writings to lend credibility to their stories.

Was the writing in step with what was generally accepted as true (or orthodox) in the churches of the day? If a writing was too far from the core of central teaching, if it was on the fringe, it was rejected.

Was it written during the period of apostolic ministry? Writings from later time periods were rejected.

Was the writing being used by the churches for worship or instruction? Some scholars contend that this might be the most important criterion. One example of the importance of usefulness is the book of Hebrews. The authorship was strongly questioned, yet it made it into the canon because churches found it very useful. They were unwilling to set it aside even though its apostolic witness was questioned.

Was the writing adaptable to different circumstances in the church's life? In other words, will the message still be helpful and useful 20 years from now? 50 or even more?

Some people think that church councils deliberated and determined which books should be included in the biblical canon. A more accurate description is that the church councils of the 4th -6th centuries

acknowledged those books that had already obtained prominence from widespread usage among various Christian communities. The council decisions reflected what the communities already recognized. If any decisions were made by the councils in such matters, it was only in regard to texts that seemed pretty far afield from what was had already been agreed on.

I can't leave this question without addressing the idea of scripture being inspired by God. I recognize that what I have said up to this point doesn't seem to leave room for that.

I would say it this way: The acceptance of a writing as scripture and its inclusion in the canon *demonstrated* that the writing was inspired by God. In other words, the fact that it has remained useful and has adapted through the years, into a world the writers knew nothing about, the fact that we continue to gather together week after week, to hear the canon read, each of us experiencing God in its reading, tells me that, yes, God was at work with human beings as the canon was formed.

***I Love You Slide**

Let us end where we started this morning, with the note under the welcome mat. For me, the Bible is that note to each of us. From start to finish, the Bible tells the story of God and God's love for all human beings and all of creation, as it was experienced by our ancestors, trying desperately to figure out their place in the world, who they were and to whom they belonged. In the myths, parables, songs, poems, letters, dreams, and wisdom, from start to finish, we can each experience God and God's love for ourselves. And yes, it has human fingerprints all over it. That makes sense though, don't you think? For it is in each other and through our own humanness that we experience God. May our still-speaking God, be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

Amen.

