

BIBLICAL CANON AND ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Canon comes from the Greek word, *kanōn*, which means standard or rule or list. For followers of Christ, the Canon of Scripture are those books of the Bible that were accepted as authoritative in the 4th century.

For Protestants and by extension the Evangelical and Pentecostal groups that came after the Reformation, the canon comprises 66 books made up of 39 books of the OT (the Hebrew Scriptures) and 27 books of the NT.

But for the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox churches there are 72 or more books i.e., the 66 books of the Bible and the Apocrypha.

Many scholars agree that any book of the OT dated later than 450-400 BC should not be part of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Apostolic writings (gospels and epistles) circulated freely in the early church. However, 27 of them were endorsed as being authoritative by the Councils of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397). Those 27 books became the NT.

2.0 ORDER OF THE CANON OF THE BIBLE

The 66 books of the Bible have been arranged in the following order:

OT

- Genesis through to Esther: the history from the creation of the human race and God's relationship with humanity especially Israel up to the 5th century BC.
- The Writings: From Job through to the Song of Songs
- The Prophets: Isaiah to Malachi

NT

- The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John)
- Acts of the Apostles (The Book of Acts)
- Epistles
- Revelation

3.0 CANONICITY: WHAT MAKES A BOOK AUTHORITATIVE?

Propheticity determines canonicity i.e., which books were divinely inspired.

God is the One who inspired the authors as well as the One who enabled those who selected the books to be included in the canon.

Characteristics of biblical books deemed authoritative:

1. Most of the OT books were written by prophets (some like Chronicles and Esther were compilations of events).
2. Predictions by those prophets came to pass and or there were miracles associated with them.
3. Writings by those whose predictions failed were deemed as not authoritative.
4. Original hearers recognized those writers as prophets and servants of God.
5. Even today, Spirit-filled persons hear God speaking through the pages of the books of the Bible.

The Hebrew Bible was recognized and accepted as authoritative by the early church. It was the Bible of the early church.

The NT books were selected based on the following criteria:

- A. APOSTOLIC: The books of the NT were written by the Lord's apostles and those who were closely associated with them. Paul, though not of the original 12 apostles, was accepted and recognized by the Lord's apostles as the apostle to the Gentiles. Mark was a close disciple of the apostles and Paul. Luke was also closely associated with Paul.
- B. UNIVERSALITY: The NT books were in circulation for more than 300 years. Churches of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd centuries considered them as being authoritative.
- C. ORTHODOXY: The books agree or complement each other. They do not contradict God's mission and are suitable for doctrine and instructions in righteousness (2Tim 3:16).

4.0 BIBLICAL APOCRYPHA OR DEUTERO-CANONICAL BOOKS

Biblical Apocrypha, which means hidden, refers to a collection of writings that are in some editions of the Bible. The books are usually placed between the OT and the NT or as an appendix at the end of the Bible.

These books or texts were written during the intertestamental period (the 400 years between Malachi and the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ). While considered good sources in understanding the history and culture of Israel of that period, they are not considered inspired.

Because of that, they should not be used to formulate doctrines.

Sadly some denominations like the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches regard some of those books as inspired.

These churches have used 2 Maccabees 12:44-45 to justify the erroneous doctrine whereby the living pray for the dead (and by extension purgatory) in order to help make atonement for them.

Whoever accepts such false teaching negates the all-sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice.

This example is a cautionary tale: followers of Christ must never formulate or accept teachings based on testimonies and doctrines that call into question the all-sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice and or undermines God's mission.

No miracle or teaching that is of God should contradict any aspect of the Bible.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

YOU AND I CAN AND SHOULD KNOW IF A BOOK OF THE BIBLE IS AUTHORITATIVE OR NOT.

- We can hear God speaking through the author.
- There is no contradiction between a book or writing with the totality of God's plan.

5. ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

- OT was written in Biblical Hebrew except for parts of Daniel and Ezra that were written in Biblical Aramaic
- NT was written in Koine Greek

Translators have adopted different approaches in the translation of the original Bible documents into English.

5.1 FORMALLY EQUIVALENT (LITERAL) TRANSLATIONS

In this word-for-word approach, the translators attempt to preserve the form and structure of original language. Though more accurate from grammatical and structural point of view, its drawback is that some readers may not understand them that easily. Examples of literal translations are NKJV, KJV and NASB and to some extent ESV and NRSV.

5.2 DYNAMIC (FUNCTIONALLY EQUIVALENT) TRANSLATIONS

The translators seek to prioritize clarity (thought-for-thought) over accuracy (word-for-word). They choose English words or phrases they consider to be most appropriate contextually for the Hebrew or Greek words or phrases. They strive to be true to the overall meaning of the text. NLT is an example of such a thought-for-thought translation.

5.3 OPTIMALLY EQUIVALENT TRANSLATIONS

In this approach, the translators have no preference for either the literal (word-for-word) or the dynamic (thought-for-thought). They adopt whichever they consider more appropriate for the particular text they were translating. NIV is an example of an optimally equivalent translation.

ABBREVIATIONS

New Testament (NT)

Old Testament (OT)

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

New Living Translation (NLT)

New King James Version (NKJV)

King James Version (KJV)

American Standard Version (ASV)

English Standard Version (ESV)

New American Standard Bible (NASB)

New International Version (NIV)