

The parallels and connections between the Canon and the Text of New Testament scripture is a critical issue for today's Bible believer. Could it be that a proper view of Canonicity could lead to a more Biblical perspective on the Text? This paper will seek to uncover some important truths regarding this important topic.

It is first necessary to understand the meaning of the word *Canon*. Following are some thoughts this on this word:

“The word *κανων* literally signifies a reed, by which the dimensions of anything were measured; and hence it came figuratively to signify a RULE.”<sup>1</sup>

“The word *Canon* properly signifies *a rule*: and it is used in this sense several times in the New Testament, as Gal. 6:16; ‘As many as walk according to this rule.’ Phil. 3:16; ‘Let us walk by the same rule.’”<sup>2</sup>

Lightfoot explains that the Hebrew equivalent to the Greek *κανων* is the word is *qaneh*.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding Canon: “Its literal meaning is a rod, ruler, or more rarely, the beam of a balance; while metaphorically, in addition to the idea of being itself straight, it comes to be regarded as something that preserves straightness, correctness, and also determines it.”<sup>4</sup>

In seeking to further express the Biblical meaning of *Canon*, Briggs explains:

“The underlying conception of a sacred collection of literature . . . is in some respects more fully expressed in the terms ‘the Holy Scriptures,’ and ‘the Scriptures,’ which . . . have continued to the present day as the most common and appropriate titles of the Bible.”<sup>5</sup> (cf. Romans 1:2 and Matthew 22:29)

Early “church” writers and “councils” used the “Canon” terminology: Irenaeus, Eusebius, Athanasius, the Council of Laodicea, Rufin, the Council of Carthage,

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<sup>1</sup> Archibald Alexander, The Canon of the Old and New Testaments. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1851, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Lightfoot, How We Got the Bible. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Bissell, The Historic Origin of the Bible. New York: Anson D.F. Randolph and Company, 1873, p. 140.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Briggs, Study of Holy Scripture. New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1899, p. 117.

Augustine, Chrysostom, Isidore, Leontius, Epiphanius, and Philastrius all refer to the *Canon*.<sup>6</sup>

Once the term *Canon* has been defined, the next (and more complex) task is to define the actual Canon of Scripture. What exactly is the New Testament Canon? How does a 21<sup>st</sup> century believer know he has exactly what God prepared for him? When did Scripture become “canonical”? Archibald Alexander wrote a tremendous book on *Canonicity*. The title is “*The Canon of the Old and New Testaments Ascertained, or the Bible Complete Without the Apocrypha and Unwritten Traditions.*” The long title is anything but a smokescreen. Alexander’s 300-page book, though published in the year 1851, stands today as a classic on the subject of Canonicity. Consider him here:

“The question is often asked, When was the Canon of the New Testament constituted, and by what authority? Many persons who write and speak on this subject, appear to entertain a wrong impression in regard to it; as if the books of the New Testament could not be of authority, until they were sanctioned by some Ecclesiastical Council, or by some publicly expressed opinion of the Fathers of the church; and as if any portion of their authority depended on their being collected into one volume. But the truth is, that every one of these books was of authority, as far as known, from the moment of its publication; and its right to a place in the Canon, is not derived from the sanction of any church or council, but from the fact, that it was written by inspiration. And the appeal to testimony is not to prove that any council of bishops, or others, gave sanction to the book, but to show that it is indeed the genuine work of Matthew, or John, or Peter, or Paul, who we know were inspired.”<sup>7</sup>

Lightfoot explains the difference between authority and canonicity. “This letter [*I Corinthians*] had authority from the moment he [Paul] wrote it, yet it could not be referred to as canonical until it was received in a list of accepted writings formed

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander, p. 118.

sometime later.”<sup>8</sup> To him, canonicity does not deal with a book’s viability or usability; it relates to *acceptance*.

Dr. Thomas Strouse, in his book *The Lord God Hath Spoken*, describes five periods of the Canonization process:

Composing (A. D. 50-100)  
Collecting (A. D. 100-200)  
Comparing (A. D. 200-300)  
Completing (A. D. 300-400)  
Copying (A. D. 400-1500)<sup>9</sup>

As is apparent from this outline, canonicity is a separate issue from inspiration.

Canonicity does, however, relate to preservation and the New Testament text: “The question, ‘When was the Canon constituted?’ admits therefore of no other proper answer than this, that as soon as the last book of the New Testament was written and published, the Canon was completed.”<sup>10</sup>

To a certain extent, human recognition of the completed word of God came in the process of time that Strouse delineates above. This is the historical side of canonicity. From what arena of history did the Scriptures receive their “stamp” of canonicity? To the Roman Catholic, the “Church” establishes canonicity – *their Church*. During the Reformation period, the Roman Catholic Church had a clear position on the Canon:

“The hierarchy maintained that it was the province of the Church to determine by its authority, as expressed through the papal administration, not only the interpretation of Holy Scripture, but also the limits of Holy Scripture, and so forced for the first time in Christian history an official determination of the extent and limits of the Canon by the authority of the Church.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lightfoot, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Strouse, *The Lord God Hath Spoken*. Newington, Connecticut: Emmanuel Baptist Theological Press, 2001, p. 71-73.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander, p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> Briggs, p. 142.

Catholic authority comes in various forms in the post-biblical history. Tradition, papal declarations, and church councils are some of the sources of Catholic authority. These are the authorities that Catholics look to for their list of canonical books.

On the other hand, the Bible states that the church is the pillar and ground of the truth. It is Biblical to look to the church for truth. It is also Biblical to *have a Biblical understanding of the nature of this church.*

One's theology and practice stands in direct correlation to his belief about the church. For this reason, the New Testament believer seeks validation of the canon of scripture through a Biblical source of truth, namely, the Holy Spirit in believers in God's earthly institutions, local and visible. For a definitive New Testament ecclesiology, see *I Will Build My Church* by Dr. Thomas Strouse. His detailed discussion the nature of the church will provide the needed backdrop for a complete understanding of Canon and Text. Simply stated, Bible believers received the words of the apostles and they kept them. This was done through copying and distributing the words, but also by putting into practice what they received, when they received it. The Bible does not speak of a waiting period to test the validity of the scriptures that they received. "Even as early as the time when Peter wrote his second Epistle, the writings of Paul were in the hands of the churches, and were classed with the other Scriptures."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander, p. 120.

Every word of God is pure and important. Commonly overlooked scriptures lend credence to a Biblical theology of canonicity. Consider these notable Biblical details relating to the issue of canonization:

“ . . . some things in Paul’s Epistles, which seem to common readers to be of no importance, were of the utmost consequence. Such as, ‘I, Teritus, who wrote this epistle,’ &c. – ‘The salutation, with mine own hand.’ – ‘So I write in every epistle.’ – ‘You see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand.’ – ‘The salutation by the hand of me, Paul.’ – ‘The salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle.’ This apostle commonly employed an amanuensis; but that the churches to which he wrote might have the assurance of the genuineness of his Epistles, from seeing his own hand-writing, he constantly wrote the salutation himself; **so much care was taken to have these sacred writings well authenticated, on their first publication.**”<sup>13</sup> [emphasis added]

Alexander continues along this vein:

“It was never considered necessary, that any council or bishop, should give sanction to these books, in any other way, than as witnesses, testifying to the churches, that these were indeed the genuine writings of the apostles. These books, therefore, were never considered as deriving their authority from the Church, or from Councils, but were of complete authority as soon as published.”<sup>14</sup>

Again, before any “church father” wrote his first word, acceptance of scripture as canonized (measuring up to the rule) was a feature of New Testament Christianity:

“As to the proper method of settling the Canon of the New Testament, the same course must be pursued as has been done in respect to the Old. We must have recourse to authentic history, and endeavor to ascertain what books were received as genuine **by the primitive church** and early Fathers.”<sup>15</sup>

A Bible believer is right in expecting a historical fulfillment of Biblical promises.

Alexander mentions the “primitive church” as receiving books as genuine scripture. This is canonization in history, tied directly to local assemblies who guarded and kept the words they received. In other words, none of the Lord’s candlesticks were waiting for a

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<sup>13</sup> Alexander, p. 121.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander, p. 113.

decree of the council or the statement of a revered church father before they recognized scripture as authoritative. They proved their belief in canonicity with their lives.

The immediate distribution of the words of scripture (recognized as meeting the “rule” [canon] criteria) proved that these immersionist assemblies “received” these writings as authoritative truth. The diligence with which they copied this truth is remarkable:

“Considering how difficult it is now, with all our improvements in the typographical art, to multiply copies of the Scriptures with sufficient rapidity, it is truly wonderful, how so many churches as were founded during the first century, to say nothing of individuals, could all be supplied with copies of the New Testament, when there was no speedier method of producing them than by writing every letter with the pen!”<sup>16</sup>

Not every Bible scholar takes this aforementioned view of canonicity. The famous liberal Charles Briggs:

“The first work of Biblical Criticism is to investigate the Canon of the Bible and to determine, so far as possible, the entire extent and the exact limits of Holy Scripture. This investigation is first of all an historical study.”<sup>17</sup>

He adds:

“Mark gives the most primitive conception of the life of Jesus. The gospel of Mark was used by our Matthew and Luke. Our gospel of John is probably based upon an original gospel of the apostle John, very much as our gospel of Matthew is based on the primitive Matthew.” Briggs

Briggs names three “layers” of Canons of the New Testament: (1) Gospels, (2) Thirteen epistles of Paul, and (3) the Catholic Epistles. In addition to this curious view of canonicity, he finds refuge for his liberalism from a very “telling” source:

“The New Testament writings were critically examined by **Origen** early in the third century. He divided them into three classes: (1) those universally accepted, the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline Epistles, Hebrews, I Peter, I John, and the Apocalypse (the first and second Canons); (2)

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander, p. 120.

<sup>17</sup> Briggs, p. 117.

those that were to be rejected; (3) the doubtful writings, James, Jude, II Peter, II and III John. Influenced by Origen, **Eusebius** in his Church History makes essentially the same classification.”<sup>18</sup>

One would expect nothing less than murky theology from the likes of the heretical Origen and the corrupt text promulgator Eusebius. Why would Briggs find them credible?

At the same time, even Briggs recognizes a history of canonicity outside of Catholicism:

“The Protestant Reformers . . . went back further than Jerome to the more fundamental principle of the common consent of the believing children of God, which in course of time eliminated the sacred canonical books from those of a merely national and temporary character, because these books approved themselves to their souls as the very Word of God.”<sup>19</sup>

The connection between canon and text is obvious. Receiving words that were given, along with promised preservation of those words, result in one’s belief on the text of the New Testament. If canonization can be established through the universal church, it follows that the identification of the text of scripture can also. On the other hand:

“There is good reason to think that if God saw it needful, and for the edification of the church, that such books should be written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by his providence he would have taken care to preserve them from destruction.”<sup>20</sup>

Antiochus Epiphanes sought to destroy actual OT copies of scripture, but the Jews of that day refused to let that happen:

“They chose rather to sacrifice their lives, and suffer a cruel death, than to deliver up the copies of the sacred volumes in their possession. And the same spirit was manifested, and with the same result, in the Dioclesian persecution of the Christians. Every effort was made to obliterate the sacred writings of Christians, and multitudes suffered death for refusing to deliver up the New Testament.”

Here is a practical evidence of OT Jews and NT assemblies at work in the preservation of Scripture. Both Kent Brandenburg and Thomas Strouse attest this truth in

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<sup>18</sup> Briggs, p. 136.

<sup>19</sup> Briggs, p. 143.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander, p. 260.

the book *Thou Shalt Keep Them*. “He used His church, the *ekklesia*, as the custodian of the NT Scriptures”.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Strouse identifies three responsibilities of NT assemblies in relation to the words of scripture: 1) Recognize and receive them, 2) Preserve them, and 3) Guard them.<sup>22</sup>

The alternative to perfect preservation (based on a biblical understanding of canonicity) is to subject God’s Word to the ever-changing realm of textual criticism. It is no wonder that a liberal theologian like Charles Briggs would make the following statement, but it is disheartening to young men who are training to serve God to be subjected to similar ideology in “Fundamentalist” colleges and universities. Briggs:

“Textual Criticism has to determine the Text of the Bible. It is necessary to study the history of the Text, and then apply the principles of Textual Criticism to manuscripts, versions, and citations, and so endeavor to ascertain the original text upon which they all depend. The Text of the Bible has passed through similar changes to those that are manifest in all other kinds of literature. The citations of the Bible have the same indefiniteness and the same variations from the original as citations from other writings. The Versions have the same difficulties and departures from the original as other translations. The manuscripts have gone through the same experiences of wear and tear as other manuscripts. The same mistakes of copyists have been made, - by omission, insertion, transposition, haste, and indistinctness of vision or utterance. The same use of conjecture has been made by scribes to remove difficulties and errors.”<sup>23</sup>

There is neither faith nor anchor in that statement, just skepticism, rationalism, and infidelity.

The discussion of canonicity and text will conclude with two opposing viewpoints. First, the liberal Briggs:

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Strouse, *Ekklesia: The Congregation of the Lord in the New Testament: Tareo*. In *Thou Shalt Keep Them: A Biblical Theology of the Perfect Preservation of Scripture*, Kent Brandenburg, ed. El Sobrante, California: Pillar and Ground Publishing, 2007, p. 111.

<sup>22</sup> Strouse, *Ekklesia*, p. 112.

<sup>23</sup> Briggs, p. 169.

“At the Reformation the Roman Catholic Council of Trent decided for one Canon, the Protestant synods for another Canon. We must wait for a reunited Christendom before the Church can give its authority to fix the Canon, even if it has in itself the divine authority so to do. It remains to be seen whether Protestantism will ever consent to an ultimate definition of the Canon even by the Reunited Church”<sup>24</sup>

And lastly, Alexander:

“But they who possess this sacred volume, and yet neglect to study it, are still more to be pitied, for they are perishing in the midst of plenty. In the midst of light, they walk in darkness. God has sent to them the word of life, but they have lightly esteemed the rich gift of His love. O that their eyes were opened, that they might behold wondrous things in the law of the Lord!”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Briggs, p. 156.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander, p. 143.

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