

Bibliology: A Panoramic Assessment around the Written Word of God

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Introduction

Bibliology is the study of the Bible, its contents, its development and how to interpret it. It essentially deals with the constituent nature of the Christian Holy Scriptures, how it was canonized and who was involved. The Bible has generated much interest in nearly every generation from inception warranting much study to synthesise answers out of it for our practical living today. While the Old Testament is typically of Jewish descent and immediate relevance, the New Testament opens up a whole new world to the entire world, incorporating the Gentile world. Protestants accept the Hebrew Bible (i.e. Old Testament) exactly as it was passed down although with a slight arrangement or classification of the same, hence the 39 books rather than 23 or 24. The Roman Catholic canon is slightly larger, having included several extra books generated in the Intertestamental period. This has been a source of discussions and even controversy over the years. While the pristine canon was agreed upon around the fourth or fifth century, the Roman Catholic canon was definitively settled (with the additional 7 books) during the Council of Trent in the mid1500s. So can we argue that technically, the Protestant canon preceded the Roman Catholic canon? But why should we have two content-different canons? Why should this be so in the first place? Why should the inspired page development have been subject to such difficulties in those early days? What dangers do we still face today? Which canon should be accepted as authentic? On what basis would the other be relegated to the terraces? What could we learn from all this? While in this paper, we may not delve into all the details relating to this all important subject, we shall attempt to highlight some salient features and points that every saint worth their salt must know and take away.

What Bibliology is

As earlier stated above, *Bibliology* is the discipline or area of study within the theological framework where the Bible is studied for what it is, how it was compiled, and the tests for its validity as well as its interpretation. In achieving the afore-mentioned, the enquirer considers various factors such as internal and external evidence for a position in relation to scripture. This calls for an open

objective mind, inquisitive spirit and willingness to counter check facts that arise from sources including archaeological findings or other emerging discoveries. Basically, Bibliology deals with the canon, or standard which houses the authoritative inspired text of God. Anything outside that is not on equal footing with the inspired word of God. It may be used and read as a secondary helpful source but never authoritative, inspired or at par with Holy Scripture. This assertion is loaded.

How the Old and New Testaments were compiled

The Bible has an interesting story. Both the Old and New Testaments took a process of many years to be recognised and accepted as divine and thus worthy of canonical status. While some books were rejected based on given criteria, premise or standard, others were not accepted or treated as any other literature of human origin and ingenuity. For our purposes, we give a bird's eye view over each Testament and then draw a conclusion:

The Old Testament

The Old Testament was first revealed to the Jewish (i.e. Hebrews) people commencing with Abraham who would be the father of many nations (Genesis 12:2-3)¹. The said Old Testament is composed of several sections that include the Law, the Prophets and the Writings². Under each head, several books are to be found with each section housing several authors. The Old Testament is also³ partitioned into the Law, The former and latter prophets in which several books are held. For instance, in the former prophets, we have the book of 1 & 2 Samuel. We may also talk about the major and minor prophets as well. But how was the Old Testament written and compiled? It is believed that Moses is the author of the books of the law (i.e. the Torah or Pentateuch), while other books are written by respective prophets or other writers like Kings or people God specifically called to perform that task. With time, it became necessary to set up a canon and is believed to have been agreed upon at some council (or even a series of meetings rather than a one-day even as some would like us to believe)⁴ probably

¹ We here (i.e. in this point) refer to the commencement of the Hebrew nation rather than the revelation about Origins etc. (Genesis 1-11 and beyond). which were penned down by Moses.

² This is the Ancient Jewish categorization. Later categorizations may have differed from what we here allude to.

³ i.e. 'further' or 'equally'

⁴ A source from the Israel Institute of Biblical studies weighs in on this asserting the following: "*Phrases such as "on that day" contained in rabbinic discussions (Mishna, Yadaim 3:5-4:4 and Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 28a) on the topic of authority of books created an impression that this was a deliberation that took place during a single session, thus creating the misnomer of the Council of Jamnia.*" These are helpful insights. Available at:

<https://blog.israelbiblicalstudies.com/jewish-studies/jamnia/>. Sourced on 20/10/2021.

at *Jamnia/Yavneh* (circa AD 90)⁵ or some such place. While the seventy-two elders sat and directed the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into the Septuagint Greek text long before the time of Christ, another august house of Jewish leaders/scholars is believed to have sat to answer this major question around the canon boundaries for several reasons beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, when Jesus walked the earth, the Hebrew canon was already largely agreed upon⁶, hence his quoting from it with apparent reference to Genesis 2:24 (first book) and 2 Chronicles 20-21:24: (last book in the Hebrew Bible)⁷. The scriptures were considered inherently authoritative and held in high reverence among the Jewish community to the extent that if a manuscript became too old or damaged, they gave it a descent religious burial!⁸ That said, the Old Testament is a rich volume describing how God dealt with His covenant people Israel, the promise of the *Messiah* and its eventual fulfilment in the New Testament.

The New Testament

The New Testament canon was compiled over a long period of time⁹, with the earliest book (James) being written between AD 45-50. As heresies and attacks on the faith arose, coupled with the progressive deaths of the Apostles, it became apparently evident that there was need to document by writing down divine instructions to generations to follow, at least that was Peter's spirit (II Peter 1:16-21; 3:1-2). Book after book was written, circulated around the Churches, with copies being meticulously drafted, preserved and passed on to the next

⁵ This dating and view has been questioned by some as the Israel Institute of Biblical Studies states: "*Since the 1960s, Graetz's theory has been questioned. (Jack P. Lewis, Lee M. McDonald, James A. Sanders and Sid Z. Leiman and others). Today modern scholars are skeptical as to whether there was ever a synod in Jamnia dedicated specifically to matters of canonization.*". Accessed on 20/10/2021.

⁶ This claim is in sync with what the Israel Institute of Biblical studies asserts: "*There are several important ancient sources (Josephus, Against Apion 1:8; 4 Ezra 14:44-45, Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra 14b and others) which indicate that a generally accepted list of sacred writings already existed in the days of Jamnia. The Jamnia sages, for example, explored the merits of Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Proverbs and Ezekiel.*" The beauty with this claim is that it even proffers other sources like Josephus to buttress the idea of an agreed canon at Jesus' time though not canonized in written form. This makes sense, given the strong oral tradition as well at the time, although we have the scrolls and other written scriptures or writings at the time.

⁷ Although in the Christian Bible, the book of Malachi is placed as the last Old Testament book from which Jesus equally quoted (Mal 3:1 in reference to John the Baptist-Lk 7:27)!

⁸ This meticulous and reverential burial rites practice could possibly partly explain why the Hebrew original auto graphs were probably not available with the 10th Century AD copies being extant until the game changing 1947 Dead Sea scrolls accidental find!

⁹ Although the authoring did not take as long (within 50 years or so, most of the NT books were written and in common circulation among Churches) as its counterpart testament.

generation. From James, a whole range of books were authored from different perspectives, genre and styles, yet inspired, speaking the same voice. The canon would be capped by Revelation about AD 90¹⁰ shortly before the great Apostle was gathered to his fathers. With time, other individuals came along accepting or rejecting some books as inspired or authoritative. One such person was Marcion the heretic (AD 85-160; denounced as heretic by early Church Fathers around AD 144), who, while in Rome, compiled a list of what he considered inspired and Biblical. Naturally, he rejected large parts/chunks of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, only accepting what supported his view, while altering one gospel (i.e. Luke)¹¹. He was condemned by the Church Fathers (i.e. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian) and branded accordingly branded a Heretic. Despite his being dubbed a heretic, Marcion catalysed the need for having an agreed canon. Next came the Gnostics with their multiple gospels and books which, at some points, clearly contradicted the accepted New Testament books. Thank fully, God raised godly people like Polycarp (disciple of the Apostle John) that freely and extensively quoted, almost verbatim, from the extant books of scripture. The first nearly complete list of the New Testament came from the hand of Muratori probably in a later century¹² but it would not be until much later when the full canon of scripture would be universally agreed, though some books still posed problems for later saints, though eventually some of them accepted the canon¹³. Examples of books that caused problems were Hebrews, 2 & 3rd John and 2 Peter (Keathley 1997). The Book of Revelation itself would pose a challenge for many years. We need to mention that the present universally accepted canon excludes the apocalypse of Peter which the Muratorian canon accepted. Reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper. That said, for over a thousand years, the accepted canon, in sync with the Hebrew Bible (though the arrangement and books slightly differ, as earlier stated) was the 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New making a library or “*biblios*” of 66 volumes. However, about 1546, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent additionally recognised and canonised the *apocrypha*¹⁴ to the same authoritative status as other scriptures. One of their reasons for this development was because this secured their doctrine of Purgatory or some other practice (i.e. 2 Maccabees 12:41-46). Additionally, the Roman Catholic Church treated *the Church* as above scripture, with the ecclesia adding or subtracting from scripture (Berkhof 1979). From that point onwards, the Protestant Bible agrees with the Hebrew Bible while the Roman Catholic Bible differs from the previous two having incorporated 7 extra books to its canon. Roman Catholics argue from different premises for their position including Jerome’s Vulgate who himself did

¹⁰ Some sources suggest a later date say AD 95 while others opt for an earlier date than has generally been agreed.

¹¹ Some sources have called it ‘*The Gospel of Marcion.*’

¹² Although some sources argue that it was drafted about AD 170 because of Muratori reference to Pius 1, Bishop of Rome (AD 140-155).

¹³ The Muratorian canon for instance, excluded four books from its NT canon namely Hebrews, James, 1 Peter and 2 Peter

¹⁴ Some call these the *Deuterocanonical* books.

not accept the extra books as inspired but merely good for reading. Sources demonstrate that he consistently excluded these from the accepted canon of scripture. Other sources claim that he at first rejected them but later changed his mind¹⁵. The debate rages on.

From the foregoing, we can say that scripture has gone through a thorough process before being canonized as a unit, although we must hasten to say that the moment the authors wrote the inspired script, at that very moment, the scripture became inherently authoritative and fit to be included as part of the canon. In other words, it is not councils or even individuals that determined or added inspiration to the text but it was inherently within the text with or without recognition from mortals. What humans merely did was to recognise and compile the text/canon.

Important points relating to Bibliology

The Bible is the very word of God revealed to human beings, using *anthropomorphic* language. The subject matter of the Bible is God as He deals with His creation. This position is not held by authentic child of God although admittedly, some hold contra opinions, given the fluid days into which our lot falls. In this section, we consider some critical points in relation to the Bible and its nature.

- Inspiration: Inspiration is a word that has been used by different people to mean different things, even in the religious community (Young 1963). However, in deeper theological circles, inspiration has to do with how the scriptures were written using human instrumentality to reveal the word of God. God, at different times, spoke in different ways as He communicated with mortals (Hebrews 1:1,2). Inspiration therefore has to do with how God led people to write scriptures using their various faculties and abilities. As

¹⁵ Ray Aviles (as quoted by Beggars all October 2, 2011), quotes a source in a post found at: <https://beggarsallreformation.blogspot.com/2011/10/did-jerome-change-his-mind-on-apocrypha.html>, interesting to read. We verbatim post this claim here: *"In his later years St. Jerome did indeed accept the Deuterocanonical books of the Bible. In fact, he wound up strenuously defending their status as inspired Scripture, writing, "What sin have I committed if I followed the judgment of the churches? But he who brings charges against me for relating the objections that the Hebrews are wont to raise against the story of Susanna, the Son of the Three Children, and the story of Bel and the Dragon, which are not found in the Hebrew volume (ie. canon), proves that he is just a foolish sycophant. For I wasn't relating my own personal views, but rather the remarks that they [the Jews] are wont to make against us" (Against Rufinus 11:33 [A.D. 402]). In earlier correspondence with Pope Damasus, Jerome did not call the deuterocanonical books unscriptural, he simply said that Jews he knew did not regard them as canonical. But for himself, he acknowledged the authority of the Church in defining the canon. When Pope Damasus and the Councils of Carthage and Hippo included the deuterocanon in Scripture, that was good enough for St. Jerome. He "followed the judgment of the churches."*

they wrote, they wrote using their free volition and yet what they wrote had the divine stamp of God, free from error, contradiction or confusion. All scripture is given by the inspiration of God, God-breathed using the language of II Timothy 3: 16. Thus, the Bible itself claims to be inspired and thus inerrant by that token. Evidences to that end may include the remarkable accuracy, the fulfilment of prophecy and the harmony (i.e. unity) of scripture despite having been written by different individuals in separate ages, conditions or locations, yet speaking the same voice. Although the style and detail may differ, scripture speaks about God and never contradicts itself. Therefore, when a saint takes up the Bible, they presuppositionally know and believe that every word, as originally given in the original autographs, is inspired from beginning to end-*Plenar* and *verbal* (Young 1963). Moreover, inspiration extends to the very words and ideas revealed in scripture. If one rejects this view, then scripture ceases to be trust worthy, let alone, authoritative.

- Inerrancy: Following what we have described above, we may well say that scripture is free from error, contamination or corruption as originally given by God. This means that Bible does not contradict itself nor harbour any errors, no matter how minute. By that token, it is both trust worthy and entirely reliable (i.e. *veracity*). It is relevant and sufficient for every generation, regardless because it speaks the mind of Christ. People can read and understand it given its *perspicuity* because it is written for men to understand for obedience.
- Illumination: The Bible is a unique book because it has the stamp of God upon it. Unlike other human writings, the Bible is inherently authoritative, reliable and informative leading to salvation. And yet, its contents can only be appreciated and understood once the Spirit illumines one's mind and understanding. Although an intelligent unbeliever can grasp some aspects of the scriptures, given its perspicuous nature, they (i.e. scripture) only come to life and have deep lasting meaning once the Holy Spirit makes the word clear. However, even if one is enlightened, they may not arrive at the correct meaning of the text unless they use the right hermeneutical interpretive principles (Klein, Blomberg & Hubbard 2004; Carson 2007; Downing 2020). This explains why even saints can be confused, hence the need to give special diligence to study of God's word.
- Hermeneutics: As earlier alluded to in the preceding point, the way in which one goes about exegeting and interpreting the word for application is what encompasses hermeneutics (Klein et al 2004; Downing 2020; Carson 2007). If your approach is wrong, so also will be your conclusion. At the base of this whole exercise is the view that one has about the Bible, whether it is God's word or just mere collections of intelligent wise men from the East. Even reputedly good sound Theologians error at this point. To rightly understand and divide the word of God, a person must first discover the authorial intent in a given context and then apply it to the

present context. In that way, the Spirit's intent remains on the throne rather than an imposed human reason or preference. We need to mention here that authorities like Downing (2020) make a distinction between interpretation and Exegesis, claiming that the latter is only possible if one has competence in the original languages. Only then, according to Downing (2020), would exegesis be possible. This assertion has vast implications in either direction but in this particular point under consideration, our focus is on the hermeneutical principles on how best to approach the Bible, at least not allegorically but as literary as possible unless the text itself dictates or states otherwise.

- **Authority:** Being the word of God, the Bible inherently carries with in it, a certain particular power demanding attention and response. What it says must be obeyed without question. Let the Bible speak and you & I obey its wise dictates, because to act otherwise is rebellion against *Yahweh*.
- **Sufficiency:** The Bible covers all matters relating to life and godliness. It is ever fresh and relevant. By principle, all matters are addressed, albeit in proxy form. Nothing is outside the purview of scripture. It is either address directly or by principle.
- **Revelation:** This is the self disclosure of God to His people through the Prophets as well as his interaction with His creation. God has used different means and methods to reveal Himself and His will (Hebrews 1:1-3). There is need to note that revelation is of at least two sorts, general and special revelation. General revelation includes the evidence of God's existence from creation or design while special revelation is God revealing Himself in a particular and special sense unto salvation in the Bible.

Thus, if a person is to be a true evangelical, they must hold inerrancy depending on the Holy Spirit to make all things clear. If not, then we classify them as liberals or even nominal.

Why Bibliology is Important

Bibliology study is very important, especially in a day when men and women wilfully reject or trivialise what scripture says. At 'best'¹⁶, they swing to one legalistic extreme but at worst, they reject the very word of God, claiming that other sources of revelation are equally available and necessary today. The Bible is thus stripped of its inherent efficacy, authority or distinctive divine nature by the latter group. Groups like the Jesus Seminar fall in this latter category. That said, an authentic conservative Evangelical holds that the canon of scripture is

¹⁶ Not sure how 'best' legalism is but we aim to highlight the two extremes along the continuum.

complete¹⁷ and thus no other new revelation is to be admitted on equal footing with scripture. A proper understanding and grasp of Bibliology therefore inoculates one from different emerging heresies or errors on offer on today's doctrinal menu. If one does not hold the right view, they open themselves up to all sorts of errors, griefs and problems such as montanism or other related heresies, ancient or new.

Possible Adverse Effects and Results of not holding Correct views about Scripture

There are several adverse effects, some of them already highlighted above. The first is that the person is not stable, wondering around as they are tossed to and fro by every wind of Doctrine (Ephesians 4:14). The second is that the person's high view of scripture diminishes because scripture is perceived and treated as incomplete, obsolete, or insufficient. Thirdly, opens the door to other errors, heresies or cults (e.g. neo-orthodoxy, extra-biblical revelation, Gnosticism, Mormonism, mysticism, rank rationalism, Romanism and cultism etc). Fifth, the Bible ceases to be authoritative. There could be other equally troubling off shoots not here highlighted. We leave it to the reader to explore these.

Advantages of Holding Correct Views of Scripture

Having a correct view saves one many headaches because they will rely on the sure, certain, sufficient and authoritative inspired word of God not the whims of men. The Bible will have a special place in their lives and practice. The scriptures are normative, acting as the highest court of appeal on all matters of faith, life and practice.

What Others have Said or Written on Scripture: Its Nature and our Attitude

There are several people who have said valuable things on inspiration. I found BB Warfield dead on target as much as EJ Young (1963) was. Their definition of *Inspiration* and *revelation* was great. Dr Robert Cara (2009) has done a remarkable job in his Thessalonians exposition. He says the following in commenting on I Thessalonians 2:13: "*This is an amazing verse. When the Thessalonians heard Paul's preaching, they realised that these words which they heard spoken by a man were ultimately words that came from God!....*"¹⁸ The Thessalonians had a correct view of God's word whether spoken, preached or

¹⁷ We have written a separate paper on the nature and closure of the canon, should readers want to explore this idea further. Among Christians, some argue that the canon closed while others dissent, with one school questioning who closed the canon or when. Interesting conversations here!

¹⁸ J. R. Cara (2009): 1 & 2 Thessalonians, pp 70.

written. The divine stamp was evident. Berkhof continues to throw immense and refreshing light on our path and so does the great Princeton Theologian, Charles Hodge. Evidently, the sources to pick from are many! We could browse through Klein et al, Carson and Downing arriving at the same or similar positions with respect to interpreting scripture. Their works add immense value to our knowledge of scripture and its handling. Had we sufficient time and space, we could have explored other works, both agreeable or not, to have a further panoramic view of this minefield.

Take Away lessons from this Consideration

Having read and chewed over what Bibliology is or entails, it leaves the reader with sense of confidence in the word of God and yet at the same time with a few reservations coupled with some level of fear considering the looming, if not fermenting Evangelical Crisis. Iain H Murray (2000) captured some aspects of this split in his *Evangelicalism Divided* years ago. In that volume, Murray high lights the progressive shifts within Evangelicalism by named leading Evangelicals of the last century (1900s) whose trajectory has effectively split evangelicalism into potential segments long into the future, largely with deleterious effects. In this paper, however, we go to possibly the root of what eventually manifests as different perceptions and conclusions among theological giants, their view of scripture. This is what makes one fearful, in that sense. It is very easy to veer to either extreme as much as it is easy to misinterpret and consequently arrive at the wrong conclusion. The exhortation to Timothy (II Timothy 2:15) to study to ensure he was approved of God, rightly dividing the word of truth definitely come alive and afresh to the reader. It appears fewer and fewer people among us, in these degenerate days, hold on to the sufficiency, inherent authority, veracity, perspicuity and completeness of Holy Scripture. Our day is flooded with all sorts of professing Christians claiming to speak in the name of the Lord and yet out rightly reject His written word. Indeed, Marcion the heretic of earlier ages definitely has a large following today. There is urgent need for us to pass on this “*body of divinity*” to the next generation. A return to *confessionalism* is one viable, but certainly unpopular, option. There in, truth nuggets are succinctly processed, packaged and presented in rich capsule form! Another lesson is the need for Christians to understand how we got our Bible both from Jewish and Greek sources/perspectives. This helps both to defend and build confidence in the trust worthy scripture passed down to us. Ignorance does much harm to the faith of some.

Benefits and Effects of this Consideration

The reference materials adduced in this study are no doubt, very helpful in establishing what Bibliology is all about and how we received our Bible. The varied reading sources outside the Bible, to gain insights into how or why people

think the way they do are clearly handy. We have in mind sources (Some agreeable, others not) such as the Documentary Hypothesis (i.e. the JEDP), journals highlighting current thinking or conversations around the extent of the Canon, nature or inclusion/exclusion of books and how the scripture has come down to us cannot be over emphasized. An example is the 43 paged primary reference document we referred to during our research by J. H. Keathley (1997) was extremely helpful because very well prepared, an easy read, sufficiently comprehensive and in many senses, all-encompassing, giving a good gist of the entire subject matter. Given the subject's sensitivity and relevance in the current context, the author handled the subject matter well helping readers to have a panoramic view of what the issues are and how best to understand them. This consideration helps the sceptic and presuppositional believer alike to appreciate the Bible for what it is, given the rich background context or historical facts adduced in the said resource (DeYoung 2014). As suggested in the previous sentence, although the subject matter in question is consistently attacked from every side, the document makes good reading for a both a first time reader or an advanced apologetics practitioner. Obviously, a study of this magnitude and sensitivity invites a lot of concentration, precision, research and diligence (O'Brien 1990). Thankfully, much has been written by many other worthy writers and all we did was to collate these thoughts into one while adding some of our own insights. The various systematic theologies, theological discourses, our own Bible reading and of course interactions with people all add to the richness of this view. We need to add a further point: Bibliology opens up the mind giving tools to work with. Confidence is enhanced in the inspired holy writ (Madeira 2002). Others may reject or despise but for us, this consideration sweetens our devotion to this "*Holy Bible, book divine*," as one hymn writer once surmised. This Bible is indeed a precious treasure which, according to legend, Thomas Brooks (1608-1680) wept over when people neglected their Bibles in His day! This Puritan knew better than many of us know today. Lives have been lost for us to have this one Bible in our lapse and how dare we neglect it?

Conclusion

Having briefly surveyed the Bibliological landscape, we can safely conclude that one's view of scripture has a tremendous impact and effect on their attitude towards the self-same scripture. Depending on their view and hermeneutic, they either veer into liberation theology with its attendant effects, legalism, rank atheism or rejecting the scriptures altogether. Some of these are fearful prospects. The Bible is the very word of God, plenary and verbally inspired as revealed by God. With overwhelming internal and external evidence (e.g. the discovery of the 1947 dead sea scrolls), the Christian Church has no excuse to doubt God's word. The evangelical world needs to reawaken to this reality if the present theoretical (and Biblical) assertions to inerrancy given the current frail nature of the Church are to be reversed. We need to recover our past gains. For Paul, the scriptures were the very words of God, whether spoken or read (I

Thessalonians 2:13). The rallying watch word of the Reformers, *Sola Scriptura* remains our battle cry still for the contemporary Church stands or falls on this score. Oh! May God revive His work in the midst of the years, so that we deeply love His word again, Amen!

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