

## BIBLICAL AUTHORITY and THE CANON

1. Asking and answering the question “Do you take the Bible literally?” is like the question “Have you stopped beating your wife?” Either a “yes” or a “no” convicts the one who responds. Further definition of the word literal is required.
  - a. Taking a literal view of the Bible does not mean that we do not recognize that figures of speech are used in the Scripture. When Isaiah speaks of the trees clapping their hands (Isaiah 55:12), it is not to be thought that one who takes the Bible literally views such statements as literal.
  - b. Obviously, the view “those who take the Bible literally are in contrast with “those who do not take the Bible literally.” A non-literal view is frequently an attempt to suggest that the biblical records of certain events (for instance, the fall of man or miracles) are merely nonfactual stories to illustrate and convey profound spiritual truth.
  - c. Those who don’t hold to a literal view say that as the truth of “Don’t kill the goose that lays the golden egg” does not hinge on the literal factuality of Aesop’s fable, so we need not insist on the historicity of biblical events and records to enjoy and realize the truth they convey.
  - d. These observations lead to the question of whether or not the Bible is reliable. How reliable is it?
  
2. How do we know that the text of the Bible as we have it today, having come to us through many translations and versions over the centuries, is not just a pale reflection of the original?
  - a. If the Bible is believed to be the word of God, the job of establishing the text accurately is an extremely important one. This task is called textual criticism. It has to do with the reliability of the text, i.e., how the current text compares with the originals. This process is true for all literature.
  - b. There are no copies of the Hebrew Old Testament earlier than around 900 A.D. A check is provided by comparing some translations from the Hebrew into Latin or Greek at about the same time. This comparison reveals a careful copying of the Hebrew text. The text dating from around 900 A.D. is called the “Massoretic Text” because it was the product of Jewish scribes known as the Massoretes.
  - c. How can we know about the accuracy and authenticity of the text in pre-Massoretic times? In 1947 the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered. From these scrolls, it is evident that a group of Jews lived at a place called Qumran from about 150 B.C. to about A.D. 70. They spent time studying and copying the Scripture. They hid their scrolls before the invasion of Rome.
  - d. The find included the earliest copy yet known of the complete Book of Isaiah, and fragments of almost every book in the Old Testament. Along with these, a number of nonbiblical items, including the rules of this ancient community were discovered.
  - e. By comparing these scrolls with the Massoretic text, the accuracy of it could be verified.

- f. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, written around 200 B.C. also confirms the reliability of the Old Testament.
3. What about the New Testament?
    - a. The New Testament was written in Greek. More than 4,000 manuscripts of the New Testament, or parts of it, have survived to our time. Modern dating techniques confirm that they were written within the lifetime of contemporaries of Christ.
    - b. The wealth of materials for the New Testament becomes even more evident when we compare it with other ancient documents which are accepted without question. Only nine or ten good manuscripts of Caesar's Gallic War exist. The oldest of these manuscripts was written some 900 years after Caesar's time.
    - c. There are also references and quotations of the New Testament books by both friends and enemies of Christianity.
  4. A question closely allied to that of the reliability of the present texts is, "How do we know the Books in the Bible, and no others, are the ones that should be there? This is the question of the Canon. There are distinct questions involved for Old and New Testaments.
    - a. The Protestant Church accepts identically the same Old Testament books as the Jews had, and as Jesus and the apostles accepted.
    - b. The Catholic Church since the Council of Trent in 1546, includes the 14 books of the Apocrypha.
    - c. At the Council of Jamnia, informal discussions were held about the Canon. From this time, we are certain that the books in the Old Testament were recognized but not yet officially established.
    - d. The Apocryphal books do not claim to be the Word of God . It is important to note that they were never received into the Jewish canon and were not considered as part of the inspired Scriptures by Jews or Christians in the early centuries of the Christian era. This is evident from a study of the writings of Josephus, the Jewish historian, and of Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa.
    - e. Books included in the New Testament were judged on the basis of their inspiration. The onslaught of heresy in the middle of the second century caused the concept of a canon to be settled that was both authoritative and all else clearly delineated.
    - f. The final fixation of the canon as we know it came in the fourth century. In the east, a letter of Athanasius clearly distinguishes between works in the canon which are described as the sole sources of religious instruction and other helpful writings that believers should read. In the west, the canon was fixed by decision of a church council held at Carthage in A.D. 397.
  5. What were the criteria used to establish canonicity?

- a. Could authorship be attributed to an apostle? The Gospel of Mark and Luke do not meet these criteria, but were included because they were such close associates of the Apostles.
- b. A second criterion was called ecclesiastical usage – that is, recognition of a book by a leading church or a majority of churches.
- c. Third, conformity must be established by standards of sound doctrine contained therein.

To sum it up, Sir Fredric Kenyon in his book “The Bible and Archeology” states “the interval, then, between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the integrity of the books may be regarded as finally established.” (New York: Harper and Brothers, pp. 288ff).