



Quaker Universalist Voice

The Canon of Scripture

by J.M. Spears

The many writings that we call Scripture have come through a long process before being accepted as having authority for the community of faith. In all of this long process, the Christian Church saw the Holy Spirit at work. This process extended from the first spoken word, through the understanding of hearers, and then passed on, by word of mouth, to more people until it reached the persons who put the words and ideas down in written form. In turn, these original documents were modified by later editors and scribes who rewrote the materials with their own fair share of errors and changes

These documents are what we have today and what we call “the received texts” of Scripture. Often these texts, which exist today, are themselves several generations away from the original writings. Today, pre-existing ancient texts pass once more through the translation process into English. The modern translation of existing ancient texts is what reflects modern hearing and understandings within the community of faith. The Bible is Scripture only as it is accurately read and heard by living persons in communities of faith.

Our children are an important part of the community of faith. It is important that the Biblical text be heard in an accurate way by children.

The language used in biblical translations must accurately reflect the meaning of the text in the language of the readers. Language has a role in forming our ideas, and our ideas have a role in forming our language. The Biblical text contains the message, which the translators must make visible through both ideas and language. Accurate understanding of Scripture through use of present language has an important bearing on the way we view the future.

The canon of Scripture is the authoritatively accepted documents designated by the Christian Church as inspired by God. For the first hundred years of its history, the Church’s scriptures consisted exclusively of the writings of what is today called of the “Old Testament.” The writings comprising what later became known as the “New Testament” were in existence and familiar long before they were elevated to the special status of canonical Scripture.

Judaism had its collection of sacred or holy books a long time before Christianity was born. The official list, though not finally ratified by the rabbis until the Council of

Jamnia in 90 B.C.E. was, for practical purposes, closed to change during of the Christian era.

It was natural that the Church would except what is today call the Old Testament as scripture. The Church claimed to be the new Israel and heir to the revelation and promises made to the old Israel. Some groups at the fringe of the church were uneasy about the Old Testament, seeing it as alien to the new gospel of Christ. But, the Old Testament was viewed by most parts of the Christian church as a Christian book, the accepted word of God, and the unimpeachable sourcebook of saving doctrine.

The contents of the Old Testament Scripture of the early church varied with the geographical location of the churches the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria (Egypt) prepared a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. This new translation was called the Septuagint. This Greek language Septuagint was the scripture for the early church and for the writers of the New Testament documents.

The Greek-speaking church had little access to the Scriptures in Hebrew. Most of the quotations found in the New Testament writings are from the Septuagint Old Testament and not the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. This is one of the reasons that the quotations taken from the Greek Septuagint Old Testament, and then translated into English, very from the texts as we read them in modern translations of the Old Testament, which are based on the Hebrew Old Testament.

The Church has universally respected the first five books of the Old Testament, known as the Torah. The remainder of the Old Testament was seen by the Church is somewhat open to modifications and additions. Books like Maccabees, Esdras, Judith, and Tobit are included in some listings of the canon but not in others. There are 15 of these books, which are known either as Deutero-canonical (Second Canon) or as the Books of the Apocrypha. The controversy about the contents of the canon of the Old Testament Scripture for the Christian church was particularly strong during the first 300 years of the Church.

There were many new Christian writings in circulation within the early churches. But, it was not until the second century C.E. that the fully scriptural character of the Christian writings was universally acknowledged or referred to as the "New Testament." Recognition of a canon, or fixed list, of New Testament writings was begun around the year 150 C.E. During this time there was a roughly defined collection, or several similar collections, of Christian writings that the Churches were learning to treat as Scripture alongside the Septuagint.

The immediate incentive to make a list of the canonical writings of the church and to close the canon of Christian scripture was the controversy with the Montanists. Montanists believed that new revelations of equal authority to Old Testament scripture and the circulating Christian writings were occurring in daily through them. The church's responsive fixing of the list of books and the order of their arrangement in the New Testament was the result of a gradual process of common agreement and

negotiation. It was settled in broad outline by 200 C.E. The churches in important localities (Alexandria) retained separate traditions and lists.

The key criteria used by the church leaders in deciding whether a writing was included in scripture was whether it came from the pen, or the authority, of an apostle. Some writings which were popular and influential hovered at the fringe of the canon (The Didache, The Shepherd of Hermas, and The Revelation of Peter), but they were finally rejected for failure to meet this test. Other writings (Hebrews, Revelation, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude) were finally included in the canon, but some of these were not fully accepted until 400 C.E. due to doubts and suspicions in different localities. A common mind as to its sacred books was not reached between the Eastern Church and Western Church until after 500 C.E. Even today, there are differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant canons of the New Testament.

Often, we introduce our children to the Bible without an appreciation of the human community through which it came. It is easy to let children think of the Bible as if it was written by God alone, with no humans involved. It is also easy, in turn, to treat the Bible as a magical good luck charm. This misunderstanding encourages acceptance of available Bible translations and reduces support for the continuous process of providing accurate translations of the Bible.

Comments and suggestions. Comments and suggestions are welcome regarding the Bible and Biblical translation.

Notes:

For example, the word "earthling" as a translation of the Hebrew word *adam* appears, after the sin of separation comes into the world that leads to misunderstanding. It has been suggested that once the earthling and the woman recognize their separateness, the earthling should be recognized as male (Genesis 3:7).

In Luke 22:58 and 60, when Peter is with the soldiers around the campfire, *adam* is "man!". The root of the word is *anthropos* (human being) not *aneer* (male). Luke may have intended it to mean that the person was human, not divine, and therefore not all knowing. Luke may have intended it to convey the gruffness of Peter while he is with the soldiers. In either case, "person!" (human being) somehow seems not right.