

Chapter 11.

The Marks of Canonicity

“[...] The sheep follow him because they recognize his voice. They will never follow a stranger; instead they will run away from him, because they don’t recognize the voice of strangers.”

– John 10:4-5, HCSB

NIPPER IS AN icon. He was a terrier who lived in the 1880s and 1890s in England. He is known today because his final owner before his death immortalized him in a painting called, “His Master’s Voice,” in which the dog is shown hearing and recognizing the voice of his owner in a phonograph. “His Master’s Voice” was then adapted as a logo by various corporations, notably RCA. Despite his perfect visual portrayal of the concept, Nipper is not unique among dogs in recognizing his owner’s voice. I have owned a couple of Rat Terriers – Max and Sophie – who looked an awful lot like Nipper. Sophie presented a few challenges though, as she was blind. If I stood very still and quiet in the yard, she would have trouble finding me. However, I could whisper, “Come, Soso,” and she would race to me. I did not even have to yell. It did not work for everyone, though. My children could scream, “Soso!” repeatedly, and she would often ignore them. She *knew* her master’s voice, and she could recognize it from far away, even in the midst of other chaos and noise. When she heard it, she (usually) followed that voice.

In the same way, Jesus said that believers – His sheep – recognize the voice of their Shepherd. He said, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me [...] My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”^a We should be able to hear Him and recognize His voice. We should be able to distinguish between His voice and all the other noise that surrounds us. His sheep in the early churches heard the Shepherd’s voice in the Scriptures, and there are four marks of canonicity that characterize all of the books in which they heard it.

^a John 10:14,27, ESV.

The Mark of Origins

The question of a book's origins addresses where the writing came from, who wrote it, when, and under what authority. Not just anyone could write Scripture. When Peter wrote on the subject of inspiration that "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost,"^b there was an indication there that God used specific people for this particular purpose. The Greek word for holy is *hagios* (ἅγιος), which indicates that God set a man apart or consecrated him to that purpose.¹¹² It was important that the writer was someone recognized by the community as a person to whom God gave special revelation—a person who would have the authority to speak on God's behalf.

Origins of the Old Testament

The canonical texts of the Old Testament were written by leaders of the Jewish people. These leaders would have included prophets, like Daniel; priests, like Samuel; or rulers, like David—though there may have been some overlap among these categories. The books were also written during a time when God was giving special revelation to the Jews, entrusting them with "the oracles of God"^c—before the end of Ezra's ministry in the 4th Century BC.

Origins of the New Testament

The canonical texts of the New Testament were written by the leaders of the Christian community, such as apostles or their close associates. Apostles were believers chosen by the Holy Spirit to be messengers of Christ, who had witnessed the Resurrection,^d and whose authority was confirmed by the ability to perform miracles.^e Twenty-one of the 27 books were written by men specifically called apostles. Mark, Luke, and Acts were written by close associates of the apostles, who record-

^b II Peter 1:21.

^c Romans 3:2.

^d I Corinthians 9:1.

^e Acts 2:43.

ed the apostles' testimony.^f James and Jude were written by the authors whose names they share, half-brothers of Jesus^g who became leaders in the early churches.^h Finally, the author of Hebrews is not identified in the text, but clues in the text point to someone who was an apostle (or close associate) as well.ⁱ Just like in the Old Testament, the canonical books of the New Testament were written during a particular period – before John's death (c. AD 100), when the apostles would have been around to confirm the writings' adherence to Jesus' teachings.

The origins of Biblical texts are important because the creditability of their sources significantly affects the credibility of the writings. After all, which biography of Christ would be more insightful, one written by a close friend who was been an eyewitness to every day of His ministry, or one written by a distant scholar who heard stories about Him 300 years later?

The Mark of Consistency

An indispensable mark of canonicity is consistency. As God revealed Himself throughout history, He regularly gave new revelations, elaborated on existing teachings, and corrected people's misunderstandings of previous revelations. However, God does not give revelation which conflicts with His previous revelations. What God says will always be consistent with what God has already said. It is for that reason that early Christians were warned to avoid teachers who promoted doctrines contrary to those that had already been revealed.^j

Consistency in the Old Testament

Canonical texts in the Old Testament were consistent with the existing teachings of mainstream Judaism, primarily the Mosaic Law as taught in the *Torah*. Also, each

^f Mark was written by John Mark, an associate of Peter, who recorded Peter's account of Christ's time on Earth. Luke and Acts were written by Luke, an associate of Paul, who meticulously collected others' eyewitness accounts.

^g Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3.

^h Acts 15:13.

ⁱ Hebrews 2:3.

^j Romans 16:17; Galatians 1:6-9.

of these works revolved around the major themes of the Jewish religion (e.g., Monotheism, atonement, redemption, covenant, etc.) in a way that echoed or elaborated on accepted teachings. For example, one of the bedrock principles of Judaism was Monotheism, as expressed in the *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”^k That meant that any prophet who promoted the worship of Baal—even alongside the worship of Yahweh—would have been disregarded, along with his writings, because his teachings were inconsistent with what God had already revealed.^l

Consistency in the New Testament

Canonical texts in the New Testament were consistent with the existing teachings of Christianity as handed down by Jesus Christ and the apostles. That is why it was so important that Luke wrote about “all that Jesus began both to do and teach.”^m It is the reason why Paul told the church at Ephesus that they were “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone,”ⁿ and warned the church at Rome to “mark” and “avoid” any teachers who contradicted that foundation.^o It is the reason why Peter warned of “false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.”^p

Consistency is important because there were many writings available in ancient times—just as there are today—that were inconsistent with what God’s people already knew of Him and His Word. People can become incredibly confused by accepting conflicting “revelations.” The best defense against this is to use what God has already revealed as a yardstick by which to measure any further teachings. As Paul

^k Deuteronomy 6:4, ESV.

^l Deuteronomy 13:1-3.

^m Acts 1:1.

ⁿ Ephesians 2:20.

^o Romans 16:17.

^p II Peter 2:1.

wrote, “[...T]he spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.”^q

The Mark of Acceptance

In evaluating origins, we determine whether a work came from an appropriate source, but that alone is not enough to make a work worthy of the Canon. Just because a work was written by a prophet or apostle does not mean that it should *automatically* be part of the Canon. Paul, for example, appears to have written at least four letters to the church at Corinth. In I Corinthians, he wrote, “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators,”^r indicating that he wrote a letter before the one that is today known as I Corinthians. Later he refers to a letter written “with many tears,”^s possibly between the two canonical letters. Though they were written by an apostle, and, according to available evidence, they contained profitable teachings, these two letters were apparently still not considered to be the inspired Word of God. As a result, they were not widely copied and circulated, and are lost to history. Acceptance is an important mark of canonicity that involves those close to the writers studying the texts and answering the question, *Is he speaking for God, or for himself?*

Acceptance of the Old Testament

By the Third and Fourth Centuries BC, the canonical texts of the Old Testament were commonly accepted as authentic and inspired among the Jews. The ones written earlier tended to be accepted earlier, and the ones written later tended to be accepted later. However, by the time that the Greek *Septuagint* translation was produced in Egypt during the Second and Third Centuries BC, the Jewish community had accepted as Scripture all 24 books of the Hebrew Canon – which corresponds to the 39 books of the Protestant Old Testament Canon.^t

^q I Corinthians 14:32-33.

^r I Corinthians 5:9.

^s II Corinthians 2:4.

^t In the Hebrew Canon, I and II Samuel were combined into one book, as were I and II Kings, I and II Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, and the 12 Minor Prophets.

Acceptance of the New Testament

The canonical New Testament texts were commonly accepted as authentic and inspired among those churches and scholars who had access to them in the First, Second, and Third Centuries AD. Some were slower to be accepted because they were written later or because they took longer to circulate among the various churches.

The mark of acceptance asks whether a work claims – implicitly or explicitly – the inspiration of God and whether the majority of those churches who had access to the work accepted that claim.

The Mark of Use

The issue of use addresses the question of how particular texts were used: Were they accepted and used by the community in their corporate worship, or were they held to be *merely* historical records or inspiring stories? For example, the book of I Maccabees, which is part of the Apocrypha (or Deuterocanon) today, tells the story of the Maccabean revolt in the 160s BC. At this time, the Jews overthrew their Greek rulers who had defiled the Temple, outlawed Jewish worship, and imposed their culture by force. This book is held to be historically reliable overall and contains an inspirational story with a powerful moral and spiritual message. However, the Jews have never used it as a part of their corporate worship the way they would the *Tanakh*.

Use of the Old Testament

Works held to be part of the Old Testament Canon were read as part of corporate Jewish worship in the Temple or the synagogues. An example of this is shown in the New Testament when Jesus' turn came to read a portion of the book of Isaiah^u as part of the worship service in the Nazareth synagogue:

“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was de-

^u Isaiah 6:1.

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livered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him.”^v

Using a text this way as part of their corporate worship indicates that the Jews viewed a work as Scripture.

Use of the New Testament

Writings in the New Testament Canon were, like their Old Testament counterparts, read as part of the corporate worship in the churches that had access to them. A couple of examples of this are found in Paul’s letters when he instructed the church at Colossae to “cause [the letter to] be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and [to] likewise read the epistle from Laodicea,”^w and when instructed the church at Thessalonica to read and circulate his letter to them.^x

Use confirms the believers’ findings in the other marks discussed. The view of the community (Jewish or Christian) was demonstrated by the way that they used it. If they *believed* a work to be the inspired, authoritative Word of God, then they *treated* it as the inspired, authoritative Word of God and used it in their worship.

Looking at the Marks

These four marks of canonicity demonstrate some of the criteria which were used by the Jewish priests and the early churches to determine which books were canonical; they also to demonstrate that their efforts to create a reliable Canon of authoritative books was consistent, rather than arbitrary. There are common traits among the books of the Bible that are just not shared by other works. In terms of their apostolic and

^v Luke 4:16-20.

^w Colossians 4:16.

^x I Thessalonians 5:27.

prophetic origins, their consistent unfolding of divine revelation, their widespread acceptance, and their long history of use in worship, the 66 books of the Bible stand head and shoulders above any rival claimants to canonicity.

Summarizing this Piece of the Puzzle:

The determination of which books to include in the Canon was not based on arbitrary concerns, but on observable criteria.

