

Lecture Five

Formation of Jewish and Christian Canons

Scope: Although Christians interacted with Jewish Scriptures in their earliest writings, the canon formation of the Jewish and Christian Bibles occurred over the same time period of the first centuries of the Common Era. This presentation traces what we can know of the process within each tradition. In Judaism, formation of the canon was largely a matter of confirming earlier usage, especially that found among the Pharisaic party. In Christianity, canon formation was more contentious. An early period of exchange and collection of writings was interrupted in the 2nd century by controversies that argued, on one side, for the truncation of authoritative writings and, on the other side, for their expansion. The official Christian Bible was not fully ratified until the end of the 4th century, but the basic conflict was resolved in principle by the end of the 2nd century.

Outline

- I. The course of biblical canonization took a distinct route in Judaism and Christianity, corresponding to the way the two traditions developed.
 - A. Not every religious tradition has a canonical Scripture, and the term has a different sense even in the traditions that do have the concept of canon. In Judaism and Christianity, *canonization* means essentially the writings to be read in worship and regarded as authoritative guides to doctrine and practice.
 - B. In Judaism, the triumph of the Pharisaic movement after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. meant that the definitive formation of the canon would be part of a larger sense of tradition, including the critical concept of the Oral Torah.
 - C. In Christianity, canon formation was a more conflict-filled process, one that was connected to controversies over the identity of this religious movement and never fully and finally resolved.
- II. The path to canonization in the Jewish tradition is partly the confirmation of an internal tradition and partly a response to external developments.

- A. Second-Temple literature suggests that by the 1st century C.E., there was a general sense of a Jewish canon in three parts but also considerable fluidity. This impression is supported by the survey of usage by Philo and the Essenes.
- B. The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. was a critical turning point.
 - 1. The loss of the sacrificial system made Judaism even more a text-centered religion.
 - 2. The loss of other competing sects (Essenes/Sadducees/Zealots) made the Pharisaic/Scribal tradition the dominant ethos shaping Judaism.
- C. The rise of Christianity and its spread to Gentiles encouraged a clearer definition of the boundaries marking normative Judaism.
 - 1. Christian use of the LXX to establish its “proof from prophecy” led to a rejection of this version. Other Greek translations by Theodotion, Aquila, and Symmachus did not displace the supreme position of the Hebrew text, which was now alone authoritative in Judaism.
 - 2. The popularity of certain apocryphal writings (such as the Enoch literature) among Christians encouraged a more definite decision concerning the content of the Writings (Ketuvim).
- D. Between the years 70 and 135, the fundamental decision concerning the Jewish canon seems to have been made.
 - 1. Critical analysis of the tradition concerning a Rabbinic Council of Jabneh (c. 90 C.E.) makes it less certain that it defined the Jewish canon of Scripture.
 - 2. Nevertheless, the discovery of Torah scrolls at Wadi Murabba’at (c. 135) shows a standardization even of text.
 - 3. Certainly, by the middle of the 2nd century, the threefold division of TaNaK was in place, and the number of compositions set at 24 (or 22, depending on how they are grouped): 5 books of Moses, 8 of the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the 12 Minor Prophets counted as one book), and 11 Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Qoheleth, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles).

- III.** Canonization within the Christian tradition was both more rapid and more filled with conflict.
- A.** The first stages of the process were natural and organic, with communities exchanging and collecting letters and gospels.
 - B.** In the middle of the 2nd century, debates concerning Christian identity forced a selection of authoritative compositions.
 - 1.** From one side, such authors as Tatian and Marcion sought a contraction in the traditional authorities.
 - 2.** From the other side, Gnostic teachers sought an expansion of authoritative compositions.
 - 3.** In both cases, fundamental issues of identity—especially with respect to the creator God and the goodness of the world—were involved.
 - C.** Teachers, such as Tertullian and, especially, Irenaeus of Lyons, pushed for a defined collection of writings by which to measure Christian teaching.
 - 1.** Irenaeus in particular devised a threefold strategy of Christian self-definition: rule of faith, canon of Scripture, and apostolic succession.
 - 2.** Most important was the affirmation of the “Old Testament” as an authoritative witness to the work of God continuous with God’s revelation in Jesus.
 - 3.** The Muratorian Canon, a fragmentary list, probably from late-2nd-century Rome, is an important witness to the combination of stability and fluidity in the New Testament canon.
 - D.** In the early 4th century, the historian Eusebius points to a more stable canon, and by the end of the 4th century, the Paschal Letter of Athanasius and the Council of Carthage define the Christian Bible.
 - 1.** The New Testament consists of 27 writings: the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles; the 14 Letters of Paul (Hebrews is counted in this number); the Letters of James, Jude, Peter (2), and John (3); and the Apocalypse of John.
 - 2.** The Old Testament consists of the compositions found in the LXX (in addition to the writings in TaNaK: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, 1 and 2 Maccabees).

- IV. In both Judaism and Christianity, defining the Bible was also an act of self-definition, but the implications were different in the two traditions.
- A. In Judaism, the writings of Torah were read liturgically and ritually honored, but Scripture was an essential part of a continuous and living tradition of practice and interpretation.
1. By 200 C.E., Judah ha Nasi codified the *halakhic* interpretations of Torah in the Mishnah.
 2. Between 200 and 600 C.E., further debate on the Mishnah in light of TaNaK led to the development of the two great compilations that guided Jewish practice through the centuries: the Babylonian Talmud and the Talmud of the Land of Israel.
- B. In Christianity, the Bible was read liturgically, but Scripture also played a role in continuing debates over self-identity.
1. Including the “Old Testament” in the Christian Bible meant sustaining an (often rancorous) conversation vis-à-vis Judaism and an internal debate concerning the Law within Christianity.
 2. The Bible served as a source of proof-texting for every side during the long and shifting debates among “orthodox” and “heretical” Christians.

Essential Reading:

J. A. Sanders, “Canon, Hebrew Bible,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:837–852.

H. Y. Gamble, “Canon, New Testament,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:852–861.

Supplementary Reading:

L. M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How can debates over canonization illustrate the conviction that “you are what you read”?
2. What are the implications of Jews canonizing the Hebrew text and Christians canonizing the Greek?