

Lesson for January 25, 2009

Old Testament Survey

The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther

These three books are companion books covering approximately the same time period and chronicling events that took place during this period. Ezra and Nehemiah deal with the return of Israel from Babylon, who had captured them after their defeat by the Assyrians. Through the kindness of King Darius, the nation of Israel was allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city, which had been destroyed in 586 B.C.

Ezra, a scribe and an Aaronic priest led the nation in the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Nehemiah, the king's cup-bearer, led the nation in the rebuilding of the walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem. The book of Esther chronicles a period of 12 years and testifies to the care of Jehovah over His people while they are dispersed among the pagan nations.

Ezra led the nation of Israel back to Jehovah and reestablished the knowledge of authority of God's Word among the people of Israel. Mixed marriages to pagans were annulled and the Law was re-instituted. Ezra was a lover of God's Word and it was this program that brought Israel back from the brink of destruction. Ezra is generally known as a reformer and revivalist among Biblical scholars. If this is true, then it was the knowledge and application of God's Word in the life of the individual believer that fueled the reform and revival in the nation of Israel.

Nehemiah is more of the model of a dedicated businessman who loved God and desired to serve Him with his talents and abilities. A gifted organizer and leader of men, Nehemiah was a man of action and few words. He believed in prayer and performance. Nehemiah went about his duties of restoring the city of Jerusalem with total dependence upon Jehovah. Despite much opposition, Nehemiah successfully completed the rebuilding of the walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem.

Esther, an Israelite in captivity, became the queen of a pagan king. Though God is never mentioned in this book, it is easy to see Him working on behalf of Esther and the Israelites who were in captivity under this king. The book of Esther is a story of love, loyalty and deliverance at the hand of God for Esther and her fellow Jews.

Canonicity

The word *canonicity* comes from the Greek word “kanon”, meaning a ruler or measuring stick. In other words, *canon* means a norm or standard. In the case of the Canon of Scripture, it is God’s divine norm or standard for a collection of books, which form one book, our Bible.

Origin and Inspiration

Peter gives us an excellent synopsis of the origin of the Word of God in II Peter 1:16-21. Remember that much of what Peter wrote was taught to him directly by Jesus Christ. Peter was an eyewitness to Christ’s ministry on earth. Peter was at most major events recorded in the Gospels. (Matthew 16:28; 17:1-8) In verse 20, Peter reveals the fact that all Scripture originates with God and is not someone’s private inspiration or interpretation. This means that God the Holy Spirit so directed the writers of Scripture that without changing their personalities, their literary style, their vocabularies or their personal feelings, God’s complete and coherent message was permanently recorded, with perfect accuracy, in the original languages of Scripture. (II Timothy 3:16)

The Bible is the recorded “mind of Christ”, which existed in eternity past before it was reduced to writing. Before the written Word of Scripture came into existence through Moses, God the Holy Spirit revealed it to certain people in the Old Testament. Revelation of Scripture also came through the spoken word of prophets and others, through dreams and visions, and through angels (often the Angel of the Lord, Jesus Christ). In this dispensation God speaks to us only through His Word. (Isaiah 6:8-10; Daniel 10:9; Isaiah 1:1; Psalms 68:17)

The Bible records many events from eternity past that cannot be substantiated by man, but are, nevertheless, true and accurate statements of those events. Ancient historical facts in the Bible, that were not found in any other writings of old, were unconfirmed by mankind for thousands of years until the recent past when many of the facts were found to be true, despite earlier skepticism from the scientific community. We also find laws of divine establishment for the entire human race, not just a chosen few. These laws express God’s desire for His creation. Some portions of Scripture are direct quotes from God or times when He spoke directly to man. The Bible is a book not only of doctrine but it also contains devotional literature, such as is found in Psalms and Proverbs. The Bible is so accurate that it even records falsehoods or lies of man and Satan. What we have been given by God is a record of His Divine Viewpoint Thinking - His plan, His purpose and His will for each of us. And He has made sure that it has been preserved throughout the centuries.

Manuscripts

Manuscripts are commonly classified into four types.

The very oldest of these is called *Uncial*, and was written on parchment. These manuscripts were written in all capital letters without punctuation and without spacing between letters, words or paragraphs.

(Example:FORGODSOLOVEDTHEWORLDTHATHEGAVEHISONLYBEGOTTE
NSONTHATWHOSOEVERBELIEVETHINHIM.....)

The second type is *Minuscule* and dates back to the 10th century B.C. The Minuscule was written with lower case cursive type letters. The Minuscule was developed by a group of monks and is the basis for Modern Greek and Roman small case letters.

The third type of manuscript is called *Lectonaries*. These are actually copies of various passages from ancient manuscripts. Copied by pastors for use in sermons or Bible lessons, these copies predate many of the manuscripts available today.

The fourth type of manuscript is called the *Papyri*. This type of manuscript was written on very delicate material and if folded would simply fall apart. It was, therefore, rolled and in this way preserved, having been stored in a hot, dry climate. Some Papyri date before 200 A.D.

Codex Sinaiticus

A codex is another word for manuscript. This particular manuscript was discovered in 1844 by a German named Tischendorf in a Greek monastery in the Sinaitic Peninsula region near Mount Sinai. This manuscript contained the entire Greek New Testament and other Christian writings not included in the Canon of Scriptures.

Codex Vaticanus

This manuscript predated Codex Sinaiticus by about fifteen years, written around 325 – 350 A.D. It is called Vacticanus because it was a part of the Roman Catholic Pope's library housed at the Vatican. This manuscript was not allowed to be copied or taken from the library, though some scholars were allowed to examine it in six-hour intervals only. One German scholar named Tregelles actually memorized a portion of the manuscript each day and upon return to his home would record the Scripture.

Codex Alexandrinus

This Greek language manuscript was written in Alexandria, Egypt about 450 A.D. Its value was discovered by a Greek Orthodox scholar in 1621 and presented to King Charles of England in 1627.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

The most significant finding in modern Biblical archaeology was in 1947 in a cave near the Dead Sea by a shepherd boy. These manuscripts were written around 125 B.C. and contain all the same Scripture as the previous oldest known manuscript, the Massoretic Text. The Dead Sea Scrolls predate the Massoretic Text by 1,000 years. These are the proof many skeptics demanded for authenticity and age of writing of the Old Testament.

Preservation of the Canon

It should be obvious to everyone that God has had a hand in the preservation of the Canon of Scripture down through the ages. Why do we need a canon? I believe that God's desire is for mankind to have the revealed plan and purpose of God. The canon of Scripture does just that; in it is contained God's thinking, His will for mankind in every dispensation, man's relationship to God and his relationship to Satan (and Satan's world system) and the principles of doctrine necessary to operate successfully in this world. Since the absolute authority, Jesus Christ, is no longer on earth, He has given us a written standard of authority, the Bible. (I Corinthians 2:16) During the first two or three centuries after Christ, there was a massive amount of writings, many which claimed to be inspired (even to the point of assigning Paul as the author of some).

There had to be a standard or canon by which these books could be judged to determine if they were or were not inspired by God. The New Testament writings were being circulated throughout the early Christian churches, but it was not until around 96 A.D. that they were completed. By the middle of the next century, the Canon of Scripture was pretty much what we have today (there was still some controversy over certain books, that were eventually included).

The Criteria for Inclusion

The Early Church Fathers, leaders and pastor-teachers of the early church, determined the criteria for the inclusion of a book into the Canon. These criteria were as follows:

The Old Testament

- 1) Inspiration – Was the book of divine origin, written by an acknowledged messenger of God?
- 2) Internal evidence – Was there evidence within the book itself and did the writer claim inspiration?
- 3) Public readings – Was the book read publicly by a prophet or priest?
- 4) Writings – Was the book quoted by a prophet or a priest or referred to in another book?
- 5) Extra-Biblical – Was the teaching of the book adhered to by its readers, were there other historians that refer to a book or its teaching?

The New Testament

- 1) Apostleship – Was a book written by an apostle or someone close to him, perhaps writing on his behalf?
- 2) Received by the local churches – Did the local body of believers believe the book to be inspired?
- 3) Inspiration – Internal and external evidence must exist for each book that it is divinely inspired. (Colossians 4:16; II Peter 3:15-16)
- 4) Recognition – Was the book used for teaching by a church father or pastor-teacher?
- 5) Internal – Does the writer believe the book is inspired?
(I Thessalonians 5:27)

As early as the second century, the Canon, as we know it today, had been confirmed by numerous sources (some Christian, some not). God has miraculously preserved His book, *the Bible* for us today.