CANON FODDER

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The way in which God pulled the Bible together is altogether remarkable. He could have written the words himself, or he could have given us a definitive list of what to include and what not to include. Instead, the relational God embarked on a process that took over a thousand years, to work with people. He inspired some to write down their understanding and experiences of his actions and he helped others to draw together these writings into the collected whole we have as the Bible today. The Bible itself is one of the most amazing demonstrations of Godâ€™s desire to draw people into relationship with him.

Category: Observations

God has never given us a definitive list of the books that should be included in the Bible. You canâ€™t look in the Bible itself or anywhere else, for that matter, to find Godâ€™s final word on the subject. The remarkable thing is that the list of books in the Bible, or the canon, is another example of God working hand in hand with humanity. Over time, the merits of different books were weighed up and people prayerfully considered whether they should be treated as Scripture or something else. The Old Testament canon, the Jewish Bible, was complete around 435 BC. People wrote excellent books of religion and history after that date, but they were never accepted to have the same authority as those that were considered Scripture, though some of them were adopted by parts of the Christian church almost 2,000 years later and became what we refer to as the Apocrypha. By Jesus time, there was a four hundred year tradition of accepting the same books as Scripture and there was very little argument or discussion about them. In fact, this is one of the few things that Jesus and the Jewish authorities didnâ€™t clash over. It was agreed, so why argue? Because Christianity has deep roots in Judaism and the history of Israel, the early Christians carried on using the Old Testament as their own.

This then begged the question of which new books should be added to the Bible. The first stage in establishing the New Testament, was to recognise that the Apostles, those who had met with Jesus after his resurrection, spoke and wrote with special authority. Their words, were seen as words from God. Because to this it was quickly accepted that many of the works written by the Apostles were of equal status to the familiar Old Testament Scriptures. Over time, other books which were closely associated with the Apostles were also given the status of Scripture. Luke and Acts were included because their author, Luke, was a close associate of the Apostle Paul, while the Gospel of Mark was adopted because Peter provided much of the raw material for it. The Epistle of Jude is closely associated with the Apostle James and Jude himself was Jesusâ€™ brother. This leaves the book of Hebrews, which was eventually included in the canon because it was thought that the Apostle Paul had written it, though in fact, he almost certainly didnâ€™t. It took many years for this process to be complete. Not everything that the Apostles wrote was thought to have divine authority, whereas books such as Jude and Hebrews were. As different books were circulated around the church, a consensus slowly emerged as to which books should be accepted. It wasnâ€™t till around 367 AD, that Athanaisus wrote a pastoral letter which included the first definitive record of the 27 books that we accept as the New Testament today.

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