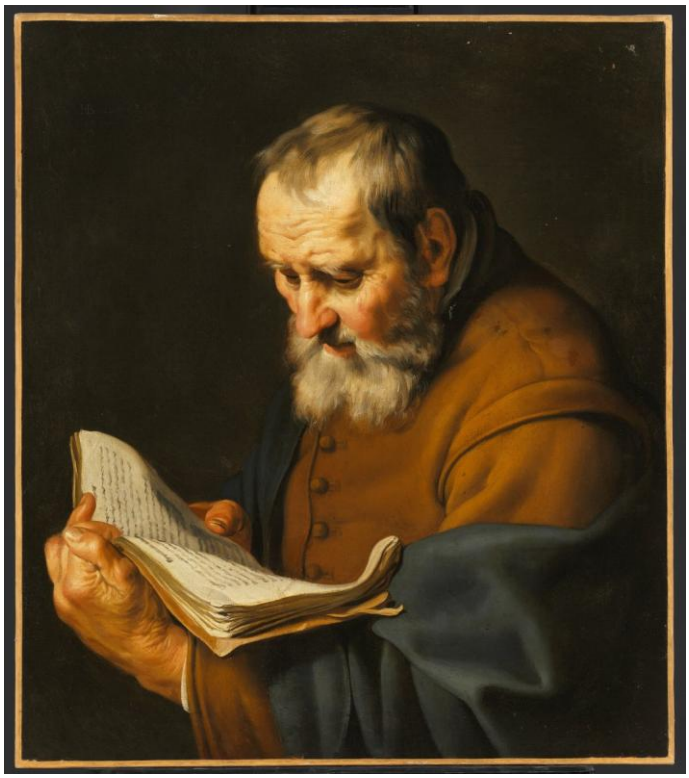
The Canon of Holy Scripture



Let us pray:

"Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever." ***Amen***.

I suppose it all began for me in the Spring of 1973, my freshman year as an undergraduate at Baylor University, the world's largest Southern Baptist college! The Baylor Bookstore was having its annual Clearance Sale, with rows and rows of tables

full of books that didn't sell earlier, now offered at discounted prices! As I didn't have much of a social life in those days, I spent many an afternoon meandering through the tables looking at the books, which was when I found it, *The Archko Volume*, with the intriguing subtitle of "*The archeological Writings of the Sanhedrim (sp.) and Talmuds of the Jews*." I was fascinated enough then to take a look at the Table of Contents, which included Chapters entitled "Jonathan's interview with the Bethlehem Shepherds," or "The Letter of Melker, Priest of the Synagogue at Bethlehem," or "Gamaliel's interview with Joseph and Mary and others concerning Jesus," or the "Report of Caiaphas to the Sanhedrim (sp.)" or "Pilate's report to Caesar of the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus."

The first 63 pages of the book were an explanation and defense of its publication, claiming to be faithful translations from rare documents hidden in the depths of the Vatican Library, transcriptions made by a trustworthy scholar and priest, labelled as the "chief guardian of the Vatican." So, I bought the book, and I read the chapters with great enthusiasm, and was touched by the stories recorded there, which only confirmed and strengthened my young faith. I shared the book with my Christian friends, from my Prayer Group and from the Bible Study in my dorm! All of us were greatly excited by the contents, such that it made me start to wonder what others documents or writings were out there that could

illuminate and validate those 'holy scriptures written for our learning?' Thus, this book and the interest it opened up in me about early writings in the Christian Church was a significant factor, I think, in my later decision to go to Seminary after college to further these studies.

There at Virginia Seminary, I learned the basic rules of historical and biblical criticism, like "don't believe everything you read," or that older sources are more trustworthy than later ones, or multiple independent attestations support the historicity of a story, or unexpected statements are usually more authentic than smoothed over clarifications. Through the use of tools such as these, I discovered that the *Archko Volume*, that book which started it all for me, was a complete fraud. The supposed official report from Pilate on the trial and execution of Jesus was, for instance, based on a French short story published in 1837. Eli's story of the Magi was copied verbatim from a chapter of the 1880 novel entitled "Ben Hur." The Presbyterian minister who first published the texts in 1884 was tried by his own churches' authorities and convicted on charges of falsehood and plagiarism, and who then promised that he would withdraw the book from publication. Yet because of weak copyright laws at the time, the book is still being sold today, without any mention of these details.

Such knowledge of biblical criticism then raised the question for me of exactly which "holy Scriptures were written for our learning", as we prayed about today in the Collect for this Sunday. I learned in Seminary, for instance, that there are parts of our Gospels that are not found in the earliest texts of those Gospels! There are, for example, at least four different endings later added to the earliest texts of the Gospel of Mark, probably because later copyists thought the original ending was too abrupt. Can we trust any of those endings now? And the beloved story of the woman caught in adultery and brought before Jesus, found only in the Gospel of John, is also absent from the earliest texts of John. So, is that story still part of our 'holy scriptures'? And who decides that question? My conservative evangelical friends, many of whom were biblical literalists (meaning that they believe that every word of the Bible is true and without error) often quoted to me the Apostle Paul from his second letter to Timothy (3.16) where it is written" *"All (holy) scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."* Okay, I thought, but did the author of that epistle mean to include his own letter then as well? And was it meant to include books of the New Testament that were not written yet? And does it matter that most scholars today do not believe that St. Paul is the author of those letters to Timothy and Titus.

Those studies at seminary eventually lead me, after a few years in parish ministry, to pursue further research at Oxford University, where I delved into the very simple question, when was the Christian Bible decided upon then, and by whom. For every preacher I have ever heard over the years has spoken of "The Bible" as though everyone knew exactly what was meant by that, but do we? The well known, often repeated ancient Medieval myth is that the Apostle John was the last of the Twelve chosen disciples to die. But before he did so, he wrote down his own memories of his time with Jesus, which is the so-called Gospel of John, and then also his Revelation on the island of Patmos, and with these he completed and closed the canon of authorized Christian Scriptures, passing down to the Church our now finalized New Testament, for guidance for Christians in the time after the apostles and eyewitnesses were all dead. But alas, there is no historical evidence to support this later myth at all, and it fell apart during the Reformation, except among my conservative evangelical friends.

The very earliest lists of the books of the Christian Bible surprisingly do not appear until the fourth century, almost 400 years after the death of Jesus, when there are suddenly 15 different undisputed lists during that century alone, and no two of them agree with each other. There are books on some of those lists that cannot be found in the Bibles most of us use, and there

are books found in our Old and New Testaments that are not on some of those lists. So again, who decides these questions of which holy scriptures were written for our learning? By whom and when exactly was the Christian Bible settled?

Well, historically it appears, different Patriarchs of the early church produced their own lists of approved holy Scripture for the Christians under their authority, starting in the fourth century, and later various Episcopal Councils of the early church approved their own lists of holy scripture. Thus, perhaps it shouldn't be surprising then that the "Bible" used by the Roman Catholic Church, which was finally delineated and approved only at the Council of Trent in the 16th century, is different from the "Bible" used by the ancient Greek Orthodox Church, and different from the "Bible" still used by the early Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox churches. And of course, the Lutherans and then the Anglicans separated out some of the books of Jewish Scripture from the others in our Old Testament, labeling them as the "Apocrypha," because those books were not part of the so-called Hebrew Bible, which was produced by the Masoretes in the 7th to 10th centuries after Jesus. And of course, this so-called "Hebrew Bible" differs significantly in content from the ancient Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures made for the famous Library in Alexandria in the 3rd century before Christ and which was reproduced so widely that it was the standard text in the Middle East at the time of Jesus,

not the Hebrew originals. For instance, every time there is a quotation of the Old Testament in the New Testament, it is from the Greek Septuagint and not the Hebrew Bible. Finally, the first copy of the so-called 'Protestant Bible,' which my evangelical friends view as the one and only true "Bible," does not appear until the 17th century!

So, now you have some idea why Adult Bible Study is so important to me! And let us thank God for the prophet Jeremiah's declaration that we heard several weeks ago, that "the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt . . . But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." The real core of our religion, my friends, is thus not found in the books of the Bible, but in our hearts! We all know, to some extent at least, what is right and what is wrong and how we are meant to treat each other, though we so often fail to do what we know we ought to do, and to refrain from things which we know we ought not to do. And so it is that we importantly

congregate with one another, and struggle together to enhance our understanding of that new covenant written on our hearts and to learn to do better. Still the early church got this much right, I think, that that 'new' covenant can be clearly seen in the words and parables and deeds of the life of Jesus, which is why the early church called those stories the "New Testament," a simple synonym for the 'new covenant,' wherein we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which God have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN.