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### The Implications Of The Antilegomena Today

"JESUS DID MANY OTHER THINGS AS WELL. IF EVERYONE OF THEM WERE WRITTEN DOWN, I SUPPOSE THAT EVEN THE WHOLE WORLD WOULD NOT HAVE ROOM FOR THE BOOKS THAT WOULD BE WRITTEN." (Jn. 21:25). Were those other books ever written? If not, are we missing anything of any importance that should have been written? If they were written, are we missing something vital because of the negligence of someone centuries ago? If there were questions concerning which books really were part of the New Testament, then do not the doubts raised by those espousing the historical-critical method take on added importance?

The matter of the New Testament canon has been studied for many centuries. It is important for our generations to understand how the New Testament canon came to us. Such a study will add better understanding to the concept of verbal inspiration. It will also prevent some superstitious ideas from developing. In this paper, we shall consider the two sets of New Testament Books. There are the homologoumena or those unanimously accepted as part of the Bible. There are the antilegomena or writings challenged by some prior to their acceptance. In this study we also hope to avoid some pitfalls when dealing with the "liberal".

#### THE CANON

The word, canon, comes from the Hebrew word,  $\times 12$ , meaning reed or measuring reed. As the various books were added to the canon, it meant that not only was the New Testament (Old as well) the measuring stick for all beliefs and behavior, it also became the standard by which another writing was judged to be inspired or authoritative. John set the purpose of all the writings when he wrote: "BUT THESE ARE WRITTEN THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE THAT JESUS IS THE CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, AND THAT BY BELIEVING YOU MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE." (Jn. 20:31) Thus all writings included in the canon were to promote the proper teachings of the Lord Jesus.

As the first century A.D. progressed, the canon was collected and refined. During those years 20 of 27 of the New Testament books received unanimous acceptance. The other seven were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. By the year A.D. 397 the New Testament was completed as we now know it as the Council of Carthage formally adopted all 27 books as authentic. Why so long a delay? That is explained by the rules for canonization.

#### DEVELOPING THE CANON

Like anything else, there had to be rules for deciding which writing was inspired and which were not. Such rules became necessary since many writings did appear. We are, supposedly, familiar with the pseudepigrapha. These were writings which also contended for canonization. Yet they were rejected because they contained false doctrine. Virtually no church father accepted them. Another necessity for rules for canonization was the false assumptions and bases that some wanted to use.

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Some tried to use age as a basis for judgment, but age did not guarantee inspiration. Others, presumably Jewish, attempted to make the Torah as the basis, but since the ~~Torah~~<sup>Torah</sup> itself was not doctrinally sound, it was discounted. Some used the matter of religious feeling as a basis for establishing the canon. The problem then as now was that feelings are subjective and do not always concern themselves with objective truth. Consequently, specific and determinative rules were established.

1) Authoritative: To be a part of Scripture, an individual writing would have to claim to be from God. That might be done literally, as in the prophets' "THUS SAITH THE LORD", or it might be done in an implied sense as in the historical books which describe God's control of all things. Where such evidence was missing, there the book would be challenged as in Esther.

2) Prophetic: Recognizing that the Apostles were inspired gifts to the Church, the early Christians considered their writings as natural parts of the canon. Paul tells us: "WHEN YOU RECEIVED THE WORD OF GOD, WHICH YOU HEARD FROM US, YOU ACCEPTED IT NOT AS THE WORD OF MEN, BUT AS IT ACTUALLY IS, THE WORD OF GOD." (1 Thess. 2:13) Once a letter or gospel was shown to be authored by an Apostle, it would have been accepted. But because of the warnings against false prophets and because of their existence, the Church sought absolute proof that any writing had truly been penned by an Apostle. This resulted in the delay in accepting 2 Peter as part of the canon.

3) Authenticity: The Bereans searched the Scriptures to make sure that Paul was teaching them the truth. As a result, part of canonical acceptance demanded agreement with Scriptural doctrine. A writing would not be from God and yet contain error simultaneously. James appeared to contradict Paul's teaching of justification and therefore received much study. Jude apparently quoted pseudepigraphal writings in vs. 9 and 14 and therefore was questioned.

4) Dynamics: A writing, for canonicity, was to offer people hope and direction. Such writings were not only to inform, but also to produce change and growth. False teaching would not do so. The Song of Solomon is an example of a writing that was challenged on this basis.

5) Acceptance: Naturally not everyone in the churches approved immediately any book. Some writings would be false. Others would deny people a sin they were permitting. I'm sure that not everyone in Corinth would have voted unanimously for Paul's first letter to them. Their sinful nature would not have permitted it. Still, God promised that He would lead us into all truth. Thus the congregations gathered the books, written by the Apostles and others, and thus formed the canon. Naturally this would have taken a long time. Communication was not the greatest back then. It would have taken a while for Rome to learn of the letters of Paul written to other places. But share they would have done. In Col. 4:14, Paul asks that congregation to share its letter with Laodicea and vice versa. Once each congregation received proof that these writings were truly authentic, they would have added them to the canon. Thus 20 of 27 were homologoumena, accepted without question. Let us look briefly at the other seven.

#### THE ANTILEGOMENA

HEBREWS: The Eastern Churches considered this book written by Paul. They readily accepted it. The West held off for two reasons. They were not so convinced of Paul's authorship. They were not too thrilled that

the Montanists sect used Hebrews to support some of its false doctrine. But by the fourth century it was accepted.

2 Peter: Apparently the change in style between 1 and 2 Peter led to one of the bitterly argued items. Even in Reformation times this book was questioned. Both Origin and Eusebius admitted this letter was disputed. Origin seemed to have had no problem accepting it as inspired. Eusebius was not so inclined. Unfortunately, I did not find much information as to what finally caused the Church to accept it as part of the canon. I can only surmise that the study of the proofs for its acceptance outweighed the criticisms against. One suggested answer to the question of differing styles is that Silas served as scribe in the first letter (1 Peter 5:12), while no scribe is named in the second. Perhaps Peter wrote it himself.

James: As has been stated before, James received flack because it seemed to prescribe a salvation by works. This book was rejected by Luther because the Roman Catholic Church used it so vociferously against him. Once the misunderstanding of the teachings was cleared up, it was accepted.

2 John; 3 John: True to nature, John did not mention himself in his letters. Since the author was not apparent, many questioned its authenticity. Part of the problem also stemmed from their lack of circulation. But understanding John's humility as he so expressed it in his gospel, it is not hard to accept these letters as his. His own disciples, Polycarp and Irenaeus, accepted both letter as authentic.

Jude: Jerome stated that the difficulty in accepting this book was the quotation from the pseudepigraphal Book of Enoch. This appears in Jude 14-15. Could one quote a non-inspired book and yet be considered inspired? Was this a way of bringing in the false teaching of other writings? That appeared to be the concern of those challenging this book. Paul had also done this in 1 Corinth. 15:33 and Titus 1:12. Consequently, there may have been questions, but they were not sufficiently strong. The book was accepted.

Revelation: This book was one of the first to be recognized as a part of the canon. However, it became listed as antilegomena in the early fourth century because of its "millennialistic" teaching. Many a sect used chapter 20 to invent all kinds of false ideas. Because it was causing so much trouble it was put on the "black" list. Once it was shown that it was being misused by the millennialists, Revelation was restored to the canon.

#### SUMMARY:

The challenges placed upon most of the antilegomena were caused by difficulty in communication as well as false interpretations read into them. Once cleared up, these books were accepted as canonical.

Understanding the hardships in deliberating leads us to appreciate the early Church fathers. Even the homologoumena did not always fulfill or satisfy every rule established for canonization. Knowing their concern for precision leads us to accept their canon.

#### THE CANON IN EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

I am not going to make a list of every individual in history who

chose to gather a New Testament canon. But it might be valuable to see what some of the very early church fathers did. Such an evaluation can help dispurse any doubts that might arise concerning the antilegomena.

The Old Syriac translation: Published in the A.D. second century, this Bible included all but 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation. Westcott suggested that these omission were due to the fact that they were addressed to Western Christians.

The Old Latin translation: Translated into Latin at the end of the second century, this Western translation omitted only Hebrews, 1 Peter, and James. Again it has been suggested that their omission was due to slowness in circulation from East to West.

Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae: Written around A.D. 206 this manuscript included all books of both Old and New Testament with the exception of Esther and Revelation.

In short, the study of these three collections would indicate that the matter of an insecure canon is not true. The early Christians held also entirely the same canon that we now use. That would prevent anyone from saying that maybe we have not been listening to God's Word at all. In fact the study of this topic would almost appear useless except that it leads us right into the matter of the modern critiques of Scripture.

#### IS IT TRULY INSPIRED?

In an article in the Fremont, California paper, a Lutheran pastor explained Lutheranism as recognizing errors in Scripture. Like so many besides him, this pastor quoted Luther's doubt concerning the authenticity of James. This, he claimed, was proof that Lutheranism is not making the Bible into an idol. Despite the protest of our pastor in Fremont, the paper refused to print an additional article telling the truth. The matter of rejecting Scriptures' authority is all around us. It lies not only in the pulpits. It appears in our offices during the wranglings of some counseling sessions. It is difficult, indeed, to lay on the Law when the guilty party can shrug it off with the old, "Well, that's your interpretation." Does the matter of the antilegomena not confuse the matter even more?

Granted that a study of the development of the canon could give rise to questions. We are not saying, however, that the decision of choosing what is or is not God's Word was up to the Church. The fact that the Apostles and Prophets spoke by inspiration was seen by the fulfillment of their prophecies as well as by the signs given by the Holy Spirit. The Church did not have to guess who was inspired. They knew. They knew because God had made it clear to them. Consequently, the principle of prophecy carried great weight. If the inspired Apostles wrote the book, it was God's Word. Thus, the Church did not have to invent either the canon nor inspiration, it had but to discover what God had already done.

It is also true that other letters by the Apostles may be missing. There is the letter to the Laodiceans. There may have been that 3 Corinthians. There may well have been more available for inclusion into the canon had God wanted. But apparently He chose to allow only what we have included. This does not suggest that we are missing something vital to our salvation. It merely suggests that like the history of Jesus' youth, it was not necessary.

Neither can some claim that, because of some questions concerning certain books, we cannot be sure of all that is written. That would be

saying that the more writings we include, the more doctrine we shall discover. That is a theory that the Roman Catholic Church has used to give credence to the Apochrypha. But more is not necessarily better. Matthew contains just about every doctrine in Scripture. Romans alone qualifies as an adult information course dealing with both Christian doctrine and Christian living. Thus no matter what approach someone might take to attack the Scriptures, the matter of antilogomena offers no support.

### TWO PRACTICAL THOUGHTS

Can someone reject one of the antilegomena today and still be "kosher"? It would seem peculiar for that problem to arise today, but I suppose it could. I'm sure some of you would consider me a queer duck if I went on record as saying that 2 Peter should not be used on the same level of the Bible. But I seriously doubt that we could remove someone for such a belief, if that belief were based on proper reasons, and if that person's doctrinal stand were not wrong. After all, don't we almost refuse under pain of death to take Revelation for fear of getting into all the millennialistic tripe? We may not be expressing our challenge to its inspiration, but are we not going through the exact same struggle as those before us? It would be odd for someone to take such a strong stand as rejecting one of those seven books. But the possibility does lead us into reviewing the whole matter of inspiration.

It would have been nice if God had provided us with a set of golden plates and an angel to interpret them for us. I suspect that a lot of our members believe it happened just that way. Consequently I would not refuse to bring this matter up to a Bible class. Granted it would have to be done in the right way, but I believe that our people would be better off if they were taught more fully how we got the Bible. It would remove some superstitions that can only cause problems. It would serve to dispel any of the old KJV-or-nothing-itis, if there is still any around. It would serve to prepare our people to handle more properly those accusations that Scripture is in error.

About 5 years ago two people came to my door out west to enlist me in a Bible class. After seeking more information I found that they were trying to get me to speak in tongues that I might be a "real" Christian. When I began to explain 1 Corinthians 12-14 to them, they promptly began to tell me about all the variant readings and why that made the written word suspect. I can easily foresee someone bringing in the antilegomena as a way of stealing the faith of the faithful. Consequently, I believe it would be valuable to forearm our members to such tricks.

So endeth this summary of the different New Testament books. I hope that it has been more than a mere review of that which you already remember from your seminary years. May these and other reviews keep us well prepared to preach the Gospel and to defend the truth.

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