

FRUITLAND BAPTIST BIBLE INSTITUTE

*THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE*

BY F. F. BRUCE

A CRITICAL BOOK REVIEW

SUBMITTED

TO PROFESSOR CHRIS ROBERTS

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BY

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*The Canon of Scripture*. By F. F. Bruce. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988. 349 pp. \$28.00. Hardcover.

The canon of Scripture and the process of canonization rest in the upper echelons of Christendom in relation to the issues raised and range of debate encompassed concerning the integrity of the canon's compilation and composition. Considered by many to be the dean of evangelical scholars, Dr. F. F. Bruce (1910-1990) was Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester in England. Dr. Bruce meticulously examines the historical evidence for the acceptance of the canon in a method consistent with the thorough and scholarly approaches exemplified in additional works such as *The Books and the Parchments* and *The New Testament Documents*. In addition to these and other works, His volumes on the Apostle Paul are standards among theologians old and new. *The Canon of Scripture* emerges from the plethora of Bruce's body of writings to ascend to the pinnacle of great modern theological literature as a noteworthy milestone in the research and study of Scriptural canonicity.

With amazing accuracy and attentiveness to detail, Bruce begins his journey via the historicity of canonization with a summation. His observations are weighted but not limited to various "windows" in the canonization process. His early chapters are rooted in an overview of the historical evidence and substantiation for the acceptance of the canon. There is thorough scrutiny of the precedent established in the writings of the Old and New Testaments, as well as various intangibles regarding the acceptance achieved as what is now deemed divinely inspired Scripture.

One of the overriding and transcendent values of Dr. Bruce's research is the scholarly perspective characterized by his effort. The pages are an expression of objective and unbiased studious investigation; furthermore, at no point does the author exhibit any inclination toward skewing his findings to a particular point of view. The evidence of his approach seems clear through the numerous citations and references found in the progression of chapters. Dr. Bruce shows great expertise in assimilating centuries of analysis and commentary while leaving no stone unturned.

An additional feature of the book can be observed in the embarkation of a chronological approach, as his observations are meshed with a sequential and yet historical summation of the canonicity issue. He does not limit his commentary to only a few thinkers, but rather provides an exhaustive overview of major players in the canonicity drama. While Professor Bruce's study of canonicity has certainly benefited from his predecessors' labors, he seems to possess a unique perspective to offer a final attribute of this monumental work. His discussions of textual criticism, exegesis, and interpretation lend themselves to audiences ranging from the highest peak of Biblical scholarship to the sinuous plains of lay thought and understanding. *The Canon of Scripture* would by no means be considered an "easy" read but tends to read "easily" as the author provides a basic text for the study of canonicity.

F. F. Bruce places his systematic examination of the historicity of canonization upon a somewhat simplistic framework as he explores the foundations of the Old Testament and

segues into an exposition of the New Testament. His conclusion is likewise methodical as he addresses such sensitive aspects of canonization criterion, criticism, and interpretation. The reader is well positioned to begin the journey of understanding the process of canonization after gaining a clear perspective through the brief introduction. It is clear that Professor Bruce intends to gain a perspective concerning the contents of Scripture and the distinguishing qualities that allowed for their exclusiveness from other revered writings of the Old and New Testament eras.

Dr. Bruce demonstrates his foundational understanding of Christian theology by beginning the exploration of the Old Testament canon and its development by pointing to Jesus Christ. He views Christ as both the foundation and fulfillment of Scripture; furthermore, the Law and the Prophets bear witness to His ascendancy as Messiah. The author explains the vast importance of the Septuagint as the early Church appealed to the Hebrew texts much in the same way Jesus demonstrated while on earth. To assist the reader in gaining a clear understanding of canonicity, Professor Bruce examines centuries of “process” regarding the Christian canon of the Old Testament. From East to West, he introduces the observer to the many personalities and places that contributed in positioning the sacred Hebrew writings to their place of prominence in the early Church.

By his own admission, Bruce prefaces his analysis and places an emphasis upon the New Testament. It must be noted, however, that he does not waiver in the assessment that the vitality of the Septuagint. A thorough analysis of the Septuagint as a sacred text is followed by the first major “pivot point” of Bruce’s exposition as he emphasizes the witness to Christ. It is his strong assertion that the “Old Covenant” became a “New Covenant” in both a theological and literary sense.

As Professor Bruce begins to delve deeper into the issues of canonization, he explores the councils and synods which assembled to debate the issues of inclusion and exclusion. Issues of criteria are thoroughly addressed and there is a significant emphasis placed upon the key aspects of apostolic authority and succession. He also explores the remarkable facet that New Testament books obtained an authoritative height not based upon their inclusion in the canon but in fact because they were consistently regarded as divinely inspired. Dr. Bruce recognizes the key Jewish foundational aspects of the Old Covenant texts, and segues to the New Covenant writings in which the shared heritage of the Jews and the newfound passion of the New Testament writers find common ground.

At a second “pivot point,” Bruce emphasizes that the writings of the new age brought about the manifestation of the “prophesied” Jesus into the One who is “revealed;” furthermore, he underscores the fact that the Gospels preserve the words of Jesus with authority. The Pauline corpus, of whom even Marcion showed affection, expounded upon the teachings of Jesus and found partnership with the Acts of the Apostles to tell the experiences of efforts to share the truths of Jesus Christ. Professor Bruce is likewise conscientious and thorough as he journeys through the canonicity of New Testament writings which were slower to gain acceptance and delineates their uniqueness among writings that did not gain such widespread confirmation. The author gives tremendous historical narrative concerning the impact of such early church personalities from

Ireneaus to Augustine and their impact upon the emergence of a fixed canon of pure distinctiveness by the fourth century.

The final chapters of the text body focus upon canonic criterion. Historical personalities speak boldly through Bruce's research in addressing several questions regarding the ultimate process of canonization. Issues are raised regarding the exclusion of certain writings, which manifests itself in the discussion of Protestant view as contrasted with the Roman Catholic traditions. Professor Bruce's own voice as a great evangelical scholar is heard, in particular, through his commentary regarding the inspiration of Scripture; moreover, his observations of canonical exegesis are annotations worthy of the ear of any aspiring biblical exegete (this is likewise a primary focus of the second appendix). It is in this vein that *The Canon of Scripture* provides additional value as a source of solid Biblical theological formation.

With quasi-apologetic overtones, Bruce concludes his summation of canonicity through an evaluation of the controversies regarding the "secret" gospel of Mark. Originally delivered in lecture format, this section makes for interesting reading. Ironically, his assertions concerning the historicity of the authentic Markan gospel account regarding its placement in the canon and chronological positioning appear to be in harmony with some early church fathers. This could, perhaps, prompt disagreement with many contemporary readers of Bruce's work who view Mark's gospel as providing valuable source material for the subsequent Matthean and Lucan gospel versions.

It is quite clear, however that the integrity of Dr. Bruce's objectivity is felt, and he tends to take positions that are consistent with mainstream evangelical thought. He affirms the sensitivity and veracity of the apostolic writings whose credibility and inspiration centered in the witness of Christ. He is consistent with his earlier observations that "the New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect." (*The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* F.F. Bruce, p. 27)

Biblical scholars from both ends of the theological spectrum will find F. F. Bruce's authoritative work on canonicity palatable. The book would prove beneficial to scholars interested in the exploration of the foundation of Scripture. The exhaustive effort thus becomes a comprehensive and yet objective overview of the historical evidence encompassing canonicity. The reader is placed in a comfortable posture to "weigh" the objectivity of the evidence presented in reaching the subjectivity characteristic of academic disciplines. It is also worth noting that *The Canon of Scripture* can rise above the expectations of scholarship and fit nicely in the framework of standard Scriptural study and exegesis. For the student of Scripture interested in a resource rich in substance and apologetics, this work will prove beneficial in responding to one of the most asked questions of any Christian: "How did the Bible originate?" *The Canon of Scripture* can support the efforts of one seeking to defend one's faith and the authority and integrity of Holy Scripture.

## NOTES

Title Page:

Must be in Turabian format as above.

Color Code:

**Purple:** Publication Information

**Blue:** Thesis Summary

**Red:** Author Information (include additional titles to show his or her expertise).

**Green:** Unique features highlighted

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Notes:

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2. Notice that I drew another source (this is acceptable if you are just summarizing what they say).
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