

177 Part 1: The Canon of Scripture

After His baptism at the hands of John, we read that Jesus, "being full of the Holy Ghost, returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being forty days tempted of the devil" (Luke 4.1-2a). We well know on what grounds Jesus resisted the various temptations dangled before Him: on each occasion He quoted Scripture at the devil - and that was that.

Now in this later period, the time of the Christian Church, we are blessed with the full Scriptures. We have the New Testament alongside, what is for us now, the Old Testament, which for Jesus in His earthly pathway was known as "the Law and the Prophets". Jesus was well-versed in the Law and Prophets, and used them to good effect, and not surprisingly God's children, those redeemed in Christ, need to do just the same with the now-completed Word of God.

This brings us on to that phrase we hear sometimes, "the canon of Scripture", to which we may well respond with an "Eh?"! This English word "canon" is a straight copy of a Greek word which is pronounced virtually the same, "kan-owne", and, as with any Greek word in the New Testament text, we can explore its meaning by looking it up in a Concordance or Greek-English Lexicon.

We learn there that "kan-owne" is basically a cane or a reed; or a straight piece of wood to which something is fastened to keep it perfectly straight; or a measuring rod; or a carpenter's line similar to a plumb-line. Metaphorically the word thus refers to a rule, a standard, principle or law - the essence of its meaning being its complete, unchanging, true, reliable STRAIGHTNESS!

So when we hear of "the canon of Scripture", we are being reminded that God's Word is utterly "straight" - freely given to us as the perfect measure by which anything else can be truly assessed. That is precisely how the Lord Jesus repeatedly used it. See for example in Matthew's Gospel - Ch 4.4,7,10 (notice the devil also knows the Scriptures) / Ch 11.10 / Ch 21.13 / Ch 26.24. In each case the Lord refers instinctively to Scripture; He knows it thoroughly (including His own unique place within its pages), and uses it calmly and confidently in any debate.

We are to do the same, treating Scripture as God's Word, the "kan-owne", the location of that perfect straight edge and ultimate authority. We do this prayerfully under the Holy Spirit, for obviously not every statement of Scripture can be taken as an instant instruction as to what we are to do! There is that story of a man asking the Lord for guidance. He flipped open his Bible and read, "Judas went out and hanged himself". He turned to the Lord again, "That can't be right, Lord -

I'll try again"; and he did, opening his Bible once more at random to read the first words he saw, "Go, and do thou likewise": a humorous story with a serious point to it.

So with the Holy Spirit's guidance we still use our brains when studying God's Word. We can ask some practical questions: When were these words written, and to whom, and for what purpose, and, humanly speaking, by whom? To whom do these words apply today: to everyone everywhere? or simply to the Jews, to the Gentiles, or to the Church? In prophetic passages, to which period of time are these words primarily referring - now past and fulfilled, or still to come, or perhaps both!?

And we can also ask some spiritual questions, which are the most important: "Please Lord, why have You included this passage in Your Word? What are You saying to me, to us, to others perhaps, through these words? What difference do You wish these words to make?".

In such ways - simple, humble, careful and prayerful - we grow in our knowledge of the Lord and of His Word, learning to use Scripture aright as that straight-edged "canon", and learning to use that powerful phrase, "It is written" to good effect - for changed lives and for the glory of God.

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