The Bible: What it is and How we got it

RCF Academy
Lesson 2: Definition of Canon

What does Canon mean?

- Canon
  - Semitic root קָנֶה (qaneh) meaning a reed which was used for measuring
  - Incorporated into Greek as Κανών
- Authority ascribed to the term "canon"
  - "And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord , the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you." Deuteronomy 4:1-2 ESV
  - "When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Micaiah, and Shaphan the secretary, and Asaiah the king's servant, saying, "Go, inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found. For great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us." 2 Kings 22:11-13 ESV

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- Roger T. Beckwith says,
  - "For the teaching of the book came as a shock, not because it was known to be new, but because it was considered to have been forgotten...It follows… that the permanent and abiding form of the law and prophecy was early perceived to be not its spoken but its written form, and this explains the rise of the Old Testament canon, the history of which we see beginning in the pages of the Old Testament itself."
- Prologue of Ecclesiasticus
  - "Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for the instruction and wisdom. Now, those who read the scriptures must not only themselves understand them, but must also as lovers of learning be able through the spoken and written word to help the outsiders. So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law."

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  - "For the blessed Paul in his Epistle to the Hebrews says, 'By faith we understand that the ages were framed by the Word of God, so that which is seen was not made of things which do appear.' But nothing is common to the Word with the ages; for He it is who is in existence before the ages, by whom also the ages came to be. And in the Shepherd [of Hermas] it is written (since they allege this book also, though it is not of the Canon)..."

Canon Philosophy

- Exclusive Definition
    - Canon is a fixed and final closed list of books
    - Makes a hard distinction between "canon" and "scripture"
    - Pros
        - Connects the church and the canon
        - Agrees that the canon was not as clean cut prior to the fourth century
    - Cons
        - The use of the term "scripture" implies strictness
        - Offers no explanation of what constitutes the closing of the canon
        - Implies that there was no canon until the church acted

Canon Philosophy

- Functional Definition
  - Canon refers to the books that are functioning as scripture
  - "Canon 1"
    - Rule, Standard, ideal, norm
  - "Canon 2"
    - Fixation, standardization, enumeration
  - Pros
    - Early Christians did have a group of texts that were authoritative
  - Cons
    - Does not account for books that were seen as scripture by certain groups
    - Fails to define what the canon is in and of itself

Canon Philosophy

- Ontological Definition
  - Canon is the authoritative books given to the church by God
  - Books are canonical as they are written
  - Natural progression
    - Canonical books were written with divine authority
    - Canonical books were then recognized and used as scripture by the church
    - The church reaches a consensus about these books
  - The Ontological definition compliments the other two in their pros and better answers their cons.