

# **THE BIBLICAL KEYS TO CANONIZATION**

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(Extract from Restoring the Original Bible)

This book is about the design and development of the Old and New Testaments. It differs substantially from other studies made over the last 150 years. In this work, a principle has been adopted which has the potential for solving a great number of perplexing problems now confronting any scholarly investigation in the field of biblical canonization. I will use a procedure which should be used to evaluate any historical account, but strangely, in major studies involving scripture canonization, it has not been emphasized as a main guideline. Its lack of use is especially apparent in matters concerning the original design and development of the Holy Scriptures. In this book, however, this proper principle will be placed in a prime position of interpretation. The results can lead us away from the present guessing game of theologians and give us a satisfying and stimulating advance towards a real understanding of what books belong in the Holy Bible and in what order they should appear.

The method involves a recognition of environmental elements which governed the social, political, and religious conduct of the people who formulated the Bible. It is a well-known fact that people find it psychologically difficult, if not impossible, to keep from absorbing social concepts and moral principles which permeate the environment in which they live and function. This certainly applies to those who canonized the Bible. When the external surroundings influencing the canonizers are recognized, and those factors are employed in the interpretation of their writings, a fuller comprehension of what the Bible teaches can result.

## **The Religious Environment for Canonization**

The age in which the New Testament was written and canonized was very different from that of modern times. This is especially true when one compares our present world with the religious atmosphere of the peoples who once existed in the Roman and Parthian Empires. Preeminent among all others in their desire to promote religious teachings were the Jewish people. Their society was dominated by scriptural teachings and interpretations maintained by the rabbis and priests. There has never been a communal existence more regulated by rigorous biblical customs and philosophies than that of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews.

Though their reliance on Old Testament standards may seem unreasonable to many modern people, early Jewish mentality regarded the performance of their religious duties as natural and normal. Their principal source for the manners and customs they exhibited was the Law of Moses. They were most interested in keeping what they called the Torah

(the Law). In fact, they went beyond the strictness of Moses (Matthew 23:1–3), and created a hidebound religious community which the apostle Paul called a society of bondage (Galatians 4:25). Peter and the other apostles agreed (Acts 15:10).

Nevertheless, that uncompromising religious system, and the principles that governed it, played a profound role in the canonization of the New Testament. A lack of comprehension of its major features (to which all the apostles were subjected) is a prime reason why some scholars are at a loss to explain how or why the books of the New Testament were selected and positioned within the canon. In this chapter I describe some of the important aspects of that 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish environment which will help show why the manuscript order of the Old and New Testament writings is proper.

## Seven Environmental Factors

There were seven major factors that affected the Jewish people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

**First**, a social feature which influenced all historical periods covered by the Bible is that involving the recognition and respect for *eldership*. Let me explain the importance of this concept. It simply means that anyone older than someone else was accorded a superior respect in all matters concerning the social graces. And though this principle could be put aside if someone younger was of more political or religious importance, the general feeling of all ancient people was that those who were older in age were given a position of prestige and honor. A good example of this is the account of Elihu in the Book of Job. When Elihu desired to give his opinion on why Job had suffered misfortunes, the Bible is clear that Elihu (the younger man) waited until the older and supposedly wiser men had their opportunities to instruct the patriarch Job. Only after the discourses of the *elders* were completed did Elihu speak (Job 32:1–9).

This principle of elders having the first chance to be heard is one which monopolizes all historical narratives of the Bible from beginning to end. Are we to imagine that the canonizers of the Bible would disallow this principle of elder supremacy when they thought of positioning the books of the Bible? It would seem highly unlikely that any respectful Jewish person in the 1<sup>st</sup> century would disallow such manners of custom involving *eldership*. In fact, when one looks at the arrangement of the biblical books, it is obvious that the New Testament writers and canonizers held to this principle in a definite way.

Let us first look at the order of the books in the New Testament. Notice the books which followed the four Gospels and the Book of Acts. The manuscripts have: James, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John, Jude, all of which scholars normally call the “Catholic Epistles” because of the general nature of their subject matter. In the official manuscripts, these seven epistles were placed before the fourteen assigned to the apostle Paul. But why? One of the reasons is because of this principle of *eldership*. Note that the four men who wrote these seven books were men who personally heard Christ teach while he was in the flesh, and they were ordained to preach the Gospel before the apostle Paul was

converted on the road to Damascus. Simply put, they were *elders* of Paul. The apostle Paul recognized this fact and said that they were ministers “**before me**” (Galatians 1:17). Paul considered himself as the “**least of the apostles**” (1 Corinthians 15:9). Indeed, he even demoted himself in personal rank to the position of being “**less than the least of all saints**” (Ephesians 3:8).

If one had to rely solely upon the statements of Paul in his epistles (and comprehending the principle of *eldership* preeminence) then the writings of those men who were apostles *before* Paul should by all the social customs of the time have had their teachings positioned before those of Paul. Interestingly, this is precisely the position in which we find them in the early manuscript order of the New Testament books. There is no *guessing* in this fact. There can be no doubt that this advancement of the seven epistles of these early “Jewish” apostles *before* the fourteen of the apostle Paul is correct.

## The Second Environmental Factor

**Second**, another environmental factor should be taken into consideration, and it is socially akin to the first. This is the deference afforded those who were in high positions of government and/or to those who occupied august religious offices, no matter what their ages might be. A notable example of this is found in the actions of the apostle Paul. The New Testament shows that Paul was at one time extremely critical of the decisions by one of his persecutors. But when he found out that the person was the High Priest (who was probably not wearing his pontifical robes at the time), Paul respected his rank and apologized for speaking to him abusively (Acts 23:1–5).

Many such examples of esteem for authorities (no matter if they were good or evil) can be cited throughout Scripture. Even today in Jewish circles, if a member of a synagogue possesses a name associated with the priesthood (Cohen, Kahn, Conn, etc.), that person has the inalienable right to read the lessons *before* anyone else. This rule also applies to Jews having Levitical names (Levi, Levine, etc.). These men are only a step removed from priesthood positions in rank of importance. However, if no one attending the synagogue has names of sacerdotal significance, then any Israelite male today can assume the duties of reading the scriptural lessons.

This courtesy to those possessing prestigious administrative (or family) ranks is sustained consistently throughout all parts of the Old and New Testaments. An example of this is found in the order of the three divisions which make up the Old Testament. The first section is composed the five books of the Law Written by Moses (who was the highest ranking man of the Old Testament, followed by his brother Aaron who was the first High Priest). The second section of the Old Testament contains the six books titled “the Prophets.” This part was called “the Prophets” because men of prophetic rank wrote it. The third section of eleven books was called “the Writings.” We will later see that these books were composed *by* or written *about* kings, queens, and statesmen. It came to be called “the Royal Division.”

Now note this. In matters of rank, Moses and the Law which he was commissioned to write were head and shoulders above all succeeding prophets, priests, or kings. All Israelites were expected to be subservient to Moses. But, on the other hand, all kings and rulers were inferior in rank to the prophets (most of whom were priests). Recall that Nathan the prophet had authority over David (2 Samuel 12:1–15), and that Elijah and Elisha were in supreme power over Gentile as well as Israelitish rulers as far as the teaching of the Bible is concerned (2 Kings 5:1–19). And this rank of authority (Moses over prophets and prophets ahead of rulers) is shown in the order of the three divisions of the Old Testament. First comes “the Law of Moses” (five books), then “the Prophets” (six books), and finally “the Royal Division” (the last eleven books).

For a further example of this recognition of rank, note that the apostle Paul’s name *always* follows that of Barnabas (who was a Levite, see Acts 4:36) until Paul later took over the apostolic leadership at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:14, 46). Paul’s primacy in rank is then upheld, except when he and Barnabas were in the presence of the “pillar” apostles while they were both in the society at Jerusalem. At Jerusalem, the Levitical rank of Barnabas reassumed its elevated position over Paul, who was of the leastborn tribe of Benjamin (Acts 15:12).

It is also a fact that in the New Testament, Peter’s name always precedes that of John in contexts involving both apostles (Luke 22:8; Acts 3:1, etc.), simply because Peter was given a higher rank than John (Matthew 16:18–19). And when the “pillar” apostles are mentioned together, it is James (the Lord’s brother, and leader of the Jerusalem church) who precedes Peter and John (Galatians 2:9).

This positioning of names within the text of the New Testament is both a conscious (and even an unconscious) show of honor and respect to the ranks of the men involved. Such a procedure represents the normal perceptions of protocol in Middle Eastern societies. What is important to our present study is that this principle (without doubt) was one which prevailed in the psychological makeup of the men who wrote and canonized the books of the Bible. And, in this appraisal, there is no *guessing* involved. This is a biblical and societal principle that all people recognize. It is also a principle that involves the canonization of the New Testament books.

Note that the seven general epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude precede the fourteen of the apostle Paul’s in the original manuscript order of the books. And even within the positioning of those seven epistles, James is placed *before* Peter, while Peter appears *before* John, and John is *before* Jude. The arrangement of these books in these various fashions is precisely as one would expect *if* the ranks of the men were being considered. And recall that even the apostle Paul, when referring to the three Jerusalem apostles, mentioned them in the order of their positions of authority in the Jerusalem church, “**James, Cephas (Peter), and John, who seemed to be pillars**” (Galatians 2:9). This courtesy of mentioning the apostles in this manner was no arbitrary incident in the writing of Paul. It was a deliberate and conscious effort in Paul’s mind in stating this, as anyone studying the customs of the biblical periods would realize. The order of the

scriptural books also echoes the use of this social formality, and this principle does not involve any *guessing*. It is a fact of history that all recognize.

## **The Third Environmental Factor**

There is yet a **third** factor that must be considered. There was in the 1<sup>st</sup> century among the Jewish community (of which the apostles were a part) a distinct belief that those who could claim a connection with the race of Israel had a special relationship with God that no other ethnic group possessed. The apostle Paul shared this belief. He stated most assuredly that only Israelites retained the sonship, the Shekinah glory, the personal covenants, the Mosaic law, the right to perform the Temple services, and were the only ones in the world who had the promises of salvation afforded to them in an ethnic sense (Romans 9:4). Paul insisted to his Gentile readers that before the introduction of Christianity, all other races were completely cut off from **“the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world”** (Ephesians 2:12).

There is no doubt that Paul’s recognition of the Jews’ special association with God was the universal belief among Jews of the early 1<sup>st</sup> century, and even Gentiles who then wanted to be in covenant with God also felt the need to join the society of Israel. And though in Christ, Paul taught that all peoples in God’s eyes were on an equal status alongside Israel (Galatians 3:28), the apostles in the sense of responsibility never forgot the spiritual ascendancy of the favored nation over all Gentiles, and this included Paul himself. Notice what he said to the Gentile Romans.

**“What advantage then has the Jew? or what profit is there in circumcision? Much every way: chiefly because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.”**

- ***Romans 3:1–2, underlines mine***

The Old Testament had been placed in the hands and care of the Jewish people to teach to the world by their example in life and by their doctrinal stance for the teaching of the Torah. The apostles felt this special responsibility gave the Jews a superior position. This covenant relationship with God that Jews had was never diminished in the eyes of the apostle Paul (nor among the other apostles who at first were commissioned to preach only to Jews). Paul readily acknowledged the principle of responsibility that the Jews were to have first choice in receiving the Gospel. They were actually recognized by the apostles to be in a legal position ahead of the Gentiles.

**“Glory, honor, and peace, to every man that works good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile.”**

- ***Romans 2:10***

This first rank for the Jewish people in regard to responsibility was always given by the New Testament writers, even in matters involving judgment (Romans 2:9). But in regard to Christ's salvation, Paul was adamant that the message of the Gospel should go to the Jews *first*.

**“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”**

- ***Romans 1:16***

The apostle Paul never deviated from his belief that the Jews should have his first attention in receiving the Gospel. And though the apostle Paul had the commission of Christ to be our Gentile apostle (the apostle to the Gentiles), he also was told that he was to preach both to Israelites and Gentiles (Acts 9:15). And Paul never shirked his responsibility of going to the Jews first. Note Paul's example.

- When Paul went to the Gentile island of Cyprus, he spoke *first* to the Jews (Acts 13:5).
- When he went to the central area of Galatia, he *first* preached in the synagogues of the Jews (Acts 13:14), and only secondarily did he speak to the Gentiles (Acts 13:42).
- The Jews were also the *first* at Iconium (Acts 14:1), and
- Later in Macedonia (Acts 16:1–13; 17:1, 10).
- At Corinth (Acts 18:4),
- Ephesus (Acts 19:8), and
- The Jews were *first* even at Rome itself (Acts 28:17–27).

Only at places where the Jewish community almost totally rejected him did Paul turn exclusively to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46; 18:6; 28:28).

It is also shown in the Book of Acts that the Gospel of Christ went *first* to the Jews at Jerusalem, and then progressively it got to the Gentiles at Rome. Jerusalem *was first* and it came to Rome *last*. Indeed, the first few years the Gospel was taught **“to Jews only”** (Acts 11:19) without a thought that the Gentiles would one day be graced with the Gospel message.

Even when it became clear that the Gentiles were also meant to share in the Gospel message, Paul said: **“It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you [Jews]”** (Acts 13:46). This *primal* position to the Jews was of utmost importance to the apostles, and especially to Paul (who was the apostle to the Gentiles). Paul even stated he would give up his own salvation in Christ if that would mean the salvation of his own people the Jews (Romans 9:1–3).

This singular importance of the Jewish people in receiving the Gospel *first* is also reflected within the design of the New Testament canon. This is because the

psychological motives dominating the thinking of the apostles demanded that the Gospel of salvation must, in all cases, be presented to the Jewish people *first*. This is another reason why the canonizers of the New Testament followed the conviction that the *first* position among the 27 Christian books within the divine New Testament library must in all cases be awarded to the books designed primarily for the Jews. This is why the seven general epistles (the “Catholic Epistles”) of James, Peter, John, and Jude (who were commissioned to preach to the Jews, see Galatians 2:7–9) *should logically precede* the fourteen of the apostle Paul who was the apostle to the Gentiles (2 Timothy 1:11).

There can be no doubt that the early Christian apostles (when presented with the responsibility of forming a New Testament canon from the available writings) would have placed the apostles specially assigned to the Jews *before* those of Paul who was the apostle to the Gentiles. This is not *guessing*. It is the simple and plain teaching of the New Testament. All the apostles were well aware of the doctrinal teaching of Christ that the Gospel was to go to the Jew *first*. And interestingly, that *is exactly* how the majority of early manuscripts of the New Testament have the books arranged.

## **The Fourth Environmental Factor**

The **fourth** factor which motivated the thinking of the biblical writers and canonizers was their perception of the manner that people gained their proper religious conversions. Nothing is more important to people with deep religious persuasions than recognizing the methods by which individuals achieve a proper relationship with God. In the New Testament we have the methodology clearly delineated. The step-by-step procedure by which Christian conversion is accomplished is found in the Book of Hebrews. The apostle Paul in Hebrews records *seven stages* that will lead a person into a full, adult relationship with Christ. These *seven phases* are revealed in a harmonious story flow from beginning to end.

In the Bible, it is sometimes the case that the desired result of a context is indicated *first*. Paul, in the Book of Hebrews, mentions the seventh and final stage of salvation first. He considered it as having a priority position. This conclusion to the salvation process is what Paul called the attainment of *perfection* (Hebrews 6:1). He then follows it by the step-by-step means through which salvation is finally reached. Paul mentions first the most important factor (other than the initial statement of the concluding phase called *perfection*). He then shows a sequence of six primary steps of doctrinal accomplishment which have to be executed before a person can achieve that final and seventh stage called *perfection* (salvation). Paul indicates that when one fulfills the first requirement, then one can proceed to the second, the third, and progressively all the way to the seventh stage which is *perfection* (salvation).

Let us notice those seven levels of development. They are, according to Paul,

1. *a repentance* from dead works [v.1];
2. *having faith* toward God [v.1];

3. understanding the doctrine of *baptisms* [v.2];
4. the *laying on of hands* (for receiving the Holy Spirit) [v.2];
5. doctrines concerning the *resurrection* from the dead [v. 2];
6. a recognition of matters concerning the *judgment* (rewards) from God [v.2];  
and
7. finally Paul shows that the last phase of Christian attainment is the desired *perfection*, which represents salvation [v. 1].

The foregoing procedure for acquiring salvation under the New Covenant (as given by Paul) was so a part of the psychological makeup of those who wrote and canonized the Bible that we find it cropping up in a stage-by-stage fashion even in the theological books of the New Testament. This sevenfold doctrinal attainment provides the clear sequence of Paul's subjects which he discussed in the first canonical book of his collection, the Book of Romans. That information in Hebrews 6:1–2 actually constituted the *outline* for the logical presentation of Paul's theological teachings in all the other writings in the New Testament.

Notice that the first subject Paul spoke about in Romans is *repentance*. See the first chapter of Romans leading up to Romans 2:4 (“**the goodness of God leads you to repentance**”). Paul's second topic dovetails precisely with his second topic in Hebrews: *faith*. Indeed, Paul's discussion on faith in Romans occupies all of chapters 3 to 5. Then Paul in Romans chapters 6 and 7 (and also in the sequence of Hebrews 6) proceeds with a discourse on *baptism* and its spiritual consequences.

Paul in Hebrews then followed with the mention of “**the laying on of hands.**” This doctrine concerned factors associated with the Holy Spirit and its functions. And remarkably, Paul in the Book of Romans chapter 8 continues with the same sequential theme (a major discourse on the attributes and role of the Holy Spirit) that he did in the Book of Hebrews.

But it does not stop there. The fifth and sixth subjects in Hebrews concerned the *resurrection and judgment*, and in Paul's teaching in Romans chapters 9 through 11 Paul presented his account of how Israel, though temporarily cast aside, will experience a thorough salvation and a judgment (their allotted rewards) when Christ finally returns to rescue them. This redemption (that Paul spoke about in Romans) will lead to what he said in Book of Hebrews was, seventhly, called *perfection*. This *perfection* is what Paul in Romans corresponds to the prophesied salvation which will be extended to all Israel (Romans 11:25).

We find that the doctrinal theme of progressive revelation found in Hebrews 6:1–2 (and in the Book of Romans) is also seen in First Corinthians. Whereas the Book of Romans concentrates primarily on the first three subjects of

- (1) *repentance*
- (2) *faith*, and
- (3) *baptism*

(with lesser emphasis on the Holy Spirit, the resurrection, judgment, and perfection), Paul in the Book of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians reverses the order with only scant attention to those first three topics but fully elaborates (with major discussions) on the doctrines of

- (4) the *Holy Spirit* (chapters 12 to 14),
- (5) and the *resurrection* (chapter 15).

In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians Paul, like in Romans, touches upon the subjects of

- (6) *judgment* and
- (7) *perfection*,

but these matters are more thoroughly treated in the later books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and (of course) in the Book of Hebrews itself, which Paul admitted contained very much *mature* doctrines. Paul said he was giving advanced teaching in Hebrews since he was then going to teach a *mature* approach to the Gospel. Paul said: **“leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on to perfection”** (Hebrews 6:1).

When one looks at the canonical order of the books of Romans and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians (followed by the remainder of Paul’s letters), it will be seen that all the doctrinal subjects (which Hebrews calls the elementary teachings) are sequentially dealt with—in an orderly and step-by-step fashion.

This same kind of procedure is also seen in the positioning of all the New Testament books. The four Gospels give the basic teaching of Christianity (and we will observe later that Matthew gives the Jewish approach, while Mark presents the Jewish/Gentile thrust, while Luke provides a Gentile/Jewish theme, and then John concludes with a thoroughly universal theme of application).

The design of the four Gospels in their manuscript order is to give teaching which progresses from the physical approach (the expected Jewish kingdom of the Messiah) to the real spiritual outcome (the universal, heavenly Kingdom of God). After this, we find that the Gospels and Acts are followed by the seven general epistles (called the “Catholic Epistles”). The subjects discussed in those seven books are primarily non-theological, and are intended to give an introduction to the fourteen epistles of Paul where the doctrinal subjects of repentance, faith, baptism, the Spirit, resurrections, judgment, and perfection are rehearsed in detail. The Book of Revelation finally ends the canon with a prophetic account of eschatological events concerning Christ’s Second Advent which will usher in the hopes and promises which were mentioned in the preceding books of the New Testament.

What we find in the manuscript order of the New Testament books is a progressive account of doctrinal teaching. This is not *guessing*. The principle of progressive revelation accords with all academic methods of teaching and the Bible is no exception. If the books of the New Testament were left in the order that the canonizers intended, the matter of doctrine would be understood much better. But our modern Bibles have misplaced books (which were intended to give elementary and preliminary teaching) into a later position, and elevated the epistles of Paul (which are more doctrinally mature) into a location ahead of the introductory ones. This causes confusion. Reason demands that it is far better to leave the books in the order that the majority of manuscripts have them.

## **The Fifth Environmental Factor**

There was a **fifth** factor which pervaded the consciousness of the writers of the Bible, particularly those of the New Testament. Though there are many virtues of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Bible, the apostle Paul mentioned three prime ones (stated in order of importance): called them *faith, hope, and love* (1 Corinthians 3:13).

And note this! The first eight chapters of Romans essentially cover the matter of faith, while chapters 9 to 11 emphasize the hope of Israel, the final chapters (12 to 16) focus on the concept of love to mankind in general, the brotherhood within the group in particular, and to God especially. But it does not stop there.

In the canonical order of the epistles of James, Peter and John, it will be seen that the first epistle emphasizes *true faith and religion* (James), the second *hope in suffering* (Peter), and the third underlines *love for the brotherhood* (John).

The positioning of those books in this way is not an accident. There is actually a conscious design in operation relative to the order of these books. It reflects a method of education in which the *first principles* of teaching used by the Holy Spirit are mentioned *first* and then the more mature doctrines of God are progressively emphasized later. I will have more to say about this type of design within the books of the Bible as we progress through this book.

## **The Sixth Environmental Factor**

The **sixth** factor which dominated the thinking of the men of the Bible (and this certainly applied to those who wrote and formulated the New Testament) concerns proper academic methods for teaching. It is well known that the best way to instruct people is to begin with the elementary aspects of a subject and then the teacher can proceed to the more advanced matters. We find this principle very much in action in the arrangement of the biblical books. The primary (or general) writings were placed first to give the “kindergarten” teaching as an introduction. These books are followed by “grade school” books, then “high school” books, “college” books, and then the student is given his or her “post-graduate studies”

This can be easily demonstrated by the writings of the apostle Paul. His first book in the canonical order is Romans. This book clearly represents the ABCs of Christian doctrine on a level for those not having heard much about the plan of salvation. Recall that Paul had never been to Rome before. He wrote the book for people who needed to **“be established”** (Romans 1:11). Then Paul proceeded to give the Romans the elementary doctrinal teachings of Christianity. This is a principal reason why the Book of Romans comes first in the canonical epistles of Paul.

First Corinthians followed the Book of Romans. Though some progress was being made in doctrinal understanding (Paul had taught the Corinthians for 18 months, unlike the Romans whom he had never taught), Paul’s emphasis in Corinthians was on corrective measures. The epistle reveals how new and immature the Corinthians were in their Christian faith. In fact, Paul made the plain statement that they were still spiritual babes in the faith.

**“And I brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk: for hitherto you were not able to bear it, neither yet now are you able.”**

- ***1 Corinthians 3:1–2***

The Corinthians at that stage in their Christian development were only capable of receiving elementary teachings from Paul. Not only were they acting like “children” (see a further reference in 1 Corinthians 14:20), but their spiritual performances were more like baptized heathens. Paul demanded that they grow up and behave like mature Christians. Thankfully, the Corinthians learned some vital lessons by the time Paul wrote his second epistle, but in spite of their progress, Paul still said in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians: **“I speak unto you as children”** (2 Corinthians 6:13).

As for the Galatians, the next book in the canonical order after the two to the Corinthians, Paul was upset with them for returning so quickly to an “infancy” in Christ, and resorting to the rule of the “schoolmaster” (the Mosaic law, Galatians 3:24–29; 4:1–10). The Galatians were reinstituting “elementary” teachings (Galatians 4:9). They were going back to a “grade school” type of instruction in Christ, returning to the lowest level of Christian development—to the keeping of the Law in order to “earn” salvation. The Galatians were retreating into Mosaic rules and trying to live like the Jewish people in Palestine: observing weekly and annual sabbath days, new moons and months, and sabbatical years. These doctrines were intended for spiritual children who were in “grade school,” and not (as Paul looked at it) befitting mature Christians.

Thus, the epistles of Paul to the Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians in the regular canonical order of the manuscripts were designed for people just coming into a knowledge of Christ. And note:

- The message in the Book of Romans was for people Paul had *never instructed before*,
- His teaching to the Corinthians was for those whom he had *taught for 18 months*, and
- The epistle to the Galatians was designed for those who had been *taught the Gospel for more than four years*.

In all of these first four epistles, the messages of Paul were intended for spiritual *children*. But when it comes to the next three epistles of Paul in the New Testament canon (Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians), they were designed to give instruction to mature and fully developed Christians. In Ephesians the subjects are directed to those who are **“no more children.”**

The teachings of Paul in these three epistles were advanced doctrinal discourses. Note that Paul spoke to these people in a mature language.

**“For the perfecting [maturing] of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man [a fully mature man], unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine.”**

- *Ephesians 4:12–14*

There could hardly be any plainer teaching. The readers of these latter epistles were far advanced in spiritual knowledge than the early Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians. Paul was even able to write the latter three epistles in very sophisticated language.

Paul’s letters to the first three churches in the canonical order of the manuscripts (Romans, Corinthians, Galatians) were arranged to provide the ABCs of doctrinal teaching, while the teaching in the latter three epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians) provided the XYZs of one’s knowledge in Christ.

These seven letters to six different church congregations are followed in the manuscripts by two epistles to a seventh church (1 and 2 Thessalonians). And what is the subject matter of those two epistles? It is teaching about the appearance of the Man of Sin, the second advent of Christ back to this earth, and the resurrection from the dead which will accompany Christ’s advent.

The number *seven* (as is evident) has the ring of *completion* and *finality* in its symbolic meaning. Thus, the seven church epistles discuss the *end of the age* and the completion of the church age. While the first six churches had epistles which described the doctrines of the church from the ABCs to the XYZs (and how one must walk in the Christian life), the seventh church had two epistles (1 and 2 Thessalonians) which have information about

the conclusion of the church age and the attainment of the promises which the previous epistles talked about.

The next book in the manuscript order is Hebrews. It is very mature teaching. Paul even stated that this treatise (rather than a “letter”) was intended for very mature Christians. Note what Paul stated in regard to the mature message that he was giving in the Book of Hebrews. **“Leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on to perfection”** (Hebrews 6:1–2). Its commentary explains how the Temple and physical rituals were types of things to come, but how the reality is found in Christ. It discusses the true kingdom of God which is to appear on earth. Emphasis is also given to **“the sabbath to come”**—the millennial age (Hebrews 4:9) and the new Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22–23).

In Hebrews Paul also states that the elementary Christian doctrines of repentance, faith, baptisms, laying on of hands, the resurrection, and the judgment (which Paul discussed thoroughly in Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians) were to be left behind, and only subjects dealing *with perfection* were then appropriate for him to discuss (Hebrews 5:11–14; 6:1–3).

The remaining four books in Paul’s canon as shown by the manuscripts were instructions for the pastoral duties of ministers. Obviously, these later teachings are most mature. After all, they were written from one professional minister to other professional ministers. The teaching contained in them was hardly for spiritual infants.

Finally, the manuscripts have the Book of Revelation last of all. This book covers all aspects of the end of the age. Its contents pertain to the whole world, not only to the Christian church (as the two to the Thessalonians do). It is the most mature and difficult book to understand. It comes last, and is a fitting conclusion not only to the New Testament but also to the Bible as a whole.

When we get further into the body of this book, we will find that the subjects of the various books of the Bible, plus the arrangement of the books in relationship to one another, echo the principle of progressive revelation. This is a teaching which begins with elementary (or general) matters and proceeds to the more sophisticated (the particular and more advanced). This is the normal way to teach.

When the apostle Peter said that Christians ought to grow in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18), he expected all people to progress in the normal step-by-step fashion of doctrinal development that individuals throughout the ages have been used to. It should not seem odd that the books within the canon of the Bible were arranged in the same fashion. Proper teaching methods demand this approach.

## The Seventh Environmental Factor

A **seventh** and final factor in canonization involves the use of symbolic numbers. The number *seven* was of prime consequence. It had a special signification of which there was little ambiguity. Professor Muirhead had this to say on the meaning of seven.

**“Seven. Examples:** [there were] **7 churches, spirits (Rev. 1:4, 11; 3:1), stars (1:16, 20), candlesticks (1:13), lamps (4:5), seals (5:1; 8:1), horns and eyes (5:6), trumpets (8:2), angels (8:2), thunders (10:30, heads (12:3; 17:3), angels with plagues (15:1), vials full of the wrath of God (15:7), kings (17:10). In view of this pervasiveness of 7, it is proof that 7 is preeminently the number of perfection or completeness. Seven represents the perfect of God in mercy and judgment in relation to men (as well as the total works of creation).”**

- *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church, vol. II, p.93,*  
— **underlines and words in brackets are mine** <sup>1</sup>

One could take a whole chapter to show the wonders found in the symbolic relevance of the number seven in the Bible and still not exhaust the subject. It provides an accent of *completion* and *perfection* to any theme.

One might wonder why I am mentioning this matter of symbolic numbers? This is because the subject is important in regard to the canonization of the Bible. The prime number associated with canonization is *seven*. The number is found in a variety of ways in the symmetrical design which exists within and between the books of the Old and New Testaments. The recognition that numbers played an important symbolic part in the religious thinking of the writers of the Bible will go a long way in helping to show just what books represent the complete Scriptures.

## Conclusion

In closing this chapter, let us remember the seven principles which motivated the actions of the men who wrote and canonized the Bible. They are important ones to consider if one wishes to know just what books represent the Holy Bible in its earliest form. Throughout this book we will pay attention to all these principles (and others which are akin to them) in order to determine what the biblical writers themselves would say are the actual and authorized books of the Bible, and in what order those books ought to appear in our modern versions.

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<sup>1</sup> In James Hastings, John A. Selbie, John C. Lambert, eds., *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1916–1918).