

PRESERVING THE CANON – THE BIBLE’S FIRST HURDLE

It must have started with a bang. Perhaps a very big one! Then there appeared the first historical journalist. His name, not certain, but it could have been Adam. Whoever that journalist was, facts were recorded and God’s creation documented.

Now, the skill of writing was yet to explode upon the people who spent more time hunting and gathering than reading the New York Times best seller list. So Adam the journalist, or a family member, collected the details and taught the people by oral tradition. The Word of God was passed along to their children and their children’s children. The ancients became so proficient that the smallest detail passed through many generations without a change of a jot or tittle or a sigh.

As writing became popular among the learned, oral transmissions were inscribed onto the hide of a selected sheep (vellum) or the squashed reed plucked from the river bank (papyrus). The history of God’s people now was captured and preserved for the ages.

Along with this new technology came the grenade of pseudo-history and imitators. Authenticity can be found in the antiquity of the sources thus separating the sheep from the wolves. Tatian, a church father writing about 160AD, advised that these collected papyrus and vellum, we now call Scripture, were older than the best selling blind author of Antiquity – Homer. His then best sellers, the Iliad and the Odyssey, pale in age and content in comparison to Genesis, Exodus, etc.

The Jews became a conquered people and were dispersed throughout the ancient world. As slaves, they absorbed the functional language of their captors. Soon their mores and language became diluted and even lost. They adopted the universal language of the day – Greek.

It was Ptolemy II (Philadelphus - 285-247BC), the ruler of Egypt and much of the ancient world, who recognized the power of the canon. Being a scholar, he saw the importance of the Hebrew documents. He was determined to prepare the Hebrew Scriptures for the world. He called 70+ world class scholars who worked 70+ weeks to present a Greek translation of the Hebrew. Consider it beta format of the first translation of the Scriptures into a world class language. The world’s scholars and theologians had a common tool to study God’s Word. This effort, referred to as the Septuagint (a play on words meaning 70), was to be housed in Alexandria’s famous library.

The world now had the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) in the universally read and understood Greek format. God moved his Scriptures, imbedded in a small national tongue, to a universal language. That document written about 282 BC is available today to the Greek reading student.

When Jesus’ family fled to Egypt, approximately 4BC, they could have been exposed to the Greek Septuagint as the Scripture read from the pulpit by learned Rabbis.

The Canon started with a bang as God directed and protected its progress through a growing, changing and an increasingly more sophisticated world. We have Philadelphus II and perhaps his beautiful wife Arisnoe to thank. As you read your Old Testament, remember its safe keeping was assured by ancients whom today are nearly unknown. Our ancient forefathers gave us much. Our mission is to pass this on as they did, without change, to the coming generations. Your family is counting on you.

The Canon lives on,

Barry L. Colyer

Next issue - Canon Makeover