

The Canon of Scripture

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The Canon of the Old Testament

The word “canon” (Greek. for “a rule”) is applied to the Bible in two ways: first, in regard to the Bible as the church’s *standard* of faith and practice, and second, in regard to its contents as the *correct collection and list* of inspired books. The word was first applied to the identity of the biblical books in the latter part of the fourth century AD; reflecting the fact that there had recently been a need to settle some Christians doubts on the matter. Before this, Christians had referred to the “Old Testament” and “New Testament” as the “Holy Scriptures” and had assumed, rather than made explicit, that they were the *correct* collections and lists.

The Causes of Uncertainty about the OT Canon

The Christian OT corresponded to the Hebrew Bible, which Jesus and the first Christians inherited from the Jews. In the Gentile mission of the church, however, it was necessary to use the Septuagint (a translation of the OT that had been made in pre-Christian times for Greek-speaking Alexandrian Jews. Because knowledge of Hebrew was uncommon in the church (esp. outside Syria and Palestine), the first Latin translation of the OT came from the Septuagint and not from the original Hebrew. Where there was no knowledge of Hebrew and little acquaintance with Jewish tradition, it became harder to distinguish between the biblical books and other popular religious reading matter circulating in the Greek or Latin language. These factors led to the uncertainty about the composition of Scripture, which the coiners of the term “canon” sought to settle.

Did the Hebrew Bible Contain the Same Books as Today’s Bible?

The above analysis assumes that the Hebrew Bible, which the church inherited in the first century, comprised the same books as it does today. The five books of the Law are obviously not an arbitrary grouping. They follow a chronological sequence, concentrate on the Law of Moses, and trace history from the creation of the world to Moses’ death. Moreover, the Prophets and the Writings, if arranged in the traditional order recorded in the Talmud, are not arbitrary groupings either. The Prophets begin with four narrative books—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—tracing history through a second period, from the entry into the Promised Land to the Babylonian exile. They end with four oracular books—Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Book of the Twelve (Minor Prophets)—arranged in descending order of size. The Hagiographa (Writings) begin with six lyrical or wisdom books—Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations—arranged in descending order of size, and end with four narrative books—Daniel, Esther, Ezra–Nehemiah, and Chronicles—covering a third period of history, the period of the exile and the return. (The remaining book of the Writings, Ruth, is prefixed to Psalms, since it ends with the genealogy of the psalmist David.) The four narrative books in the Hagiographa are this time put second, so that Chronicles can sum up the whole biblical story, from Adam to the return from exile, and for this reason also Ezra–Nehemiah is put before Chronicles, not

after it. A small anomaly is that the Song of Solomon is in fact slightly shorter than Lamentations, not longer, but it is put first to keep the three books related to Solomon together.

Jesus and the NT authors quote the words of the OT approximately 300 times; uncertainty about the exact number arises because of a few instances where it is not clear whether it is an OT quotation or only an echoing expression using similar words. They regularly quote it as having divine authority, with phrases such as “it is written,” “Scripture says,” and “God says,” but no other writings are quoted in this way. Occasionally the NT writers will quote some other authors, even pagan Greek authors, but they never quote these other sources as being the words of God (see [Acts 17:28](#); [Titus 1:12–13](#); [Jude 8–10, 14–16](#)), as they do the canonical OT books. Sound historical study shows, therefore, that the Hebrew OT contains the true canon of the OT, shared by Jesus and the apostles with first-century Judaism. No books are left out that should be included, and none are included that should be left out.

The Canon of the New Testament

The foundations for a NT canon lie in the gracious purpose of a self-revealing God whose word carries his own divine authority. Just as new outpourings of divine word-revelation accompanied and followed each major act of redemption in the ancient history of God’s people (the covenant with Adam and Eve, the covenant with Abraham, the redemption from Egypt, the establishment of the monarchy, the exile, and the restoration), so when the promised Messiah came, a new and generous outpouring of divine revelation necessarily ensued (see [2 Tim. 1:8–11](#); [Titus 1:1–3](#)).

The OT Authorization

The prospect of a NT Scripture to stand alongside the OT was anticipated, even authorized, in the OT itself, embedded in the promise of God’s ultimate act of redemption through the Messiah, in faithfulness to his covenant ([Jer. 31:31–33](#); and [Heb. 8:7–13](#); [10:16–18](#)). Jesus taught his disciples after his resurrection that “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” predicted not only the Messiah’s suffering and resurrection but also that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” ([Luke 24:44–48](#)). Prophetic passages such as [Isaiah 2:2–3](#); [49:6](#); and [Psalm 2:8](#) spoke of a time when the light of God’s grace in redemption would be proclaimed to all nations. It naturally follows that this proclamation would eventuate in a new collection of written Scriptures complementing the books of the old covenant—both from the pattern of God’s redemptive work in the past (mentioned above) and from the actual writing ministry of some of Jesus’ apostles (and their associates) in the accomplishment of their commission.

The Commission of Jesus

God, who spoke in many and various ways in times past, chose to speak in these last days to mankind through his Son (see [Heb. 1:1–2, 4](#)). Bringing this saving message to Israel and the nations was a crucial part of the mission of Jesus Christ ([Isa. 49:6](#); [Acts 26:23](#)), the Word made flesh ([John 1:14](#)). He put this mission into effect through chosen apostles, whom he commissioned to be his authoritative representatives ([Matt. 10:40](#), “whoever receives you receives me”). Their assignment was to “bring to ... remembrance,” through the work of the

Spirit, his words and works ([John 14:26; 16:13–14](#)) and to bear witness to Jesus “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” ([Acts 1:8](#); cf. [Matt. 28:19–20](#); [Luke 24:48](#); [John 17:14, 20](#)).

In time, the apostolic preaching came to written form in the books of the NT, which now function as “the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles” ([2 Pet. 3:2](#)).

Paul and the other apostles wrote just as they preached: conscious of Jesus’ mandate. From the beginning, the full authority of the apostles (and prophets) to deliver God’s word was recognized, at least by many ([Acts 10:22](#); [Eph. 2:20](#); [1 Thess. 2:13](#); [Jude 17–18](#)). This recognition is accordingly reflected in the earliest non-apostolic writers. For example, Clement of Rome attested that “The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. Both, therefore, came of the will of God in good order” (*1 Clement* 42.1–2 written c. a.d. 95). In its deliberations about the particular books that make up the canon of Scripture, the church did not sovereignly “determine” or “choose” the books it most preferred—whether for catechetical, polemical, liturgical, or edificatory purposes. Rather, the church saw itself as empowered only to receive and recognize what God had provided in books handed down from the apostles and their immediate companions (e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.preface; 3.1.1–2). This is why discussions of the so-called “criteria” of canonicity can be misleading. Qualities such as “apostolicity,” “antiquity,” “orthodoxy,” “liturgical use,” and “church consensus” are not criteria by which the church autonomously judged which documents it would receive. The first three are qualities the church recognizes in the voice of its Savior, to which voice the church willingly submits itself (“My sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me,” [John 10:27](#)).

The Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (the earliest Gospels known) gained universal acceptance while arousing very little controversy within the church. If the latest of these, the Gospel of John, was published near the end of the first century (as most scholars think), it is remarkable that its words are echoed around AD 110 in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, who also knew Matthew, and perhaps Luke. At about the same time, Papias of Hierapolis in Asia Minor received traditions about the origins of Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospels, and quite probably Luke’s and John’s. In the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr in Rome reported that the Gospels (apparently the four)—which he calls “memoirs of the apostles”—were being read and expounded in Christian services of worship.

In [2 Peter 3:16](#), a collection of at least some of Paul’s letters was already known and regarded as Scripture and therefore enjoyed canonical endorsement. Furthermore, a collection (of unknown extent) of Paul’s letters was known to Clement of Rome and to the recipients of his letter in Corinth before the end of the first century, then also to Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna and their readers in the early second century. The Pastoral Letters (1–2 Timothy and Titus), rejected as being Paul’s by many modern critics, are attested at least from the time of Polycarp.

By the end of the second century a “core” collection of NT books—21 of the 27—was generally recognized: four Gospels, Acts, 13 epistles of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. By this time Hebrews (accepted in the East and by Irenaeus and Tertullian in the West, but questioned in

Rome due to doubts about authorship), James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude were only minimally attested in the writings of church leaders. This infrequent citation led to the expression of doubts by later fathers (e.g., Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.25).

Yet, by some time in the third century, codices (precursors of the modern book form, as opposed to scrolls) containing all seven of the “general epistles” were being produced, and Eusebius reports that all seven were “known to most.”

By the 240s a.d. Origen (residing in Caesarea in Palestine) acknowledged all 27 of the NT books but reported that James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude were disputed. The situation is virtually the same for Eusebius, writing about 60 years later, who also reports the doubts some had about Hebrews and Revelation. Still, his two categories of “undisputed” and “disputed but known to most” contain only the 27 and no more. He named five other books (*The Acts of Paul*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, *The Letter of Barnabas*, and *The Didache*) which were known to many churches but which, he believed, had to be judged as spurious.

In the year a.d. 367 the Alexandrian bishop Athanasius, in his annual Easter letter, gave a list of the NT books which comprised, with no reservations, all 27, while naming several others as useful for catechizing but not as scriptural. Several other fourth-century lists essentially concurred, though with various individual deviations outside of the most basic core (four Gospels, Acts, 13 epistles of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John). Three African synods—at Hippo Regius in a.d. 393 and at Carthage in 397 and 419—and the influential African bishop Augustine affirmed the 27-book Canon. It was enshrined in Jerome’s Latin translation, the Vulgate, which became the normative Bible for the Western church. In Eastern churches, recognition of Revelation lagged for quite some time. The churches of Syria did not accept Revelation, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, or Jude until the fifth (Western Syria) or sixth (Eastern Syria) centuries.

The apostolic word gave birth to the church ([Rom. 1:15–17](#); [10:14–15](#); [James 1:18](#); [1 Pet. 1:23–25](#)), and the written form of this word remains as the permanent, documentary expression of God’s new covenant. It may be said that only the 27 books of the NT manifest themselves as belonging to that original, foundational, apostolic witness. They have demonstrated themselves to be the Word of God to the universal church throughout the generations. Here are the pastures to which Christ’s sheep from many folds continually come to hear their Shepherd’s voice and to follow him.

The Apocrypha

Larger editions of the English Bible—from the Great Bible of Tyndale and Coverdale (1539) onward—have often included a separate section between the OT and the NT titled “The Apocrypha,” consisting of additional books and substantial parts of books. The Latin Vulgate Bible translated by Jerome (begun a.d. 382, completed 405) had placed them in the OT itself—some as separate items and some as attached to or included in the biblical books of Esther, Jeremiah, and Daniel. In Roman Catholic translations of the Bible, such as the Douay Version and the Jerusalem Bible, these items are still placed in their pre-Reformation positions. In Protestant translations, however, the Apocrypha is either omitted altogether or grouped in a separate section.

Jerome called them by the name “apocrypha” (Gk. *apokrypha*, “those having been hidden away”). In accordance with his teaching—

and with the understanding of the OT canon held by Jesus, the NT authors, and the first-century Jews; thus the sixteenth-century Protestant translators did not consider those writings part of the OT but gathered them together in a separate section, to which they gave Jerome’s name, “The Apocrypha.”

The way in which Christian writers used the Apocrypha confirms the above analysis. The NT seems to reflect knowledge of one or two of the apocryphal texts, but it never ascribes authority to them as it does to many of the canonical OT books. While the NT quotes various parts of the OT about 300 times, it never actually quotes anything from the Apocrypha ([Jude 14–16](#) does not contain a quote from the Apocrypha but from another Jewish writing, *1 Enoch*) In the second century, Justin Martyr and Theophilus of Antioch, who frequently referred to the OT, never referred to any of the Apocrypha. By the end of the second century *Wisdom*, *Tobit*, and *Sirach* were sometimes being treated as Scripture, but none of the other apocryphal books were. Their eventual acceptance was a slow development. Much the same is true with Christian lists of the OT books: the oldest of them include the fewest of the Apocrypha; and the oldest of all, that of Melito (c. a.d. 170), includes none.

By the late fourth century, Jerome found it necessary to assert the distinction between the Apocrypha and the inspired OT books with great emphasis, and a minority of writers continued to make the same distinction throughout the Middle Ages, until the Protestant Reformers arose and made the distinction an important part of their doctrine of Scripture. At the Council of Trent (1545–1563), however, the Church of Rome attempted to obliterate the distinction and to put the Apocrypha (with the exception of *1* and *2 Esdras* and *The Prayer of Manasseh*) on the same level as the inspired OT books. This was a consequence of (1) Rome’s exalted doctrine of oral tradition, (2) its view that the church creates Scripture, and (3) its acceptance of certain controversial ideas (esp. the doctrines of purgatory, indulgences, and works-righteousness as contributing to justification) that were derived from passages in the Apocrypha. These teachings gave support to the Roman Catholic responses to Martin Luther and other leaders of the Protestant Reformation, which had begun in 1517.