

Canonicity

The definition of canon

From the Greek word for ruler, the word "canon" came to mean a rule or standard for anything. For early Christians, it meant the rule of faith, that is the authoritative Scripture. The first clear record of the word "canon" being applied to the Bible was by Athanasius around 350 A.D.

The determination of the canon

God determined the canon of Scripture by co-authoring it. Man recognized what God had revealed and accepted the canon of Scripture for what it was, the very Word of God. A book is not the Word of God because it was accepted by the people, it was accepted by the people because it was the Word of God. This is an important distinction. The canon was not formed by a council of men. It did not evolve over the years. God led men to discover what He had authored.

The process of canonization

There are four historical phases that every book of the Bible went through:

1. Inspiration by God

God inspired prophets who wrote the Scripture. All writing that is inspired by God is prophetic (Hebrews 1:1; 2 Peter 1:19-20). Inspiration occurred when the books were originally written.

2. Recognition by men of God

The Bible books were recognized as such soon after they were written as from a prophetic source. A few books came to be disputed later.

3. Collection and preservation

The reason that Bible books were collected into groupings that led to what we know as the New Testament was first and foremost that the books were revelation from God. Practically speaking, the early church needed them. Heresy needed to be refuted, missionary churches were planted and persecution attacked the church.

4. Translation into other languages

The New Testament began to be translated as early as 100 years after it was completed. It was translated by the early church into Syriac (200 A.D.), Old Latin (200 A.D.), Coptic (300 A.D.) and Latin (400 A.D.). This was an important step since translations took effort. The books that were consistently translated were the books that were consistently respected as apostolic. These formed the New Testament.

The recognition of the Old Testament canon

There is ample evidence within the Old Testament itself that other Old Testament books were recognized and accepted into the canon. The law of Moses is referred to in 2 Kings 14:6, Ezra 3:2 and Nehemiah 13:1. Ezekiel speaks of Job (Ezekiel 14:14, 20). Jonah 2:2-9, 2 Samuel 22 and 1 Chronicles 16 refer to a portion of Psalms. The books of Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon) are likely mentioned in 1 Kings 4:32.

Due to its age, the acceptance of the Old Testament canon is more difficult to trace historically than the New Testament canon. By the time of the destruction of the Temple in the second century B.C., all of the Old Testament books were accepted, with the exception of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon (all due to questions about their content), Esther (due to it not including the name of God) and Ezekiel (allegedly not in harmony with the law of Moses). These five books were largely but not completely accepted. By the time of the New Testament, there was complete unity regarding the acceptance of the Old Testament books of the Bible.

The rejection of the Old Testament Apocrypha

The Old Testament Apocrypha includes:

- The Wisdom of Solomon (c. 30 B.C.), known as the Book of Wisdom.
- Ecclesiasticus (132 B.C.), also known as Sirach.
- Tobit (c. 200 B.C.).
- Judith (c. 150 B.C.).
- 1 Maccabees (c. 110 B.C.)
- 2 Maccabees (c. 110 B.C.)
- Prayer of Azariah (c. 100 B.C.) placed as Daniel 3:24-90 by Roman Catholics.
- Susanna (c. 100 B.C.) placed as Daniel 13 by Roman Catholics.
- Bel and the Dragon (c. 100 B.C.), placed as Daniel 14 by Roman Catholics.
- Baruch (c. 150-50 B.C.), placed as Baruch 1-5 by Roman Catholics.
- Letter of Jeremiah (c. 300-100 B.C.) placed as Baruch 6 by Roman Catholics.
- Additions to Esther (140-130 B.C.), placed as Esther 10:4-16:24 by Roman Catholics.
- 1 Esdras (c. 150-100 B.C.), also known as 3 Esdras.
- 2 Esdras (c. 150-100 B.C.), known as 4 Esdras.
- Prayer of Manasseh (c. 100 B.C.)

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The Roman Catholic Council of Trent accepted all of the Old Testament Apocrypha as canonical in 1546, with the exception of 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh. While there are 15 total books in the Apocrypha, Roman Catholic Bibles count only 11 because they combine the Letter of Jeremiah with Baruch and omit 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh. The teaching of 2 Esdras 7:105 in opposition to prayer for the dead may have led to its exclusion by the Roman Catholic Church.

The reasons suggested for the Old Testament Apocrypha as Scripture include:

- Some early church fathers accepted these books (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria).
- The Syriac church accepted them in the fourth century.
- The Eastern Orthodox church accepts them.
- The Roman Catholic Church proclaimed them as canonical in 1546.
- The Apocrypha was included in Protestant Bibles, including the original King James version of 1611.
- Some of the Old Testament Apocrypha has been found among other Old Testament books with the Dead Sea Scrolls.

However, there is abundant compelling evidence for rejecting the Apocrypha as inspired by God. While these books may be of historical value and in some ways supplement God's truth, they are not canonical for the following reasons:

- Jesus and the apostles did not accept these books as part of the Scripture. There are no New Testament references to any of the Apocrypha as being authoritative in any way. The New Testament writers quote not one part of the Apocrypha.
- Judaism has never accepted these books as part of the Scriptures. Ancient Jewish leaders specifically rejected the Apocrypha (Josephus, Philo).
- While a few early church leaders may appear to take some material from the Apocrypha, most were opposed to the inclusion of the Apocrypha into the canon of Scripture (Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome, Origen). Furthermore, no church council for the entire church accepted these books as Scripture.
- The Apocrypha itself recognizes our Old Testament canon as a distinct twenty-four books, which corresponds to the Hebrew Bible as it is known today. In 2 Esdras 14:44-48, seventy books are distinguished from ninety-four, leaving twenty-four, or exact number of the Hebrew canon, which became our 39 Old Testament books. Not only does the Apocrypha not claim inspiration for itself, it actually disclaims it when 1 Maccabees 9:27 describes an existing cessation of prophecy.
- The Apocrypha includes unbiblical teaching, including prayers for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:45, or 12:46 in Roman Catholic Bibles) and salvation by works (Tobit 12:9).

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- The first official adoption of the Apocrypha by the Roman Catholic Church came at the Council of Trent in 1546, over 1,500 years after the books were written. This was part of a reaction by Catholicism against the Protestant Reformation and if anyone did not accept these books they were considered accursed. When the Apocrypha appeared in Protestant Bibles, it was normally placed in a separate section since it was not considered of equal authority.
- When Greek manuscripts do include books of the Apocrypha, they do not do so completely. In fact, no Greek manuscript contains the exact collection of the books of the Apocrypha as was accepted by the Council of Trent. While the Syrian church accepted the Apocrypha in the fourth century, the translation of the Bible into Syrian in the second century A.D. did not include it.
- The Qumran community had hundreds of books in its library beyond the Scripture. While the library had some of the Apocrypha, it did not have commentaries on the Apocrypha it did with Old Testament books. The Old Testament books had special script and parchment, unlike the Apocrypha. Qumran clearly considered the Apocrypha as different from Scripture.

Up until the Council of Trent established the Apocrypha as by the Roman Catholic Church, different people viewed it with different degrees of value. Very few considered it to be Scripture and if so it was for flawed reasons. We should not consider people who view the Apocrypha highly as necessarily supporting it as authoritative Scripture.

The recognition of the New Testament canon

The early church discovered the New Testament by discerning whether a book was apostolic. That means it was either written by an apostle or by the close associate of an apostle, hence with the apostolic authority.

In addition to this basic and fundamental criterion for recognition, there are certain indications of canonicity. That is, several things occurred when the early church considered a book to be Scripture:

- It was read publicly (Thessalonians 5:27)
- It was circulated widely (Revelation 1:11; Colossians 4:16)
- Copies of it were collected (2 Peter 3:15-16)
- It was quoted in other writings (Jude 17; 1 Timothy 5:8)

Furthermore, there is evidence that the New Testament regarded itself as canonical. It is written with authority in directing the church. Paul quotes the Gospel of Luke as Scripture, right along with Deuteronomy (1 Timothy 5:8). Paul's letters were designed to be circulated among the churches (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27). Peter had Paul's letters and called them "Scripture" in 2 Peter 3:16.

The categories of early church writings

1. Homologomena ("acknowledged")

The Homologomena are the New Testament books that virtually everyone accepted as part of the New Testament Canon. This includes every New Testament book from Matthew through Philemon, plus 1 Peter and 1 John.

2. Antilegomena ("disputed")

The Antilegomena are the New Testament books that became a subject of controversy regarding their inclusion in the Scripture. The acceptance of these books was never seriously threatened and by 400 A.D. all these books were restored to their place of acceptance by the church. The following seven books were "spoken against" by some for various reasons:

a. Hebrews

Hebrews was questioned because of its anonymous authorship. In the East it was considered from Paul and accepted but in the West there was more uncertainty. Also in the West, those from the Montanist sect appeal to Hebrews for some of their doctrinal error. This caused the book to be viewed skeptically by some, without reason.

b. James

James was brought into question because of its teaching on justification and to a lesser extent on its authorship. The alleged conflict with Paul's teaching on justification by faith slowed the book's acceptance. Even as late as the Reformation, Martin Luther doubted it.

c. 2 Peter

No New Testament book has been questioned as much as 2 Peter. Some claim it was written after Peter had died. Others note the apparent dissimilarities with 1 Peter. However, the similarities outweigh the dissimilarities and the book does have broad support from many such as Origen, Eusebius, Jerome and Augustine.

d. 2 John; 3 John

These books were questioned because the author calls himself an "elder" rather than an apostle and because they were private letters with limited circulation. Of course apostles called themselves "elders" (1 Peter 5:1) and they are similar to 1 John.

e. Jude

Jude is questioned because of its quotation of the Book of Enoch (14-15 cites Enoch 1:9). Also, the Assumption of Moses is possibly referenced in verse nine. However, a quotation of a book not in the Scripture is not significantly different than when Paul quotes pagan poets (Acts 17:28; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Titus 1:12). A reference of a portion of a work does not validate the entirety of it. We can quote a person without affirming their entire belief structure.

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f. Revelation

Revelation was questioned because of its prophetic nature. This dispute lasted longer than any other New Testament book. Revelation was quickly embraced by the apostolic Fathers but over time it became in dispute. By the middle 200's until the Council of Carthage in 397, Revelation was in question. The main reason was its teaching on future things, which some people distorted. This distortion caused some in the church to be reluctant to accept not just the erroneous teaching but even the book at all.

With all seven of the disputed books, once the question of authenticity was settled, they were readily accepted into the canon as God's revelation. It is important to note that each of these books enjoyed continual and significant support for its place in the Scripture. This support was just not unanimous.

3. Pseudepigrapha ("false writings")

The Pseudepigrapha are books that virtually no orthodox church father, collection or council considered legitimate Scripture. There are over 280 of these writings and they are mainly the product of heretical groups. They contain exaggerated and mythical religious folklore that abounded in the early days of the Church. They were never considered canonical by respectable leaders and are of very questionable value. Most are known only through citation or quotation by another author.

More than fifty of these writings are accounts of Christ. The more well-known of these are the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Hebrews and the Protevangelium of James.

In general, the basic value of the Pseudepigrapha is to learn about the types of ascetic and Gnostic attitudes. The Pseudepigrapha also shows the popular desire for information beyond the Scripture, the illegitimate tendency to glorify Christianity by fraudulent means and the unhealthy desire to support teachings under the guise of apostolic authority. This problem exists today as many fall into the same trap of seeking revelation from God beyond His Word.

4. Apocrypha of the New Testament

The Apocrypha of the New Testament is not the Old Testament Apocrypha that was added to the Roman Catholic Bible in 1564. It is books that were written after the time of Christ and which were accepted by some in the church.

The difference between the Pseudepigrapha and the Apocrypha is in some cases small. Neither of these were received as canonical and both were used by sects. However, the New Testament Apocrypha also appeared at times in local church collections of Scripture and in occasional Bible translations. They had local acceptance for a temporary period of time, but never enjoyed acceptance by the Church in general and in final canonical decisions were not seriously considered.

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The New Testament Apocrypha includes:

- The Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas (70-79 A.D.)
- The Epistle to the Corinthians (96 A.D.)
- The Ancient Homily, also known as the Second Epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians (120-140 A.D.)
- The Shepherd of Hermas (115-140 A.D.)
- The Didache, also known as the Teaching of the Twelve (100-120 A.D.)
- The Apocalypse of Peter (150 A.D.)
- The Acts of Paul and Thecla (170 A.D.)
- The Gospel According to the Hebrews (65-100 A.D.)
- The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (108 A.D.)
- The Seven Epistles of Ignatius (110 A.D.)

The New Testament Apocrypha is more valuable than the Pseudepigrapha. They provide early documentation of the existence of some of the New Testament Bible books. They also fill in the gap between the teaching of the apostles and the writings of the early church of the third and fourth centuries. They give clues to the practices, policies and future teachings of the church.

However the Apocrypha was not accepted as Scripture for several reasons:

- These books never enjoyed more than a temporary and local recognition.
- Those that advocated their acceptance considered them at best to be "semi-canonical." That is, they were added at the end of various other collections or mentioned in the table of contents.
- No major church council or New Testament collection included them as inspired books.
- The reason they had some acceptance was because they wrongly attached themselves to references in canonical books (cf. Colossians 4:16) or alleged apostolic authorship (e.g. the Acts of Paul).

Conclusion

God inspired the books of the Bible. Inspiration by God made a book part of the canon of Scripture. These inspired books were circulated and collected into a growing canon as they were written. There was no lengthy delay to await official approval because the people recognized the author as prophetic and the writing was received as from God. Later disputes about certain books should not be confused with the original acceptance of the books. These later disputes revolved particularly around authenticity of the work. As some began to question whether the work was truly from a prophet then this raised questions concerning their canonicity. However, the early Christians were in the best position to determine if a book was authentic and thus canonical. What was written by the prophets of God was accepted by the people of God and has been preserved by God for us today.