**Easton Bible Dictionary**

**CANON** This word is derived from a Hebrew and Greek word denoting a reed or cane. Hence it means something straight, or something to keep straight; and hence also a rule, or something ruled or measured. It came to be applied to the Scriptures, to denote that they contained the authoritative rule of faith and practice, the standard of doctrine and duty. A book is said to be of canonical authority when it has a right to take a place with the other books which contain a revelation of the Divine will. Such a right does not arise from any ecclesiastical authority, but from the evidence of the inspired authorship of the book. The canonical (i.e., the inspired) books of the Old and New Testaments, are a complete rule, and the only rule, of faith and practice. They contain the whole supernatural revelation of God to men. The New Testament Canon was formed gradually under divine guidance. The different books as they were written came into the possession of the Christian associations which began to be formed soon after the day of Pentecost; and thus slowly the canon increased till all the books were gathered together into one collection containing the whole of the twenty-seven New Testament inspired books. Historical evidence shows that from about the middle of the second century this New Testament collection was substantially such as we now possess. Each book contained in it is proved to have, on its own ground, a right to its place; and thus the whole is of divine authority.

The Old Testament Canon is witnessed to by the New Testament writers. Their evidence is conclusive. The quotations in the New from the Old are very numerous, and the references are much more numerous. These quotations and references by our Lord and the apostles most clearly imply the existence at that time of a well-known and publicly acknowledged collection of Hebrew writings under the designation of “The Scriptures;” “The Law and the Prophets and the Psalms;” “Moses and the Prophets,” etc. The appeals to these books, moreover, show that they were regarded as of divine authority, finally deciding all questions of which they treat; and that the whole collection so recognized consisted only of the thirty-nine books which we now possess. Thus they endorse as genuine and authentic the canon of the Jewish Scriptures. The Septuagint Version (q.v.) also contained every book we now have in the Old Testament Scriptures. As to the time at which the Old Testament canon was closed, there are many considerations which point to that of Ezra and Nehemiah, immediately after the return from Babylonian exile.

**Holman Bible Dictionary**

**BIBLE, FORMATION AND CANON OF**

The word “Bible” was formed from a Greek term meaning books in the plural. Our Bible is, in fact, the collection of books written by various authors that possesses final authority in Christian communities. It has no rival in its pervasive influence
upon Western culture, and increasingly over world culture. It is a perennial best-seller and has been translated into more than two thousand languages and dialects.

Why does the Bible exist? The answer has to do with the transmission of the gospel down through the generations. Once God had revealed Himself and His plan of salvation to Israel and to the believers surrounding Jesus, the question arose how this truth would be passed along to posterity without its suffering distortion from later interpreters. The only obvious answer to this question was written documentation. It would be necessary to secure the revelation in a fixed, written, and authentic form so that the truth would not be lost in the transmission. Both from a human and a divine standpoint, then, a Bible was required to be the vehicle of transmission of the gospel, conveying the revelation intact to succeeding generations.

Does the Bible itself give this answer? You can see that it does when you consider, first, the fact that leading figures in the Bible, such as Moses, Jeremiah, Luke, and Paul, are described as writing things down precisely for people who are unable to talk with them directly. Second, you find that Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament had a very high view of the divine authority of the Hebrew Scriptures which they believed God gave by inspiration (2 Timothy 3:16). The idea of the Bible was not a late afterthought in the history of salvation but was in the process of being formed almost from the first. It seems reasonable to conclude that God's plan of salvation included the Bible as a book which would convey the truth of the gospel down through the years.

How did the Bible take shape? A general acquaintance with the book goes a long way toward answering this question. In the case of the Old Testament, people must have told and retold the stories of God's interaction with Israel before they were collected into the books we now possess. They carefully preserved the law of God given through Moses and accepted it as binding on them. The inspired prophecies could not be allowed to be forgotten even when they were painful. Of course, the wisdom of the sages and the hymns of the people had to be preserved. The process of formation can thus be viewed both from the point of view of God's purpose and with an eye on the natural historical dynamics. In the case of the New Testament, it is clear that four writers undertook the task of presenting the life of Jesus, each of them with some special emphases and with a particular audience in view. The apostle Paul, as well as some others, had the practice of writing letters to groups of people to communicate with them when visiting was difficult. Writing was a way of instructing them in the things of God from a distance. One can see how the Bible must have been formed just by looking at it. Each of its parts was created and preserved because it met a need in the covenant community and qualified to be treasured for transmission to posterity.
How was the canon of Scripture decided on? The word *canon* comes from a Sumerian term meaning “reed,” and it came to designate the list of books which were normative and sacred. The simplest answer to this question is a practical one: the books which ended up on the canonical lists in the end were those which proved themselves in a variety of ways to be God's Word to His people as they used them over the years. The historical answer is a little less clear. We just do not know as much about the process of canonization as we would like. The best clues are in the Bible itself. The law of Moses was written down and became the core of the later Old Testament. This is the assumption of all the later documents. There is much less said about the composition and preservation of the other writings. Certainly the divine authority claimed by the great prophets of Israel attached to the books which preserved their preaching. It is possible that the Old Testament canon as we know it took shape under the influence of the scribe Ezra who rounded off the task long in process. This would explain the tenacity of the Jews ever since to preserve their Hebrew canon. As for the New Testament, the books involved are many fewer and were composed over a mere half century. The respect for the words and deeds of Jesus is obvious and would explain both the preparation and the respect accorded the four Gospels. Paul's apostolic authority guaranteed respect for his epistles from the beginning. Respect grew later when the original witnesses began to die off and the epistles circulated among the churches. The authority of a prophecy like the Revelation of John, if deemed authentic, would be automatic. An extraneous factor which speeded the process toward developing a canon was the work of second century reformer Marcion, who proposed dropping the Old Testament and much of the New Testament as well, forcing orthodox Christians to make up their minds on the question of the canonical list. The die was already cast in the Muratorian Canon of 170 A.D. where one finds the essential New Testament as we know it today.

Is there an interplay then of subjective and objective factors in the determination of the canon of Scripture? Yes, we need to view it in terms of God's providence guiding and directing His people in this matter. God sent His messengers and the Scriptures in their wake. God's Word to the people had to make its own impact upon human minds. There is the historical solidity of God's revelation in history, but there is also the need for God's sheep to hear the voice of their Shepherd. God has given us His written Word and allowed it quietly and unhurriedly to make its impact upon us. It did not require a big council when the decision would come down from the leaders of the churches. All that was needed was that God's people be satisfied in the matter of the historical authenticity and then of the practical efficacy of the books in question. The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same books as canonical is remarkable when we remember the agreement was not at all contrived.

The body of our canon is solid and well-supported, and proves itself over again in our use of the Bible. Therefore, we can live happily with a little uncertainty around the edges.
With the writer of Psalms 119:1, we should give thanks to God for His gift of the Scriptures, in which we can hear His voice and meet with Him. We know the Bible is God's Word, not because we are scholars, but because we are people of faith and experience its authority and truth. The formation of the Bible was in part a human process, directed, we believe, by God. We have reason to feel full confidence when we accept the sixty-six books as God's inspired Word to us. We treasure the Bible because it gives us firm anchorage in history and is the source from which we can continually draw inspiration for renewing our faith and finding the path to follow in serving the Lord.

Clark Pinnock