The Bible: The Holy Canon of Scripture

Introduction

The fact of the inspiration of the Bible as God’s special revelation to man naturally leads to the question (since many other religious books were written during both the Old and New Testament periods) what particular books are canonical, that is, what books are inspired and should be recognized as a part of God’s authoritative revelation? Are any inspired books missing? Are any books included that should not be in our Bible? Is our Old Testament Bible the same as the Lord’s and is our New Testament the same as the Bible of the church fathers? These are obviously vital questions for the people of God to determine.

Meaning of “Canon” or “Canonicity”

The word canon is used to describe those books recognized as inspired of God. The word comes from the Greek kanwn and most likely from the Hebrew qaneh and Akkadian, qanu. Literally, it means (a) a straight rod or bar; (b) a measuring rule as a ruler.
used by masons and carpenters; then (c) a rule or standard for testing straightness.

Historically, the word was first used by the church of those doctrines that were accepted as the rule of faith and practice. The term came to be applied to the decisions of the Councils as rules by which to live. All these employ the word in the metaphorical sense of a rule, norm, or standard.

In the course of time, the terms *canon* and *canonical* came to be applied to the catalogue or list of sacred books distinguished and honored as belonging to God’s inspired Word. “Greek Christians by the fourth century A.D. had given the word a quasi-technical religious meaning, applying it to the Bible, especially to the Jewish books.”

… It is important to note that religious councils at no time had any power to cause books to be inspired, rather they simply recognized that which God had inspired at the exact moment the books were written.

Jews and conservative Christians alike have recognized the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament as inspired. Evangelical Protestants have recognized the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as inspired. Roman Catholics have a total of eighty books because they recognize the Apocrypha as semicanonical.

**The Logical Necessity for a Canon of Scripture and Its Preservation**

That God would provide and preserve a Canon of Scripture without addition or deletion is not only necessary, but it is logically credible. If we believe that God exists as an almighty God, then revelation and inspiration are clearly possible. If we believe in such a God, it is also probable that He would, out of love and for His own purposes and designs, reveal Himself to men. Because of man’s obvious condition in sin and his obvious inability to meet his
spiritual needs (regardless of all his learning and technological advances), special revelation revealed in a God-breathed book is not only possible, logical, and probable, but a necessity.

The evidence shows that the Bible is unique and that God is its author. The evidence declares that “all Scripture is God breathed and profitable …” (2 Tim. 3:16) and that “no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:20-21). In view of this, the logical question is: “Would it not be unreasonable for God to fail to providentially care for these inspired documents to preserve them from destruction and so guide in their collection and arrangement that they would all be present with none missing and none added that were not inspired?”

Important Considerations

There are a number of important considerations that must be kept in mind when considering the issue of canonicity or how the books of the Bible came to be recognized and held to be a part of the Bible. Ryrie summarizes these issues as follows:

1. Self-authentication. It is essential to remember that the Bible is self-authenticating since its books were breathed out by God (2 Tim. 3:16). In other words, the books were canonical the moment they were written. It was not necessary to wait until various councils could examine the books to determine if they were acceptable or not. Their canonicity was inherent within them, since they came from God. People and councils only recognized and acknowledged what is true because of the intrinsic inspiration of the books as they were written. No Bible book became canonical by action of some church council.

2. Decisions of men. Nevertheless, men and councils did have to consider which books should be recognized as part of the canon, for there were some candidates that were not inspired. Some decisions and choices had to be made, and God guided groups of
people to make correct choices (not without guidelines) and to collect the various writings into the canons of the Old and New Testaments.

3. Debates over canonicity. In the process of deciding and collecting, it would not be unexpected that some disputes would arise about some of the books. And such was the case. However, these debates in no way weaken the authenticity of the truly canonical books, nor do they give status to those which were not inspired by God.

4. Completion of canon. Since A.D. 397 the Christian church has considered the canon of the Bible to be complete; if it is complete, then it must be closed. Therefore, we cannot expect any more books to be discovered or written that would open the canon again and add to its sixty-six books. Even if a letter of Paul were discovered, it would not be canonical. After all, Paul must have written many letters during his lifetime in addition to the ones that are in the New Testament; yet the church did not include them in the canon. Not everything an apostle wrote was inspired, for it was not the writer who was inspired but his writings, and not necessarily all of them.

The more recent books of the cults which are placed alongside the Bible are not inspired and have no claim to be part of the canon of Scripture. Certainly so-called prophetic utterances or visions that some claim to be from God today cannot be inspired and considered as part of God’s revelation or as having any kind of authority like that of the canonical books.63

Canonicity of the Old Testament

The Hebrew Bible of today is substantially the same as the original writings, with only physical changes like the addition of vowel pointings, reading aids in the margins, and a change to a more open form of the letters, etc. In Romans 3:2 we are told that the “oracles of God,” the Old Testament Scripture, had been entrusted to the Jews; they were to be the custodians of the Old Testament.
This precisely fits what we know about the Jews and the Old Testament. They have always been a people of one book who have guarded it with extreme care and precision. From the time of Ezra and even before, there were priests (Deut. 31:24-26) and later scribes called sopherim who were given the responsibility to copy and meticulously care for the sacred text so they could hand down the correct reading.

To ensure this accuracy, later scribes known as the Masoretes developed a number of strict measures to ensure that every fresh copy was an exact reproduction of the original. They established tedious procedures to protect the text against being changed. For instance, (a) when obvious errors were noted in the text, perhaps because a tired scribe nodded, the text was still not changed. Instead, a correction was placed in the margin called qere, “to be read,” and that which was written in the text was called, kethibh, “to be written.” (b) When a word was considered textually, grammatically, or exegetically questionable, dots were placed above that word. (c) Minute statistics were also kept as a further means of guarding against errors: in the Hebrew Bible at Leviticus 8:8, the margin has a reference that this verse is the middle verse of the Torah. According to the note at Lev. 10:16 the word darash is the middle word in the Torah, and at 11:42 we are assured that the waw in a Hebrew word there is the middle letter. At the end of each book are statistics as: the total number of verses in Deuteronomy is 955, the total in the entire Torah is 5,845; the total number of words is 97, 856, and the total number of letters is 400,945.64

In this we see something of the painstaking procedures the Jews went through to assure the accurate transmission of the text. Our English Bible is a translation of this Hebrew text which has been handed down to us. God made the Jews the custodians of the Old Testament record. Though their eyes may be blind to its truth (Isa. 6:10; John 12:40; Rom. 10:1-3; 11:7), they have guarded its transmission with great accuracy.
The original copies of the Old Testament were written on leather or papyrus from the time of Moses (c. 1450 B.C.) to the time of Malachi (400 B.C.). Until the sensational discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 we did not possess copies of the Old Testament earlier than A.D. 895. The reason for this is simply that the Jews had an almost superstitious veneration for the text which impelled them to bury copies that had become too old for use. Indeed, the Masoretes (traditionalists) who between A.D 600 and 950 added accents and vowel points and in general standardized the Hebrew text, devised complicated safeguards for the making of copies (as described above) … When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, they gave us a Hebrew text from the second to first century B.C. of all but one of the books (Esther) of the Old Testament. This was of the greatest importance, for it provided a much earlier check on the accuracy of the Masoretic text, which has now proved to be extremely accurate.

Other early checks on the Hebrew text include the Septuagint translation (middle of third century B.C.), the Aramaic Targums (paraphrases and quotes of the Old Testament), quotations in early Christian writers, and the Latin translation of Jerome (A.D. 400) which was made directly from the Hebrew text of his day. All of these give us the data for being assured of having an accurate text of the Old Testament.65

The Three-fold Division

The Masoretic text of the Hebrew Old Testament contains twenty-four books, beginning with Genesis and ending with 2 Chronicles. Though this arrangement of the Old Testament is in only twenty-four books, the subject matter is identical with the thirty-nine book division of our Protestant English Bible. The difference is in the order and division of the arrangement of the books. The reason for this is that the Protestant canon of the Old Testament has been influenced by the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX) made about 250-160 B.C.
The Septuagint divided the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah each into two, which makes eight instead of four. The Twelve Minor Prophets were divided into twelve, instead of being counted as one book as in the twenty-four book division. This adds fifteen making a total of the thirty-nine books as in the Protestant English Bible.

Since the year 1517, modern Hebrew Bibles divided the books into thirty-nine, but kept the three-fold division including the arrangement of the books (Genesis through 2 Chronicles) as in the ancient Hebrew Bible. In Matthew 23:35, Jesus said, “that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” The murder Jesus spoke of is recorded in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22. Abel’s death is recorded in Genesis and in the Hebrew Bible 2 Chronicles is the last book. In essence then, Christ was saying “from the first to the last murder in the Bible.” This was equivalent to saying from Genesis to Malachi and demonstrated what He considered as the canon of the Old Testament.

This twenty-four book division in its three-fold division which became the thirty-nine book division is as follows:

1) *The Law* or The Pentateuch (5 books)—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

2) *The Prophets* (originally 8 books, then 21)
   - The Former Prophets (originally 4 books, then 6)—Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1 & 2), Kings (1 & 2)
   - The Latter Prophets (originally 4 books, then 15)
     Major: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel (3 books)
     Minor: The 12 (originally 1 book, then 12)

3) *The Writings* (originally 11 books, then 13)
   - Poetical (3 books)—Psalms, Proverbs, Job
The Rolls (5 books) — Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther

Historical (originally 3 books, then 5) — Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (2), Chronicles (1 & 2)

... By the time of the New Testament this three-fold division was recognized (Luke 24:44). Other designations such as “The Scripture” (John 10:35) and “The Sacred Writings” (2 Tim. 3:15) suggest a generally accepted Old Testament canon. This three-fold division was also attested to by Josephus (A.D. 37-95), Bishop Melito of Sardis (ca. A.D. 170), Tertullian (A.D. 160-250), and others (Gleason L. Archer, Jr., A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Moody, Chicago, 1964, pp. 62-65). The Council of Jamnia in A.D. 90 is generally considered the occasion whereby the Old Testament canon was publicly recognized (while debating the canonicity of several books).

There is evidence of the manner in which the Old Testament books were recognized as canonical. Laird Harris (R. Laird Harris, Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1969, pp. 62-65), traces the continuity of recognition: Moses was recognized as writing under the authority of God (Ex. 17:14; 34:27; cf. Josh. 8:31; 23:6). The criterion for acknowledging the Pentateuch was whether it was from God’s servant, Moses. Following Moses, God raised up the institution of prophecy to continue revealing Himself to His people (cf. Deut. 18:15-19; Jer. 26:8-15). The prophets to whom God spoke also recorded their revelation (cf. Josh. 24:26; 1 Sam. 10:25; Isa. 8:1; Ezek. 43:11). Harris concludes, “The law was accorded the respect of the author, and he was known as God’s messenger. Similarly, succeeding prophets were received upon due authentication, and their written works were received with the same respect, being received therefore as the Word of God. As far as the witness contained in the books themselves is concerned, this reception was immediate.” (Ibid., p. 167).
Specific tests to consider canonicity may be recognized.

(1) Did the book indicate God was speaking through the writer and that it was considered authoritative? Compare the following references: (a) God was speaking through the human author—Ex. 20:1; Josh. 1:1; Isa. 2:1; (b) that the books were authoritative—Joshua 1:7-8; 23:6; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 14:6; 21:8; 23:25; Ezra 6:18; Nehemiah 13:1; Daniel 9:11; Malachi 4:4. Note also Joshua 6:26 compared with 1 Kings 16:34; Joshua 24:29-33 compared with Judges 2:8-9; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 compared with Ezra 1:1-4; Daniel 9:2 compared with Jeremiah 25:11-12.

(2) Was the human author recognized as a spokesman of God, that is, was he a prophet or did he have the prophetic gift? Compare Deuteronomy 18:18; 31:24-26; 1 Samuel 10:25; Nehemiah 8:3.

(3) Was the book historically accurate? Did it reflect a record of actual facts?

**Historical Evidence Supporting the Canonicity of the Old Testament**

There are a number of important historical evidences drawn from the ancient writings that give support to the Old Testament canon as we have it in our Protestant Bible.

1. *Prologue to Ecclesiasticus*. This noncanonical book refers to a threefold division of books (namely, the Law, the Prophets, and hymns and precepts for human conduct) which was known by the writer’s grandfather (which would be around 200 B.C.).

2. *Philo*. Philo (around A D. 40) referred to the same threefold division.
3. *Josephus*. Josephus (A. D. 37-100) said that the Jews held as sacred only twenty-two books (which include exactly the same as our present thirty-nine books of the Old Testament).

4. *Jamnia*. Jamnia (A. D. 90), was a teaching house of rabbis who discussed canonicity. Some questioned whether it was right to accept (as was being done) Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. These discussions concerned an existing canon.

5. *The church fathers*. The church fathers accepted the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. The only exception was Augustine (A. D. 400) who included the books of the Apocrypha (those “extra” books that some Bibles include between the books of the Old and New Testaments). However, he did acknowledge that they were not fully authoritative. The books of the Apocrypha were not officially recognized as part of the canon until the Council of Trent (A.D. 1546) and then only by the Roman Catholic church.67

*New Testament Evidence for the Canonicity of the Old Testament*

(1) *Old Testament quotations in the New*. There are some 250 quotes from Old Testament books in the New Testament. None are from the Apocrypha. All Old Testament books are quoted except Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon.

(2) *Old Testament quotations by Jesus Christ*. In **Matthew 5:17-18**, the Lord declared that the Law and the Prophets, a reference that includes all of the Old Testament, then summarized as “the Law” in verse 18, would be fulfilled. This declared it was therefore God’s authoritative Word. Christ’s statement in **Matthew 23:35** about the blood (murder) of Abel to the blood of Zechariah clearly defined what Jesus viewed as the Old Testament canon. It consisted of the entire Old Testament as we know it in our Protestant English Bible. This is particularly significant in view of the fact there other murders of God’s messengers recorded in the Apocrypha, but the Lord excludes them suggesting He did not
consider the books of the Apocrypha to belong in the Canon as with the books from Genesis to 2 Chronicles.

The above evidence shows the books of the Old Testament, as we have them in our Protestant Bible, were God breathed and therefore authoritative and profitable the very moment they were written. “There was human recognition of the writings; normally this was immediate as the people recognized the writers as spokesmen from God. Finally, there was a collection of the books into a canon.”68

Canonicity of the New Testament

Factors Leading to the Recognition of the New Testament Canon

What were the factors that led to the recognition of a New Testament canon as we have it today? For almost twenty years after the ascension of Christ none of the books of the New Testament were even written and about sixty-five years elapsed before the last New Testament book was written. James was undoubtedly the first, being written between 45-50 A.D., and Revelation was most surely the last, being written about 90 A.D. But several things began to happen that promoted the formation of the New Testament canon. Enns summarizes these:

(1) Spurious writings as well as attacks on genuine writings were a factor. Marcion, for example, rejected the Old Testament and New Testament writings apart from the Pauline letters (he altered Luke’s gospel to suit his doctrine). (2) The content of the New Testament writings testified to their authenticity and they naturally were collected, being recognized as canonical. (3) Apostolic writings were used in public worship, hence, it was necessary to determine which of those writings were canonical. (4) Ultimately, the edict by Emperor Diocletian in A.D. 303, demanding that all sacred books be burned, resulted in the New Testament collection.69
(1) In the Apostolic Era. Since the books were inspired when they were written, they were already canonical and possessed authority as being a part of God’s Word. The responsibility of the church was simply to attest to the fact of their inspiration. This process began immediately with the writers recognizing that their own writings were the Word of God (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 4:15). But they also recognized that other writings of the New Testament were Scripture and on a par with the Old Testament. In 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul quoted Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7 and referred to both passages as Scripture. Peter likewise attested to Paul’s writings as Scripture in 2 Peter 3:15-16. Furthermore, the New Testament epistles were being read and circulated among the churches as authoritative revelation from God (cf. Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27).

(2) In the Post-Apostolic Era.

Clement of Rome (c. A.D. 95) mentioned at least eight New Testament books in a letter; Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 115) also acknowledged about seven books; Polycarp, a disciple of John, (c. A.D. 108), acknowledged fifteen letters. That is not to say these men did not recognize more letters as canonical, but these are ones they mentioned in their correspondence. Later Irenaeus wrote (c. A.D. 185), acknowledging twenty-one books. Hippolytus (A.D. 170-235) recognized twenty-two books. The problematic books at this time were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John.

Even more important was the witness of the Muratorian Canon (A.D. 170), which was a compilation of books recognized as canonical at that early date by the church. The Muratorian Canon included all the New Testament books except Hebrews, James, and one epistle of John.

In the fourth century there was also prominent recognition of a New Testament canon. When Athanasius wrote in A.D. 367 he
cited the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as being the only true books. In A.D. 363 the Council of Laodicea stated that only the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were to be read in the churches. The Council of Hippo (A.D. 393) recognized the twenty-seven books, and the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) affirmed that only those canonical books were to be read in the churches.₇⁰

Ryrie has an important note in connection with Martin Luther’s opinion of the epistle of James.

Sometimes it is claimed that Martin Luther rejected the Book of James as being canonical. This is not so. Here’s what he wrote in his preface to the New Testament in which he ascribes to the several books of the New Testament different degrees of doctrinal value. “St. John’s Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul’s Epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and St. Peter’s Epistle—these are the books which show to thee Christ, and teach everything that is necessary and blessed for thee to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book of doctrine. Therefore, St. James’ Epistle is a perfect straw-epistle compared with them, for it has in it nothing of an evangelic kind.” Thus Luther was comparing (in his opinion) doctrinal value, not canonical validity.₇¹

**The Tests For Canonicity**

The question naturally arises, what process and by what means did the early church recognize which books were canonical and which books were not? The following summarizes the tests used to discern which books were canonical.

**(1) Authentication on the Divine side—Inspiration.** Did the book give internal evidence of inspiration, of being God breathed? Was it of proper spiritual character? Did it edify the church? Was it doctrinally accurate? “The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha were rejected as a result of not meeting this test. The book should bear
evidence of high moral and spiritual values that would reflect a work of the Holy Spirit.”

(2) Authentication on the human side. Three issues were important here: (a) Was the author an apostle or did he have the endorsement of an apostle? Mark wrote the gospel of Mark, but he did so under Peter’s endorsement. Luke, as a close associate of the Apostle Paul, wrote under the endorsement of his authority. (b) Universal acceptance was another key factor. On the whole, was the book accepted by the church at large? The recognition given a particular book by the church was important. By this standard, a number of books were rejected. There were some books that enjoyed an acceptance by a few, but were later dropped for a lack of universal acceptance. Then there were a few books that some questioned because of doubts about the author, not the content, but were later accepted because the majority accepted them.

The Reliability of the New Testament

Just how reliable are the New Testament documents?

There are now more than 5,300 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Add over 10,000 Latin Vulgate and at least 9,300 other early versions (MSS) and we have more than 24,000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament. This means that no other document of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers and attestation. In comparison, the Iliad by Homer is second with only 643 manuscripts that still survive. The first complete preserved text of Homer dates from the 13th century.

This contrast is startling and tremendously significant.

Perhaps we can appreciate how wealthy the New Testament is in manuscript attestation if we compare the textual material for other ancient historical works. For Caesar’s Gallic War (composed between 58 and 50 B.C) there are several extant MSS, but only nine or ten are good, and the oldest is some 900 years later than
Caesar’s day. Of the 142 books of the Roman history of Livy (59 B.C-A.D 17), only 35 survive; these are known to us from not more than twenty MSS of any consequence, only one of which, and that containing fragments of Books III-VI, is as old as the fourth century. Of the fourteen books of Histories of Tacitus (c. A.D. 100) only four and a half survive; of the sixteen books of his Annals, ten survive in full and two in part. The text of these extant portions of his two great historical works depends entirely on two MSS, one of the ninth century and one of the eleventh…. The History of Thucydides (c. 460-400 B.C.) is known to us from eight MSS, the earliest belonging to about the beginning of the Christian era. The same is true of the History of Herodotus (c. 480-425 B.C.). Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest MSS of their works which are of any use are over 1,300 years later than the originals.75

The fact of the many documents plus the fact that many of the New Testament documents are very early (hundreds of parchment copies from the 4th and 5th centuries with some seventy-five papyri fragments dating from A.D. 135 to the 8th century) assures us we have a very accurate and reliable text in the New Testament.


61 Enns, p. 170.


63 Ryrie, electronic media. For other articles on canonicity, see our web page at www.bible.org under “Theology,” and then under “Bibliology--The Doctrine of the Written Word.”


66 Enns, p. 170-171.


68 Enns, p. 171.

69 Enns. P. 171.

70 Enns, p. 172.

71 Ryrie, electronic media.

72 Enns, p. 172-173.

73 For more reading on canonicity, see the BSF web page under the Theology/Bibliology section at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).


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