

One Bible, Many Books

A Brief Meditation on the Christian Canon



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Introduction

Followers of Jesus have always been a people of the Book. The written Word of God has shaped the life, teaching and identity of Christian people from the time of Jesus onward. This was simply an extension of the long history of the people of God walking under the direction of the law, the prophets, and the writings of the Jewish Scriptures. Yet a question can arise at many points in a Christian's journey. Why do we use these books as the authoritative Word of God and not other ancient writings which were prevalent in days past? The question may come from intellectual curiosity about the history of the Bible. It may come about as one learns the deep and rich history of the Christian church. Or as it came most forcefully in my own life, it may come through the interaction with a serious Roman Catholic believer who has different books in his Bible. This brings us directly to the question of the Christian canon of Scripture—the accepted 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. This will only be a short treatment of the history of the Bible and which books have and have not been considered authoritative and inspired by God. We will do this by first looking at a definition for the term canon. We will then look briefly at the history of both the Old Testament and New Testament canon. Next we will look at a few controversies surrounding certain Old and New Testament books before closing with a comment on the relationship of the church to the canon of Scripture.



The Word Canon

The Word canon simply means “measuring stick or rule.” The term has been used by the church to describe what counts as a measure or standard for the faith. Simply stated we use the term canon to describe the accepted list of books which have been included in our Bibles. The canon of the Bible actually can be considered in two parts, as both the Old and New Testament canons were separately agreed upon in the history of the church. We’ll look briefly at the history of each in turn.

A Brief History of Our Canon

The Old Testament Canon

The Protestant Old Testament consists of 39 books of various types of literature chronicling the creation of the world, human beings’ fall into sin, and God’s pursuit of a people for Himself—the people who came to be known as Israel. These books consist of various genres ranging from historical narrative, prophetic writing, poetry, proverb and other wisdom literature and even apocalyptic portions. The Jewish people had divided the Hebrew Bible into *The Law*, *The Prophets*, and *The Writings* which contained the books we recognize as the Old Testament. Although the chronology and precise dating is not clear, we do know this was accepted in the Jewish community much before the time of Christ.¹ Additionally, there was a Greek translation of the Old Testament in use by people through

out the Roman Empire. This translation, known as the Septuagint (or LXX)² was used by the early church and contained additional writings to the Hebrew canon which have come to be known as the *apocrypha*.³ The additional writings were Greek works and were never acknowledged as part of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Jewish community, after the fall of the temple in 70 AD, confirmed this tradition, never accepting the apocrypha, the additional Greek works, as canonical. Although there would be controversy in the future about these additional books, the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible stood solidly confirmed by both Jewish and Christian communities as early as the 1st century AD.

The New Testament

As the early Christian movement progressed forward in gospel mission, many writings began to circulate in the newly established churches. One of the chief concerns of the apostles and the leaders of the church was to keep false teaching about Jesus and the gospel from leading the people astray. From the early days of the church the apostles had circulated gospels containing accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. As time went on other sects began to circulate false gospels which incorrectly represented and speculated on Christ and His teaching. Additionally, pseudoanonymous epistles also began to get around causing questions and confusion in the churches. We know about these works because they are mentioned by name in the writings of church fathers such as Eusebius

of Caesarea and Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon. The leadership of the church, already using the inspired writings of the New Testament, found it necessary to clearly identify these false writings by recognizing the true inspired works. The motivation was not to invent “orthodoxy” by giving status to certain books and discarding others; the motivation was pastoral—to clearly identify the false teaching and rule them out for use by the churches. The process was deliberate and it proceeded over time. These false gospels and epistles were not in any way “lost,” they were discarded intentionally. More will be said on the process of identifying these books, but let me just say what the process was not. It was not a bunch of guys sitting in a back room smoking stogies and playing Go Fish with ancient epistles and gospels. “I like this one for my agenda; I don’t like that one” was not the process which was engaged. No, this was a concerted effort, led by the Spirit of God, whereby the books which were inspired by God were identified and the list clarified for the church. One thing is certain; the church has been univocal on the canon of the New Testament with Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant Christians in perfect agreement on the 27 books of the New Testament. Though many partial lists have survived from the ancient world, we find the completed list in its current form in an ancient Easter letter from Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, which is dated to 367 AD. There has been no change in the New Testament canon from this time forward.

Controversies and Questions

Though the canon has been established for some time, there have been controversies surrounding it in church history which have been revisited over the course of time.

We'll look quickly at the one main issue surrounding the canon of the Old Testament and then make short comment about some issues with the New Testament.

The Apocrypha and the Canon of the Old Testament

Around 382 AD, the early church scholar Jerome (345 – 420) was asked to produce a new Latin translation of the Bible. When he began his work on the Old Testament, he realized that such a translation required a Hebrew original and not the Greek Septuagint and its apocrypha. He clearly identified the

Hebrew Old Testament to alone be Scripture, setting aside the apocryphal writings as useful “for the edification of the people, not to give authority to doctrines of the Church.”⁴ Jerome, however, was not the lone voice on these matters in the 4th



century as another looming figure was also to weigh in. This person is well known to us today as the great Latin theologian St. Augustine. Augustine's view was that since the inspired authors of the New Testament actually quote directly from the Septuagint, that it too must have been inspired by God.⁵ Augustine's position was that the Septuagint and the additional books along with it were inspired.⁶ However, he overlooked one important matter; the New Testament writers never quoted



any of the apocryphal books from the LXX, they only quoted the canonical Old Testament. Unfortunately, Augustine prevailed upon Jerome to translate the extra books along with the Latin translation, known as the Vulgate. Ironically, Augustine's apocrypha differed from the list of apocryphal books found in the LXX and included the following writings: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, additions to Esther and Daniel, Baruch,

the Letter of Jeremiah, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. This canon of the Old Testament was confirmed by the church in regional councils at Hippo (393 AD) and Carthage



(397 AD and 419 AD) and his version of the apocryphal books are found in the Roman Catholic Bible today.

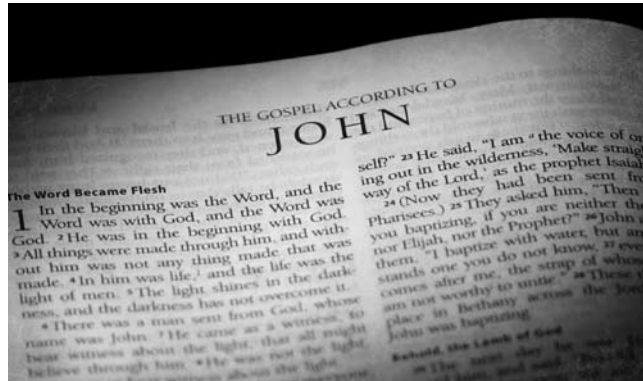
During the Protestant Reformation the reformers revisited this issue and sided with the opinion of the early church and that of Jerome. The reformers also reasoned that the Bible of Jesus and the apostles was comprised of the accepted canonical books of the Hebrew Old Testament which did not include the apocrypha. The Jewish community still does not accept these other books to this day. This, along with the chronologically and factual problems in many of these works, caused them to reject these works as Scripture. Much like Jerome, Martin Luther, in his German translation of the Bible, included the apocrypha as useful for reading but not equal with inspired Holy Scripture. At the council of Trent in 1546, the Catholic Church responded by stating the following:

*If anyone does not accept all these books in their entirety, with all their parts, as they are being read in the Catholic Church and are contained in the ancient Latin Vulgate edition, as sacred and canonical and knowingly and deliberately rejects the above mentioned traditions, **let him be anathema.***

With such condemnation stated clearly, Catholics and Protestants remain divided on this issue of the apocrypha to this day.

Before closing this section on controversy it is important to mention one more issue related to the New Testament. There were in existence many other gospels which went under names like: Peter, Thomas, and Judas written after the New Testament period. These along with many other false epistles were rejected by the early church in order to weed out false teaching. With the univocal voice of all Christians on the 27 New Testament books there is no debate on which books actually belong in the canon. There can simply be no lost books from the Bible. However, in recent times some scholars have shown much interest in “other books” from the first four centuries of Christianity.⁷ Some of these gospels have been discovered recently by archaeology⁸ and are very interesting studies in antiquity but they are not and were not ever part of the canon.

These so called “lost gospels” have been the subject of much speculation and the object of the imagination of many popular fictional works with perhaps the most popular being Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* novel. As these discussions are beyond the scope of this work, those interested can investigate the other sources referenced in the footnotes.⁹





The Recognition of Canon

Did the Church Give the World the Bible or Did She Recognize God's Word?

There is a great difference of opinion between the Protestant view of the canon and that of the Roman Catholic view. This is not relegated to the division about the apocryphal writings which still continue. There is an even more important discussion to be had. Catholics make the claim that the church gave us the Bible in that she collected and ruled the writings to be authoritative Scripture. Catholics claim that the church gave us the canon rather than merely recognizing what God had already done. The following table, modified slightly from that of Norman Geisler,¹⁰ summarizes the different views well.

The Authority Relationship Between Church and Canon

Catholic View	Protestant View
The church is determiner of the canon.	The church is discoverer of the canon.
The church is mother of the canon.	The church is child of the canon.
The church is magistrate of the canon.	The church is minister of the canon.
The church is regulator of the canon.	The church is recognizer of the canon.
The church is judge of the canon.	The church is witness of the canon.
The church is master of the canon.	The church is servant of the canon.

Both Protestants and Catholics agree on one very important fact which I believe solves the disagreement. Both believe that the canon is *inspired by God*. If this is so, then the church did not confer authority upon the books, the books themselves already possessed authority on the basis of *their author*. As the Word of God, the Scriptures carry his authority and thereby stand above the church, not judged by the church. Again, Geisler and Nix summarize this well:

So canonicity is determined by God, not by the people of God. The simple answer to the question "Why are there only these books in the Bible?" is that God inspired only these and no more. If God had given more books through more prophets, then there would be a larger canon. But, because propheticity determines canonicity, only the prophetic books can be canonical.¹¹

One final note on the recognition of Canon is appropriate. Many times a summary of the principles used to discuss the canonical status of a book are given. Though the church did not have a simple list before to check off books, they were guided by certain principles which shed light on the process. The following is a helpful summary of these principles:

- Was the book written by or contain the voice of a prophet or apostle of God? The basic question was whether a book was prophetic or apostolic. Propheticity determined canonicity.
- Was the writer confirmed by acts of God? A miracle is an act of God to confirm the Word of God given through a prophet of God to the people of God.
- Does the message tell the truth about God? That is, does the book tell the truth about God and His world as known from previous revelations?
- Did it come with the power of God? Another test for canonicity is a book's power to edify and equip believers.
- Was it accepted by the people of God? A prophet of God was confirmed by an act of God (miracle) and was recognized as a spokesman by the people who received the message. Thus, the seal of canonicity depended on whether the book was accepted by the people.¹²

The leaders of the early church were in the position to know the truth about the writings which circulated purporting to be revelation from God. They were in the position to recognize false teaching from true. In their calling in pastoral leadership, these men faithfully cast aside heretical books and maintained that which was inspired by God for His church.

Conclusion

I pray this sheds some light on some of the issues surrounding the canon of Scripture. God in His providence has given us a standard for our faith—the 66 books of the Bible. The Old Testament, the Bible of Jesus and the apostles, and the New Testament, the four gospels and the teaching of the apostles, have been preserved for us and recognized by the churches throughout time. In the Bible we receive revelation of God and His will for the world, as such this book is the greatest treasure given to the church. It contains the content of the faith once for all entrusted to the saints. This Word is to be preached, studied, believed, meditated on, and lived out in our families and churches today.

For additional reading see:

- Brief Article: Greg Koukl, *No Lost Books of the Bible* <http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5473>
- Article: Don Closson, *The Christian Canon* - <http://www.probe.org/content/view/961/77/>
- Book: Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Rev. and expanded. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996, c1986)
- Book: F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988)

Endnotes

- ¹ See Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Rev. and expanded. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996, c1986), 255.
- ² The term Septuagint means “translation of the seventy” referring to a story in the ancient world relating to the origins of the translation. Although not regarded as authentic there is a story from history that 70 translators worked separately on the translation and miraculously arrived at the same manuscript without collaboration.
- ³ Books in the LXX: 1 Esdras, Judith Tobit, *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Wisdom of Ben Sirach*, *Baruch*, *Letter of Jeremiah*, *Prayer of Manasseh*, additions to the book of *Daniel*, (*Bel and the Dragon*, *The Song of the Three Children*), and *1 and 2 Maccabees* (a history of Jewish revolts in the 2nd century BC).
- ⁴ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. VI*, Jerome: Letters and Select Works. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 492.
- ⁵ Ibid, St. Augustine’s *City of God and Christian Doctrine*. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 387.
- ⁶ Ibid – See Chapter 43 - *Of the Authority of the Septuagint Translation, Which, Saving the Honor of the Hebrew Original, is to Be Preferred to All Translations*.
- ⁷ Two examples would be Elaine Pagels – *Beyond Belief – The Lost Gospel of Thomas* and Bart Ehrman’s *Lost Scriptures*.

- ⁸ Many of these were found as part of the Nag Hammadi Library discovered in Egypt 1945 – for more on this find see <http://www.nag-hammadi.com/>.
- ⁹ For a treatment of these books See Darryl Bock's recent *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth Behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006). On the *Da Vinci Code* see the list of resources available at: http://www.powerofchange.org/blog/2006/04/the_da_vinci_code_1.html.
- ¹⁰ Norman L. Geisler, Baker *Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker reference library (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 80.
- ¹¹ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 219.
- ¹² A shortened version adapted from of Geisler's entry *Bible, Canonicity of* in The *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker reference library (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999).

Notes

Notes



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