

Introduction: We hold in our possession a most valuable communication. This book contains the inspired writings of 40 authors. It has been passed down for 56 generations. The first volume was written almost 3,700 years ago. This book is the most widely translated, frequently published, intensely persecuted book in the history of the World. I am speaking of course about the living, eternal word of God. The Bible has been and continues to be the world's best selling book, but not everybody knows just how this amazing book came to us today.

The enduring popularity of the Bible throughout the generations amazes us, and yet we should not wonder that people read the Bible as they read no other book. 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" and "Canonicity"

When this word is used to apply to literature it has come to mean those writings, which conform to the rule or standards of divine inspiration and authority. Eventually, the terms *canon* and *canonical* came to be related to the catalogue or list of sacred books notable 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."<sup>1</sup>

- *It is important to keep in mind that religious councils at no time had the power to cause any books to be inspired. These councils simply recognized those books which had been inspired at the time of their authorship.*

In the Hebrew Scriptures there are 39 books that were considered by the Jewish community to be canonical. These are the same 39 books that were accepted by the apostolic church as well as by the Protestant churches since the days of the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church adds to these books fourteen books (or in some cases just portions of books) which together form the *Apocrypha*. The Roman Church considers these books to be on equal authority with the rest of Scripture.

### Summary:

- 1) Practicing Jews and conservative Christians alike have acknowledged the 39 books of the Old Testament as being inspired.
- 2) Evangelical Protestants have recognized the 27 books of the New Testament as being inspired.

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1951, p. 47.

- 3) Roman Catholics have a total of 80 books since they since they include the Apocrypha as being semicanonical.

Interrogative: What makes a book of Scripture canonical?

## The Basic Issue Concerning the Canon

### A. How did the 66 books of our Bible come to be singled out from the mass of early Christian writings?

Explanation: There is a mass of early Christian writings. Why weren't they included in the canon? There are even some works written between A.D. 80 and A.D. 180 that were composed by "apostolic fathers." Some of the most notable examples of these works are:

#### 1. Letter of Clement

This work was composed in A.D. 95 by Clement of Rome and was written to the Corinthians church. Clement was a leading elder in the church of Rome which makes his work a very important work for the early church. The letter was meant to help end a dispute between the elders and the laity in the Corinthian church.

#### 2. Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius of Antioch was an important early church leader who composed 7 letters in A.D. 115. He would eventually be martyred for his faith by being thrown into a den of lions. While his works are important Ignatius, himself, made the distinction between his works and the works of the apostles.

*"I do not enjoin you as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles, I am a convict; they were free, but I am a slave to this very hour"* (Ignatius, "Letter to the Romans," 4.3)

#### 3. Quadratus

Quadratus was one of the earliest defenders and apologists of Christianity. In A.D. 125 he wrote to the Emperor Hadrian. Most of the work has been lost except for one brief statement found in the writing of the church historian Eusebius.

*"The deeds of our Saviour were always before you, for they were true miracles; those who were healed, those who were raised from the dead, who were seen, not only when healed and when raised, but were always present. They remained living a long time, not only whilst our Lord was on earth, but likewise when he left the earth. So that some of them have also lived to our own times."*

In another account Quadratus writes of the miracles of Jesus and testifies that the Apostle Paul does

#### 4. The Epistle of Barnabas

This was written to show that Jesus is a fulfillment of the OT law and was written between A.D. 130 and 138. This is not the Barnabas of the NT.

"Though these books were written at an early date, they have never been seriously considered as Holy Scripture. They do not claim biblical authority, some actually disclaim it. In addition, none of them were written by apostles or members of the apostolic company. But they are helpful in shedding light on the New Testament."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.blueletterbible.org/faq/canon.cfm>

**B. Did God really guide humans to accomplish a perfect canon in a similar way he inspired the writings in the first place?**

Explanation: The truth is that throughout history God has chosen to use the church as a part of the canon of Scripture should recognize men and councils to consider which books. In these councils there were those books that were considered as candidates but were ultimately not considered to be inspired. Important decisions have had to be made and God guided these groups to make the correct decisions. These groups followed important guidelines that helped them collect the various writings into the canons of the Old and New Testaments.

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.

## The Logical Necessity of a Canon

Not only is the idea of a “canon” reasonable, it is an absolute logical necessity. Without a fixed number of books a divine standard, we would be left to our own imaginations or reason to determine which books contain God’s truth and which do not. In that case, everyone would be making their own personal decisions and we would be left in total chaos.

The idea that God would preserve a Canon of Scriptures without addition of other non-canonical books or the deletion of truly canonical books is not only necessary, but is logically credible. If we believe that God is an almighty God, then revelation and its subsidiary of inspiration are clearly possible. Because of man’s obvious condition in sin and his inability to meet his own spiritual needs special revelation from a complete God-breathed book is not only possible and probable, but a necessity.

With respect to Scripture there are a number of important things to keep in mind.

**1) God has revealed himself to humanity through His Word**

Explanation: From the first page of the Bible until the last, we have the record of God revealing Himself to humanity. This revelation was recorded in a number of sacred books. 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)
- “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).

**2) God is able to preserve His Word**

Illustration: It has been estimated there are a quintillion stars in the universe. The Bible says God calls them by their names. If God is able to do this, He certainly is able to preserve intact His Word for the benefit of humankind.

Explanation: I am the LORD, the God of all humankind. Is anything too hard for me? (Jeremiah 32:27).

### 3) God desires to preserve His Word

#### Biblical Data:

- “The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever” (Psalm 12:6-7).
- “Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away” (Mark 13:31)
- “The counsel of the Lord standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.” (Psalm 33:11)
- “For ever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven.” (Psalm 119:89)
- “Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever.” (Psalm 119:160)
- “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.” (Isaiah 40:8)
- “For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” (Matthew 5:18)
- “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.” (Matthew 24:25)
- “But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.” (1 Peter 1:25)

### 4) Therefore, it would be unreasonable to think God wouldn't preserve the revelation of Himself through His Word if he had the ability and desire to do so.

Conclusion: The idea of a canon of Scripture is an absolutely logical necessity. The emphasis on the Bible is that God has reveals Himself to humanity. We know from Scripture that He is eternal, unchanging, and the essence of truth. Since this revelation has been committed to writing, it is only reasonable o assume that God would preserve these writings for the benefit of humanity.

## The Canonicity of the Old Testament

Compared to the NT the OT has far less controversy about the canon. In fact, the Hebrew Bible of today is substantially similar to the original writings. The only changes between the ancient writings and today's Hebrew Bible are the vowel points, notes in the margins, and a change to a more open form of letters. While there was definitely some debate by A.D. 250 there was nearly universal agreement on the canon of Hebrew Scripture.

### *Contributions of the Masoretes*

#### 1) The Masoretes translation process

These scribes developed a number of strict measures to ensure that every fresh copy was an exact reproduction of the original. To ensure that this happened the Masoretes developed a tedious process to protect the text against any change.

- a. When obvious errors were noted in the text, perhaps because of a tired scribe, the error was noted in the margin called *gere* “to be read” and that was written in the text was called *kethibh*, “to be written.” The text was not to be changed.
- b. When a words was considered textually, grammatically, or exegetically questionable, dots were placed above the word but the word was not to be changed.
- c. Minute statistics were kept to ensure that there were no errors. At the end of each book are statistics such as the total number of verses (5,845 in the Torah),

the total number of words (97,856 in the Torah) and the total number of letters (400,945 in the Torah).

Conclusion: The Masoretes clearly took some painstaking steps to ensure that there was an accurate transmission of the text. The English Bible we carry today is a result of this process. God made the Jews the custodians of the OT record. Though their eyes were blind to its truth, they guarded its transmission with great accuracy.

## 2) The Masoretic Text

Explanation: The result of the translation process of the Masoretes is the Masoretic text. This text contains 22 books, beginning with Genesis and ending with 2 Chronicles. Though the arrangement of the OT is only 22 books, the subject matter is identical to the 39 books in the Protestant Bible today. 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 OT has been influenced by the Greek translation of the OT (The Septuigint, LXX) made about 250-160 BC.

- *The LXX divided the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah each into 2, which makes 8 instead of 4. The 12 minor prophets were divided into 12, instead of being counted as one book as in the 24 book division. This adds 15 books making the total of the 39 books as in the Protestant 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.

The 3-fold division is as follows:

- The Law* or the Pentateuch (5 books) –  
Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Deuteronomy
- The Prophets* (Originally 8 books, then 21) –  
The Former Prophets (originally 4 books, then 6) – Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings)  
Latter Prophets (Originally 4 books, then 15) – Major: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekial (3 books), Minor: The 12 (originally 1 book, then 12)
- 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, Chronicles

### **Tests of Canonicity**

- 1) Did the book indicate God was speaking through the writer and that it was considered authoritative?
- 2) Was the human author recognized as a spokesman of God, that is, was he a prophet or did he have the prophetic gift?
- 3) Was the book historically accurate? Did it reflect a record of actual facts?

### **Historical evidence supporting the OT canon**

How early was this 22 book canon of the Bible used? This question also answers how early were the books we hold to as canonical in the OT considered to be the very Words of God.

- 1) *Prologue to Ecclesiasticus* (190 BC)

Explanation: This work has the earliest reference to the three main division of the Hebrew Scripture. It was composed in Hebrew in 190BC by Jesus ben Sirach.

In the prologue, which was penned by the grandson of Jesus ben Sirach in 130BC, we read:

*“Whereas many and great things have been delivered to us by the Law and the Prophets and by others that have followed their steps – my grandfather, Jesus, when he had much given himself to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and other books of our fathers, and had gotten therein good judgment, was drawn himself to write something pertaining to learning and wisdom.”*

2) *Josephus of Jerusalem (AD 37-95 AD)*

Explanation: The ancient historian Josephus writes down these thoughts:

*“We have not tens of thousands of books, discordant and conflicting, but only twenty-two containing the record of all time, which have been justly believed to be divine.”*

3) *The New Testament Writers*

Explanation: Luke 24:14 refers to the OT as *“the law of Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms.* 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.

4) *The Church Fathers*

Explanation: 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 (we will discuss the Apocrypha later).

## Canonicity of the New Testament

### *Factors prompting the formal canon recognition and lists*

- 1) False teaching regarding the Scripture
  - Marcion: 2<sup>nd</sup> c. Gnostic – accepted only parts of Paul and Luke. Believed that the OT god was demiurge (just God) and the NT god is a good God who redeems man. (He altered Luke’s gospel to suit his doctrine)
  - Montanus: 2<sup>nd</sup> c. Charismatic - It was a prophetic movement that called for a reliance on the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit and a more conservative personal ethic.
- 2) Persecution for the sake of Scripture
  - The edict by Emperor Diocletian in A.D. 303, demanding that all sacred books be burned, resulted in the New Testament collection.
- 3) Translation of the Scripture for Missions
  - As the NT into Syriac, Old Latin, etc. in the 2<sup>nd</sup> C., the church needed a definitive list of accepted works worthy of translation and transmission
- 4) Inherent authoritative quality of the NT books
  - The church did not create the canon – the canon created the church

### *The Formation of the Canon*

1) In the Apostolic Era

Explanation: The early church did, by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> c., possess the inspired documents of the NT, which by virtue of that inspiration were fully authoritative the moment they were written. The church need only to attest to this great truth.

- a. The Writers recognized their own works were the Word of God
  - *Colossian 4:16* "And after you have read this letter, have it read to the church of Laodicea. In turn, read the letter from Laodicea as well."
  - *1 Thess. 4:15* "For we tell you this by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep."
- b. The NT writers referred to other NT books as Scripture
  - *2 Peter 3:15-17* "Paul . . . As also in all his epistles speaking to them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures . . ." - Peter calls the writings of Paul Scripture
  - *1 Timothy 5:18* "For the Scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth the corn. And, the labourer is worthy of his reward - Paul quotes from Luke 10:7 and calls it Scripture
- c. NT epistles were read and circulated throughout the church

## 2) In the Post-Apostolic Era

Explanation: Early church Fathers appealed to the OT and NT books in refuting heretics. You can't refute a heretic by your own opinion. The church had to have known what the canon was from the beginning because otherwise they couldn't have refuted heretics.

Polycarp: "For I am convinced that you are all well trained in the sacred scriptures . . . Only as it is said in these Scriptures, 'be angry and do not sin,' and 'do not let the sun set on your anger.'" (Phil. 12.1). (Eph. 4:26)

### Three Criteria for Discerning Canonical Books

- 1) **Apostolicity** - surviving writings with clear evidence of origin from apostolic authority are included
- 2) **Conformity to the "rule of faith"**
- 3) **Widespread acceptance**

## The Issue of the Apocrypha

Perhaps the greatest acknowledgement we must make about the Apocrypha is that The Roman Catholic Church did not officially canonize the Apocrypha until the Council of Trent (1546 AD). This was in part because the Apocrypha contained material which supported certain Catholic doctrines, such as purgatory, praying for the dead, and the treasury of merit.

Furthermore, we must acknowledge that the apocrypha was included and published in the original 1611 King James Bible. These apocryphal books were positioned between the Old and New Testament (it also contained maps and genealogies). The apocrypha was a part of the KJV for 274 years until being removed in 1885 A.D.

The Apocrypha books are as follows:

1. 1 Esdras
2. 2 Esdras

3. Additions to Esther
4. 1 Macabees
5. 2 Macabees
6. Tobias
7. Judith
8. Wisdom
9. Sirach
10. Baruch
11. Epistle of Jeremiah
12. Susanna
13. Prayer of Azariah
14. Prayer of Manasseh
15. Bel and the Dragon
16. Laodiceans

Catholic Argument	Rebuttal
Early Christians quote from the Apocrypha thus proving it belongs in the Bible	Early Christians quoted from many different uninspired writings. Why not include those?
The Apocrypha was included in the LXX	The Jews and the early church never accepted the Apocrypha as being part of the Scripture. It was included in the canon until 1546AD
The seminal councils that finalized the 66 canonical books all Christians accept included the Apocrypha. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Hippo (393)</li> <li>▪ Carthage (397, 419)</li> </ul>	False. The canon of the New Testament was set from the 1 <sup>st</sup> C. It is wrong to assume that the church councils gave us the Word of God.

### *Important Considerations for Refutation*

- 1) The Apocrypha is not quoted in the NT
- 2) The Apocrypha is not mentioned by Christ
- 3) None of the Apocrypha writers claim their works were inspired.
- 4) The Apocrypha was not permitted among the other sacred books for the first four centuries of the church.
- 5) None of the Apocryphal books were written in Hebrew.
- 6) The Apocrypha contains extraordinary statements which contradict the true canon and themselves. (For example, in the two Books of Maccabees, Antiochus Epiphanes is made to die three different deaths in three different places.)
- 7) The Apocrypha includes doctrines that are inconsistent with the Bible (such as prayers for the dead, penance, sinless perfections, etc.).
- 8) The Apocrypha was not considered inspired by the church fathers