

# HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

## LESSON 4 CANONIZATION

---

How we got the Bible:

“God’s hands” → Revelation → Inspiration → Canonization → Preservation  
→ Translation → “Our hands”

In this lesson, we come to the middle step—canonization. So far we have covered how God gave His special revelation and how men of God wrote it down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But this happened many different times with many different prophets in many different places over a long period of time. Naturally then, the people of God would want to collect all of the inspired writings, so that they could benefit from the whole counsel of God’s word. This process is known as canonization.

Common canonization questions:

What is the canon?

What books belong in the Bible?

What books do not belong in the Bible? How was the canon determined?

Is it true that it wasn’t until the 4<sup>th</sup> century that church councils determined the canon?

Why were some books that are currently in the Bible questioned?

What about all the books that didn’t make it into the Bible?

Why do Catholics have extra books in their Old Testament?

Why did Jude quote from the book of Enoch which is not in the Bible?

Can anything be added to the Bible today?

What if a new writing of Paul was found; would we add it to the Bible?

And ultimately, how can we be sure that the Bible we have today contains all the correct books?

## **THE MEANING OF “CANON”**

Today, the word canon is used in the Christian realm to denote the collection of authoritative Scriptures. The Christian canon then consists of the 66 books of the Bible as we know it today. Originally though, the Greek word for canon referred to a rod or reed that was used in the ancient world for measuring things.

The Old Testament canon consists of the 39 books of the Old Testament. It was written over a period of about 1,000 years, from Moses ~1400 BC to Malachi ~400BC.

The New Testament canon was composed over a period of about 50 years, roughly from AD 45-95. It consists of 27 books written by eight or nine authors, starting with James in AD 45 and ending with Revelation around AD 95.

## **THE EXISTENCE OF THE CANON**

Although the word canon wasn't employed at first, both the Jews concerning the Old Testament and the first Christians concerning the New Testament definitely had a concept of divinely authoritative books and they immediately began recognizing and collecting such books. Before the term canon, the Jews primarily referred to their Scriptures as the “sacred writings” or “authoritative writings.” These were the writings of prophets that were recognized as inspired by God and thereby came with binding authority. Not all books have such authority so by setting these books apart, they were in fact forming a canon. And of course, by the time of the New Testament, the word “Scripture” came to be a technical term on its own, referring to all of God's inspired writings.

- Deuteronomy 17:18-19; 31:24-26
- Joshua 1:8
- 2 Kings 22:8
- 2 Timothy 3:15-16
- 2 Peter 3:16

Before we move on though, we must point out that ultimately, it was not up to Israel or the church to determine the canon or create the canon. Rather the canon is determined or created by God Himself. What does the canon of Scripture consist of? It consists of the 66 books of the Bible which were all divinely inspired, right? You must understand then the cause and effect relationship between inspiration and canonicity. Inspiration is the cause; canonicity is the effect. What makes a book included in the canon is its inspiration. If a book is inspired, if it is truly God-breathed, then its place in the canon is established. So God, in inspiring certain writings, was in effect creating a canon, or a collection of such writings.

What is man's role in the canonization process then? Man's role is merely to recognize, accept, and collect such divinely authorized writings. The canon is a result of God's work, not man's decisions. The early church fathers and councils did not create the canon, but merely recognized what God had created by inspiration. So the additional point we are making here is that you must not confuse the existence of the canon with the church's recognition of the canon. The canon was created by God as He inspired multiple writings and with each new inspired writing, the canon was immediately added to. The immediate audience of these writings recognized these books right away, but due to travel and communication limitations, universal recognition for some writings took some time. So while it took 300 years for all the writings of the New Testament to spread throughout all the ancient world and be recognized by all the local churches, that does not mean the church created the canon at that time. It just means the canon was formally and universally recognized.

## **THE CLOSE OF THE CANON**

When was the canon closed? When was the Bible complete? The Bible was complete when God stopped giving new special revelation through inspired prophets. God closed the canon with the last inspired message. Again, since we tie our view of the canon to inspiration, if there are no more inspired writings being written, then the canon is closed.

Indeed, the Jews recognized this after Malachi and the Christians recognized this after Revelation. Even though there were many other valuable Christian writings after Revelation, the church recognized that these were not inspired and God's authoritative message for the universal church was complete.

The close of the canon is hinted at in two New Testament passages:

- Jude 3
- Revelation 22:18-19

## **THE CRITERIA OF THE CANON**

### **Inadequate tests of canonicity:**

1. Antiquity
  
2. Historicity
  
3. Provenance
  
4. Spirituality

### **Adequate tests of canonicity:**

1. Authorship—Was it written by a prophet of God?
  - Old Testament
    - Deuteronomy 4:2; 18:18
    - Numbers 22:18
    - Amos 3:8

- New Testament
  - Ephesians 2:20
  - 2 Peter 1:20

### The credentials of a true prophet:

- Signs and wonders
    - Exodus 4:1-5- sign to verify Moses
    - 1 Kings 18:36-37- sign to verify Elijah
    - John 20:30-31- signs to verify Jesus
    - Acts 2:22- signs to verify Jesus
    - 2 Corinthians 12:12- signs to verify apostles
    - Hebrews 2:3-4- signs to verify apostles
  - Fulfilled prophecy
    - Deuteronomy 18:18-22
    - Jeremiah 28:9
  - Righteousness
    - Matthew 7:15-23
  - Consistent message
2. Consistency—Is it consistent with previous revelation?
- This principle was established by God Himself through Moses and is just as important as signs and wonders:
    - Deuteronomy 13:1-5
    - Isaiah 8:19-20
3. Authority—Does it claim divine authority?
4. Power—Does it come with God's dynamic power?
- 2 Timothy 3:15
  - 1 Thessalonians 2:13
5. Reception—Was it quickly received by the people of God?

## THE CANONIZATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

In total, according to the Hebrew canon, which is the same as our Old Testament today, although arranged differently, there were 17 books in the Prophets. They ranged from the time of Joshua to the time of Malachi, almost 1,000 years. As we studied before, the determining factor in their inspiration and canonicity was their prophetic authorship.

- Deuteronomy 18:15- God promises future prophet, the messiah above all
- Joshua 24:26- Joshua was a writing prophet
- 1 Samuel 10:25- Samuel was a writing prophet
- Matthew 24:15- Daniel was a writing prophet
- Acts 2:30- David was a writing prophet

During this 1,000 year period of Israel's history, spanning the time of the Judges to the time of the kings to the time of the exile, God raised up prophets to speak to His people. Mostly the prophets were rebuking the people for falling short of the Law of Moses and trying to guide them back. Although these messages came over 1,000 years, there is a great deal of continuity in this prophetic message. Many of the Old Testament books in fact contain connections to the next book in the canon.

- The ending of Deuteronomy sets up the beginning of Joshua
  - o Many similar elements (be strong and courageous); continuity
- The ending of Joshua sets up the beginning of Judges
- Ruth was appended to the end of Judges
- Ruth itself ends with a genealogy of David, leading to the accounts of the kings in Samuel and Kings
- The last 4 verses of 2 Kings were written after the Babylonian captivity, leading right into Ezra and Nehemiah
- The last 2 verses of 2 Chronicles match the first 2 verses of Ezra, written after the exile
- So there is a chain of prophetic continuity in the Old Testament starting with Moses and running through the time of the conquest, the judges, the kings, the divided kingdom, the exile, and the post-exile.

The Old Testament canon concluded with Malachi around 400 B.C. There were clues in the writings of the latter prophets themselves that God's message was ending for now, until the coming of the messiah and the day of the Lord.

- Zechariah 13:2-5
- Malachi 4:5

During the intertestamental period, the Jews themselves affirmed that there were no more prophets being raised up and therefore no more sacred writings. The people were waiting until another prophet should rise up, speak to them, and deliver them. Later Jews understood that the Holy Spirit had departed from Israel and Jesus Himself alluded that the limit of Old Testament prophets was in the time of Zechariah (Matt 23:35).

Many believe Ezra and his scribes played a big part in formally collecting all the sacred writings written thus far. Later scribes carried on this work. However, there is no record of when exactly the Old Testament canon was fixed together. We do know that by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the Hebrew canon was well recognized and reflected in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

Over time though, the two-fold division of the Old Testament canon expanded into a three-fold division. A third category was added known as the Writings. This was only a change in how the canon was classified and arranged. It was not an addition of new books or material.

By the time of Jesus, both the two-fold and three-fold divisions were used to refer to the Old Testament canon. There were 24 books in the Hebrew canon, which are equivalent to our 39 books. This three-fold division is sometimes referred to as the TANAK, where the T, N, and K represent the three divisions. See the chart below.

TANAK	ROMAN CATHOLIC AND ORTHODOX	PROTESTANT
<b>Torah</b>	<b>Pentateuch</b>	<b>Pentateuch</b>
1. Bereshith (Genesis)	1. Genesis	1. Genesis
2. Shemoth (Exodus)	2. Exodus	2. Exodus
3. Wayiqra (Leviticus)	3. Leviticus	3. Leviticus
4. Bemidbar (Numbers)	4. Numbers	4. Numbers
5. Debarim (Deuteronomy)	5. Deuteronomy	5. Deuteronomy
<b>Nevi'im (Former)</b>	<b>History</b>	<b>History</b>
6. Joshua	6. Joshua	6. Joshua
7. Shofetim (Judges)	7. Judges	7. Judges
8. Samuel	8. Ruth	8. Ruth
9. Melakim (Kings)	9 – 10. 1 and 2 Samuel	9 – 10. 1 and 2 Samuel
10. Isaiah	11 – 12. 1 and 2 Kings	11 – 12. 1 and 2 Kings
11. Jeremiah	13 – 14. 1 and 2 Chronicles	13 – 14. 1 and 2 Chronicles
12. Ezekiel	15 – 16. Ezra and Nehemiah	15 – 16. Ezra and Nehemiah
13. TereAsar (The Twelve)	17. Esther	17. Esther
Hosea	18. Judith*	
Joel	19. Esther, including The Rest of Esther*	
Amos	<b>Poetry and Wisdom</b>	<b>Poetry and Wisdom</b>
Obadiah	18. Job	18. Job
Jonah	20. Job	19. Psalms
Micah	21. Psalms	20. Proverbs
Nahum	22. Proverbs	21. Ecclesiastes
Habakkuk	23. Ecclesiastes	22. Song of Songs
Zephaniah	24. Song of Solomon	
Haggai	25. Wisdom of Solomon*	
Zechariah	26. Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of ben Sirach)*	
Malachi	<b>Prophets</b>	<b>Prophets</b>
<b>Kethu'bim</b>	27. Isaiah	23. Isaiah
14. Tehilim (Psalms)	28. Jeremiah	24. Jeremiah
15. Job	29. Lamentations	25. Lamentations
16. Mishle (Proverbs)	30. Baruch, including The Letter of Jeremiah†	26. Ezekiel
17. Ruth	31. Ezekiel	27. Daniel
18. Shir Hashirim (Song of Songs)	32. Daniel, including The Rest of Daniel,* Susanna,* Song of the Three Holy Children,* Bel and the Dragon*	28. Hosea
19. Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)	33. Hosea	29. Joel
20. Ekah (Lamentations)	34. Joel	30. Amos
21. Esther	35. Amos	31. Obadiah
22. Daniel	36. Obadiah	32. Jonah
23. Ezra – Nehemiah	37. Jonah	33. Micah
24. Dibre Hayamin (Chronicles)	38. Micah	34. Nahum
	39. Nahum	35. Habakkuk
	40. Habakkuk	36. Zephaniah
	41. Zephaniah	37. Haggai
	42. Haggai	38. Zechariah
	43. Zechariah	39. Malachi
	44. Malachi	
	45. 1 Maccabees*	
	46. 2 Maccabees†	

\*Apocryphal in Protestant canon

† Roman Catholic only

From Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 1:301 – 2.

## **Non-canonical books**

### 1. Homologoumena- the books accepted by all

These are the books that were never questioned or disputed. They were accepted and recognized as inspired from the get go and not called into question by later generations. The homologoumena consisted of 34 of the 39 books of the present Old Testament. The five books left out were Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Ezekiel, and Proverbs.

### 2. Antilegomena- the books disputed by some

This category refers to books that were initially accepted by the people of God and considered canonical, but were later called into question by rabbis. Later rabbis found some reasons to question the character and claims of these books. Although some rabbis found reasons to question these books, their inspired character prevailed and they were still universally affirmed as canonical. Why were they disputed?

- Song of Solomon—sensuality
- Ecclesiastes—skepticism
- Esther—unspiritual
- Ezekiel—apparent contradictions
- Proverbs—apparent self-contradiction

In all, the 39 books of our present Old Testament were widely recognized by the Jews and formed their formal canon. Five books were questioned in later years in seemingly insignificant ways and their divine character was upheld, affirming the historical Old Testament canon. Other books existed though that needed to be classified and dealt with.

### 3. Apocrypha- the books accepted by some

14 additional books were in circulation in the intertestamental period that gained some acceptance by certain Jewish groups. Somewhat of a division formed between the Palestinian Jews (traditional Hebrews) and the Alexandrian Jews (Hellenistic Jews, Greek influenced). The Palestinian Jews continually recognized

the traditional Hebrew Old Testament canon, which consists of the same 39 books we have today. But some Alexandrian Jews recognized these 14 additional books. These 14 books were all written roughly between 200-100 B.C. They detail some of the history between the testaments and reveal Jewish thinking at the time.

- Wisdom books
  - The Wisdom of Solomon
  - Ecclesiasticus
- Historical books
  - 1 Esdras
  - 1 Maccabees
  - 2 Maccabees
- Religious Romance
  - Tobit
  - Judith
- Prophetic books
  - Baruch (and the Epistle of Jeremiah)
  - 2 Esdras
- Legendary additions
  - The Prayer of Manasseh
  - The Remainder of Esther
  - The Song of the Three Holy Children
  - The History of Susanna
  - Bel and the Dragon

Significantly, Jesus and the apostles vastly quoted from the Old Testament, but they never once quoted from these apocryphal books or referenced them as authoritative. Although they were esteemed by some Jews and early Christians, they failed the tests of canonicity and were overall not accepted as canonical by the early church.

#### 4. Pseudepigrapha – the books rejected by all

Finally, many books were written that found no recognition or acceptance by the people of God. They were deemed from the beginning inauthentic. These were the fairy tales of the Hebrew intertestamental period. As a side note, the Catholic church refers to these books as their “apocrypha.”

- Legendary books
  - The Book of Jubilee
  - The Letter of Aristeas
  - The Book of Adam and Eve
  - The Martyrdom of Isaiah
- Apocalyptic books
  - 1 Enoch
  - The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs
  - The Sibylline Oracle
  - The Assumption of Moses
  - 2 Enoch
  - 2 Baruch
  - 3 Baruch
- Didactical books
  - 3 Maccabees
  - 4 Maccabees
  - Pirke Aboth
  - The Story of Ahikar
- Poetical books
  - The Psalms of Solomon
  - Psalm 151
- Historical books
  - The Fragment of a Zadokite Work

## THE CANONIZATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

About 15 years after Christ, the first new Scriptures produced were not the gospel accounts, but rather some epistles. The good news of Christ's death and resurrection spread orally and through eyewitness testimony, but questions on faith and practice created the need for authoritative instruction. To this, the apostles responded, writing several epistles, providing the church with the instruction they needed.

But shortly thereafter, about 25 years after Christ, two factors contributed to the need for written gospels, written accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. First, the eyewitnesses were starting to die out. Those who spread the gospel of Jesus orally were becoming rarer. Second, Christianity was spreading all throughout the vast Roman Empire, so there simply were not enough eyewitnesses to reach them all. A written account was clearly needed. So Matthew was written in the late 50s, Luke in AD 60, Mark in the late 60s, and John in the late 80s. The church also needed an authoritative account of its early history and the new activity of the Holy Spirit in uniting Jews and Gentiles, so Acts was written in AD 62 or 63.

Around this time came the death of the apostle Paul and hence the end of his writings. But a few more epistles came later, notably those of John. Finally, to complete this new revelation, God wanted the church to have a word on the future, especially concerning the return of Christ. So Revelation was written around AD 95. This closed the New Testament canon.

The historical side of the process where all of the New Testament writings were recognized by all the church took some time for various reasons. There is evidence that each individual writing was received as inspired and authoritative by its original audience, but due to limitations in travel, communication, language, and duplication, not all of the New Testament books spread throughout the empire at an equal rate. Gaining universal recognition therefore took some time. So in all, we can rightly say that the canon of the New Testament was established and closed with the writing of Revelation, but the historical recognition of the full canon was a process that took some time.

## The Period of Circulation

At the time of writing, the churches that received the original writings received them as authoritative. There is evidence even within the New Testament that the church saw these new writings as Scripture on par with the Old Testament. They were to be read, copied, and shared among the churches as the word of God.

- Colossian 4:16
- 1 Thessalonians 2:13
- 1 Thessalonians 5:27
- 1 Timothy 4:13
- Revelation 1:3, 11

## The Period of Collection

With the dawn of the second century, all of the writings of the New Testament had been completed. Furthermore, all of the apostles had died and there were no more eyewitnesses to the risen Christ. All the church had now was the Scriptures. And due to various factors, the need arose to start collecting together all the inspired writings of the apostles and prophets, so that the church would know God's word and will for this new age.

- Church needs
  - To know which books should be read in the assembly
  - To know which books authoritatively gave guidance
  - To know which books established the rule of faith
- Missionary needs
  - To know which books should be translated into other languages
- Heresy
  - To counter false canons like Marcion's canon
- Persecution
  - To know which books were worth risking your life over, even dying over

## **The Period of Recognition**

Early in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the intense persecution against Christians was ending. Just ten years after Diocletian's edict to burn all copies of the New Testament writings, Constantine legalized Christianity in AD 313. Not long after he commissioned Eusebius to produce 50 copies of the New Testament. This of course created a very formal need for a universally recognized canon.

Eusebius is known as the first church historian. He kept a close record of his work in classifying the existing writings at the time. His work reflects the prevailing tradition among the churches long before the first council ever met. In addition to Eusebius, Athanasius was another figure who weighed in on the canonicity issue. He strongly wrote against using other books in the churches and in his festal letter of AD 365, he advocated only the 27 books of the New Testament that we still have today. This was another important milestone in universal church recognition.

The next major milestone was the Council of Laodicea in AD 363. This was the earliest council to act upon the canon. They allowed only for canonical Old and New Testament books to be read in the churches. But they did not furnish a list of canonical books. Still, it was a move in the direction of formal ecclesiastical recognition of the New Testament canon. The next several decades saw extensive discussion of the canon.

Next came the Council of Hippo in AD 393, which included the great Augustine. Here formal recognition was given to the New Testament canon. They affirmed that only canonical Scriptures were to be used in the churches and the present 27 books were ratified as the New Testament canon.

## **Non-Canonical Books**

Eusebius himself was the one to formally classify all the writings existent at the time under four headings, that we still use today. Again, Eusebius' research reflects the consensus of the church at that time.

### 1. Homologoumena- the books accepted by all

These books received universal acclaim from the beginning. They were not disputed and had wide approval. 20 of the 27 books are included here: Matthew through Philemon plus 1 Peter and 1 John.

Again, just because 7 books were left out, that does not mean they were not considered canonical or received as authoritative by the church. They were. But as we discussed, limitations in travel and communication meant some books did not have wide circulation. Their authorship and authority was therefore obscured to other parts of the church, which led some to dispute them.

### 2. Antilegomena- the books disputed by some

These were books that Eusebius classified as somewhat controversial because they were disputed by certain corners of the church. Seldom were these books considered uncanonical though. Many Christians in many parts of the church had already given recognition to these works. They included Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, and Revelation.

- Hebrews—anonymity
- James—veracity
- 2 Peter—genuineness
- 2-3 John—genuineness
- Jude—authenticity
- Revelation—authenticity

### 3. Apocrypha- the books accepted by some

These books were not considered canonical by the church, but they did gain some support by some church fathers. Basically some local churches had come to recognize and value these books, but the church overall had not. Once these books were evaluated per the tests of canonicity, they were rejected by more and more of the church. Some of these books were deemed edifying, but they did not have the same apostolic authority as the NT books. They did not evidence inspiration. Therefore they came to be excluded.

Common examples include The Epistle of Barnabas, The Epistle to the Corinthians, The Shepherd of Hermas, Didache, and The Epistle to the Laodiceans.

#### 4. Pseudepigrapha – the books rejected by all

These books were rejected by all. In the first few centuries of the church, quite a few false writings were created. There were numerous pseudo-Christian movements in the first few centuries, movements where some Christian teaching was blended with pagan philosophy (e.g. Gnosticism, Docetism). These movements held clearly heretical and unbiblical beliefs. They preached a very false gospel. The problem is that they also produced quite a number of writings. This was common among the Greek philosophical movements. Some list over 200 such writings. However, they were consistently rejected by the church from the beginning.

Common examples include The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Peter, The Gospel of Hebrews, and The Gospel of Judas.