

Interpreting the Bible 5 – The Canon of Scripture

Introduction

- * *Key Text:* Revelation 22:18-19. Is this warning broader than just the Book of Revelation? Does it apply to *all* of Scripture?

The Canon of Scripture

What “canon” means:

- * The word “canon” comes from the Greek word *kanōn* (κανών) -- “a means to determine the quality of something; *rule, standard.*”¹
- * “The canon is the divinely authorized collection of books that God has given to govern his people.”²
- * The canon of Scripture is the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament. The Roman Catholic canon includes *The Apocrypha* (see handout), but Protestants do not recognize the Apocrypha as being canonical.

How did the 66 books of the Bible come to be recognized as inspired by God? (The process of canonization)

- * The early church had three tests to determine if a particular writing should be recognized as inspired and canonical:
 1. *Was it written by an Apostle or someone closely associated with an Apostle?*
 2. *Was it widely recognized by existing churches?*
 3. *Was it theologically consistent with other established Apostolic writings?*
- * Canonization Timeline
 - The New Testament books were written during the period A.D. 45–100.
 - They were collected and read in the churches A.D. 100–200.
 - They were carefully examined and compared with spurious writings A.D. 200–300.
 - Complete agreement was obtained A.D. 300–400.³

¹ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 507.

² John Frame, “The Canon,” in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

³ Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010), 61.

* Theologian John Frame:

“There was, of course, a period of several centuries during which the church came to recognize which books God had made canonical. Most of the New Testament books we currently accept as canon were recognized as Scripture by Irenaeus, who died around AD 202. Others, such as 2 Peter, 2-3 John, and Revelation, continued to be disputed for various reasons. But the Easter Letter of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in AD 367 contained a list of inspired documents identical to that we recognize today, and after that there was no further dispute in the church about the contents of the canon.

The resolution of disputes from the first New Testament documents to AD 367 is an interesting story. Various factors entered into the recognition of different books as God’s word. Apostolic authorship, association of an author with an apostle (Mark with Peter, Luke with Paul), and the association of James with Jesus as his half brother were important factors in the acceptance of these books. Controversies over content also needed to be resolved. But this process was remarkably peaceful compared with other controversies in the early church (even controversies over such central doctrines as the deity and humanity of Christ). We cannot rule out a supernatural factor in the recognition of the canon. As Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice” (John 10:27). Heart reception of God’s word always involves the illumination and empowering of the Holy Spirit.”⁴

⁴ John Frame, “The Canon,” in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).