

**CBC Sunday School**  
**Bibliology: Formation of the Canon**  
**September 26, 2021**

“it is God’s intention to speak personal words to us, words that have more authority than any other. These words govern our use of all other words, all other sources of knowledge. For God’s words to have this kind of authority, they must be distinguishable from all other words, from words that are merely human. So there must be a canon, a body of divine words that God’s people can identify as his.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 134

“Identifying the books of the canon can be made to seem like a terribly difficult task. Roman Catholics and Protestants have disputed the list of OT books since the time of the Reformation. And the list of NT books accepted by the churches as canon varied (from church to church and from time to time) in the first four centuries A.D.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 133

“The preservation and correct assembling of the canon of Scripture should ultimately be seen by believers, then, not as part of church history subsequent to God’s great central acts of redemption for his people, but as an integral part of the history of redemption itself. Just as God was at work in creation, in the calling of his people Israel, in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and in the early work and writings of the apostles, so God was at work in the preservation and assembling together of the books of Scripture for the benefit of his people for the entire church age. Ultimately, then, we base our confidence in the correctness of our present canon on the faithfulness of God.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 66

“You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you.” Deuteronomy 4:2

“The question of the canon... is at the very center of how biblical authority is established... the canon issue could become the single thread that unravels the entire garment of the Christian faith.” Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, p. 16

“...we must approach our present problem (*that is, the problem of canonicity*) with a presupposition: that God will not let his people walk in darkness, that he will provide for us the words we need to have, within our reach.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 136

## **I. Discussion Question**

When we say “canon” in relation to the Bible, we are talking about the list of books which conform to the standard of divine inspiration and authority, and are accepted as such.

Did the church create the canon? In compiling a list of accepted books, does the church then become the *creators* of the Bible? If so, would the church have *authority* over the Bible? How do we resolve the tension of Scripture’s innate authority, and the church’s role in affirming or receiving that authority?

## II. Markers of Canonicity for the Old Testament

Note: Taken from Dr. Jan Verbruggen, Western Seminary, DBS 506

- A. Is it authoritative?
- B. Is it prophetic?
- C. Is it authentic?
- D. Is it dynamic?
- E. Does it contain contradictions?
- F. Was it collected, received, accepted, received, copied, and used by the people of God?
- G. The main test for the OT Canon was whether or not the book was part of those who had been laid up in the temple.

## III. Formation of the Old Testament Canon

### A. Jewish Perspective

1. "The first canon was the two tablets of the covenant. A later canon added to these the Deuteronomic law of Moses (Deut. 31:24). Still a third added words of Joshua (Josh. 24:25-28)." John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 135
2. Various prophets and leaders in Israel wrote down additional words from God.  
-1 Samuel 10:5; 1 Chronicles 29:29; 2 Chronicles 20:34; 26:22; 32:32; Jeremiah 30:2
3. 1 Maccabees—written around 100 BC and considered by Protestants to be an Apocryphal book—sees its own day as a time without a prophet of God, and thus no "word of God."  
-“So they tore down the alter and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them.” 1 Maccabees 4:45-46  
-1 Maccabees refers to a time of distress in Israel “such as had not been since the time that the prophets ceased to appear among them.” 1 Maccabees 9:27
4. “writings subsequent to about 435 B.C. were not accepted by the Jewish people generally as having equal authority with the rest of Scripture.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 57
5. Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:38-40  
“For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from, and contradicting one another: [as the Greeks have:] but only **twenty two books**: which contain the records of all the past times: which are justly believed to be divine. And of them **five belong to Moses**: which contain his laws, and the traditions of the origin of mankind, till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years. But as to the time from the death of Moses, till the reign of Artaxerxes, King of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the **Prophets**, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times, in **thirteen books**. The remaining **four books contain hymns to God**; and precepts for the conduct of human life.”

## B. New Testament and Patristic-Era Perspective

1. “We note that although Jesus and his opponents disagreed about a great many things, they never disagreed about what texts could be authoritatively cited. Evidently, then, we should identify the OT canon as consisting of those books acknowledged by the Jews, in the time and place of Jesus’ earthly ministry.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 135
2. Bishop Melito of Sardis in 170 AD investigated the number and order of OT books, and landed on the following list. This is the earliest Christian list of Old Testament books.  
“When I came to the east and reached the place where these things were preached and done, and learnt accurately the books of the Old Testament, I set down the facts and sent them to you. These are their names: five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kingdoms, two books of Chronicles, the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon and his Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Job, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Twelve in a single book, Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra.”  
Note: Lamentations was grouped with Jeremiah, and Nehemiah with Ezra, and Esther was omitted.
3. Origen in 254 AD noted the list that Eusebius preserved, which was 22 books – the same list as Josephus – but with the addition of the Epistle of Jeremiah.
4. Tertullian (160-250 AD) lists 24 books as canonical, and this list includes all of our exact books.
5. Hilary of Poitiers (305-366) lists 22 books as canonical, and this list matches our books as well.
6. These numbers of 22 or 24 Old Testament books seems to be relatively consistent; evidence shows that the number of canonical books was assume to be 22 or 24 by most Jewish people.

“The early church was divided by many controversies concerning basic doctrines, including the Trinity and the person of Christ. There were differences among the churches, too, as to what books were canonical. But it is remarkable how little they fought about this.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 136

## IV. Markers of Canonicity for the New Testament

Note: Taken from Dr. Jan Verbruggen, Western Seminary, DBS 506

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” 1 Thessalonians 2:13

- A. **Apostolic Origin** – attributed to and/or based on the preaching and/or teaching of the first-generation apostles, or their close companions.
- B. **Universal Acceptance** – acknowledged by all major Christian communities in the Mediterranean world (by the end of the fourth century).
- C. **Liturgical Use** – read publicly along with the OT when early Christians gathered for the Lord's Supper (their weekly worship services).
- D. **Consistent Message** – containing theological ideas compatible with other accepted Christian writings (including the divinity and humanity of Jesus).
- E. **Antiquity** – was written during the apostolic age.
- F. **Orthodoxy** – reinforced and did not contradict the consensus of beliefs.

## V. Formation of the New Testament Canon

- A. Books that have always received universal acceptance:
  - Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, 1 Peter, 1 John
- B. Books that took longer to decide.
  - Titus, Philemon
- C. Books that received more extensive debate.
  - 2 Peter, 2-3 John, James, Jude, Revelation, Hebrews
- D. Early Usage of the NT by Apostolic Fathers
  1. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110 AD): Matthew, Luke, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians
  2. Polycarp (wrote around 110 AD): Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, 3 John
  3. Justin Martyr (wrote between 142-165 AD): Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Revelation
  4. Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 200 AD): quoted from all NT books but Philemon, 2 Peter, 3 John, Jude
  5. Clement of Alexandria (d. 215 AD): quoted from all NT books except Philemon, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John
  6. Tertullian of Carthage (2. 220 AD): quoted from all NT books except 2 Peter, James, 2 John, 3 John
- E. Early Canon Lists
  1. Cyril's Catechetical Lectures, iv. 36; written around 350 AD
 

“Then of the New Testament there are the four Gospels only, for the rest have false titles and are mischievous. The Manichæans also wrote a Gospel according to Thomas, which being tinctured with the fragrance of the evangelic title corrupts the souls of the simple sort. Receive also the Acts of the Twelve Apostles; and in addition to these the seven Catholic Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude; and as a seal upon them all, and the last work of the disciples, the fourteen Epistles of Paul. But let all the rest be put aside in a secondary rank. And whatever books are not read in Churches, these read not even by yourself, as you have heard me say. Thus much of these subjects.”

2. Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History, III. Xxv. 1-4; written between 265-340 AD

<sup>1</sup> Since we are dealing with this subject it is proper to sum up the writings of the New Testament which have been already mentioned. First then must be put the holy quaternion of the Gospels; following them the Acts of the Apostles <sup>2</sup> After this must be reckoned the epistles of Paul; next in order the extant former epistle of John, and likewise the epistle of Peter, must be maintained. After them is to be placed, if it really seem proper, the Apocalypse of John, concerning which we shall give the different opinions at the proper time. These then belong among the accepted writings.

<sup>3</sup> Among the disputed writings, which are nevertheless recognized by many, are extant the so-called epistle of James and that of Jude, also the second epistle of Peter, and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist or to another person of the same name. <sup>4</sup> Among the rejected writings must be reckoned also the Acts of Paul, and the so-called Shepherd, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to these the extant epistle of Barnabas, and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles; and besides, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject, but which others class with the accepted books."

3. The Canon Approved by the Synod of Laodicea (about 363 AD)

**Canon 59.** Let no private psalms nor any uncanonical books be read in the church, but only the canonical ones of the New and Old Testament.

**Canon 60.** [After listing the books of the Old Testament] And these are the books of the New Testament: four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles, seven Catholic epistles, namely, one of James, two of Peter, three of John, one of Jude, fourteen epistles of Paul, one to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, one to the Ephesians, one to the Philippians, one to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, one to the Hebrews, two to Timothy, one to Titus, and one to Philemon.

4. The Canon of Athanasius (367 AD)

"I must without hesitation mention the scriptures of the New Testament; they are the following: the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, after them the Acts of the Apostles and the seven so-called catholic epistles of the apostles -- namely, one of James, two of Peter, then three of John and after these one of Jude. In addition there are fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul written in the following order: the first to the Romans, then two to the Corinthians and then after these the one to the Galatians, following it the one to the Ephesians, thereafter the one to the Philippians and the one to the Colossians and two to the Thessalonians and the epistle to the Hebrews and then immediately two to Timothy , one to Titus and lastly the one to Philemon. Yet further the Revelation of John."

5. Canon Approved by Third Synod of Carthage (397 AD)

"The first council that accepted the present canon of the books of the New Testament was the Synod of Hippo Regius in North Africa (A.D. 393); the acts of this council, however, are lost. A brief summary of the acts was read and accepted by the Synod of Carthage, A.D. 397)." Jan Verbruggen, Western Seminary

**Canon 24.** Besides the canonical Scriptures, nothing shall be read in church under the name of divine Scriptures. Moreover, the canonical Scriptures are these: [then follows a list of Old Testament books]. The [books of the] New Testament: the Gospels, four books; the Acts of the Apostles, one book; the Epistles of Paul, thirteen; of the same to the Hebrews; one Epistle; of Peter, two; of John, apostle, three; of James, one; of Jude, one; the Revelation of John.

## **V. What About Other Books?**

### **A. Apocryphal Books**

#### **1. Apocrypha Contents**

- a. Tobit and Judith (placed after Nehemiah)
- b. Esther addition (Esther 10:4-16:24)
- c. Psalm 151 (Orthodox)
- d. Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus aka Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach (placed after Song of Songs)
- e. Baruch; Baruch 6 = Letter of Jeremiah (placed after Lamentations)
- f. Daniel addition (3:24-100; Daniel 13:1-14:42 – includes stories of Susannah and Bel and the dragon)
- g. 1 and 2 Maccabees
- h. 3 and 4 Maccabees (Orthodox)

#### **2. Dispute over Validity**

Protestants, Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox all have different opinions and traditions as to what books belong to the canon of the Old Testament.

Protestants argue that only the 39 books were accepted by Jews at the time of Christ. However, it does seem that some Jews accepted other books, particularly Jews in Alexandria.

The Apocryphal books are of a later date than other OT books, written after the time of Ezra-Nehemiah. There was an understanding, affirmed by Judas Maccabee, that prophecy ended in the time of Artaxerxes. There was also a widespread belief in later rabbinical literature, and in Josephus, that prophecy ceased after the time of Ezra-Nehemiah. Thus, the canon would have been closed after that time.

Jesus implies that the last prophet was Zechariah, from the book of Chronicles. See Luke 11:50-51 and 2 Chronicles 24:21.

“According to one count, Jesus and the New Testament authors quote various parts of the Old Testament Scriptures as divinely authoritative over 295 times, but not once do they cite any statement from the books of the Apocrypha or any other writings as having divine authority.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 57

It can be argued that the Catholic and Orthodox belief, that these Apocryphal books were authoritative, only arises at a later period, when Christianity seemed to have lost sight of its Jewish roots. "It was not until 1546, at the Council of Trent, that the Roman Catholic Church officially declared the Apocrypha to be part of the canon." Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, p. 59

#### B. New Testament-Era Writings

1. Books that Received Some NT Inclusion, but Eventually Not Included
  - Epistle of Barnabas, Shephard of Hermas, 1 and 2 Epistles of Clement
2. Some books that modern scholars might propose for "canon status" had obvious disqualifying traits, and were never seriously considered by the early church for canon contention.
  - a. The Gospel of Thomas was not written by Thomas the apostle, but was probably written a century after the NT writings. Furthermore, it states; "Simon Peter said to them: "Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said: "Lo, I shall lead her, so that I may make her a male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven."
  - b. This and the rest of the Gnostic Gospels, such as the Gospel of Philip or the Gospel of Mary, are later writings fraudulently written in the name of the Apostles, in an attempt to give them legitimacy in the church. The early church was essentially unanimous in recognizing the Gnostic Gospels as containing false teaching.
  - c. Even the Didache, an early manual for Christian and church life, composed in the first or second century, featured teaching contrary to the New Testament. For example, it forbids food offered to idols, mandates extraneous fasting laws and recitations of the Lord's Prayer, and forbids testing or examining prophets who speak in the Spirit. It likewise was never seriously considered for inclusion in the canon.

#### Discussion Question:

In Colossians 4:16, Paul commands the church in Colossae to also read the letter to Laodicea. This letter has been lost to the church. If it was suddenly found, would we consider it canon, and would we likewise be obligated to read it?

Could God add to the canon today? To ask a different question, do we need additional words beyond what we have in Christ? Consider Hebrews 1:1-2 and Revelation 22:18-19

“the authority of the church rests on the authority of the canon, not the other way around... Our assurance that these books are canon, like our assurance of the divine voice and of prophecy, is supernatural. So we can be sure that the canon of twenty-seven NT books, now universally accepted in the church, is God’s personal word to us today” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 138

“Today there exist no strong candidates for addition to the canon and no strong objections to any book presently in the canon.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 66

“The Church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity... Newton did not create gravity but recognized it.” J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible*, p. 109

-“The supposed closing of the canon in the fourth century neither changed their status nor increased their authority—it was already as high as could be. In regard to the function of these books, one could rightly say there already was a canon, or at least the category of a canon, well before the fourth century.” Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, p. 37