



Equipping Hour

The Canonicity of Scripture

Key Verse: 2 Timothy 3:16

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.”

Overview

All Scripture is inspired by God. However, one might ask, “What does ‘all Scripture’ consist of? How does a person know whether or not a book is Scripture?” To answer this question, one must study the canonicity of Scripture. What is the canonicity of Scripture? The word “canon” refers to the list of all the books that belong in the Bible and are recognized to be “inspired by God.” This list of books is often referred to as “the canon of Scripture” and it contains 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament.

The precise determination of the canon of Scripture is of utmost importance as the Scriptures are the words by which we are saved and nourish our souls. To subtract something from the Bible would prevent God’s people from obeying Him fully. If words are added, then it might require God’s people to do things that God has not actually commanded (Deut. 4:2). If we are to trust and obey God completely, then we must be certain that the collection of words we have are God’s own words to us. If we ever have doubts about whether a portion of Scripture is God’s word or not, then we will have doubts about its authority in our lives and will not trust it. Therefore, the canonicity of Scripture is vitally important for the believer so that we will trust and obey God as we trust and obey His Word.

How do we know the 66 books that we have in our Bible belong there? There is no verse in the Bible that says, “And these are the books that should be included in the canon.” Because the Bible does not have a verse like this, the investigation into the question is both historical and biblical, as Scripture helps in the process of determining the extent of the Old and New Testament canon.

The Old Testament Canon

1. Exodus 31:18. What did God write? _____
2. Deuteronomy 10:1–5. What did Moses do with the tablets? _____
3. Deuteronomy 31:24–26. What did Moses write? _____
4. Exodus 17:14. What does this verse tell us? _____

5. Deuteronomy 4:2. What was the command to the people? _____

6. Joshua 24:26. What did Joshua write? _____

7. Psalm 3:1. Who wrote this psalm? _____
8. Proverbs 1:1. Who wrote Proverbs? _____
9. Isaiah 1:1. Who wrote the book of Isaiah? _____
10. Jeremiah 1:1; 30:2. What did God tell Jeremiah to do? _____
11. God continued to write His Word through prophets until about 435 BC (Malachi).

Extra-Biblical Jewish Literature¹

- Extra-biblical Jewish literature indicates the widespread belief that divinely authoritative words from God had ceased at this time.
 - 1 Maccabees 4:45–46; c. 100 BC
 - “And they thought it best to tear it down, so that it would not be a lasting shame to them that the nations had defiled it. So they tore down the altar and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill *until a prophet should come* to tell what to do with them.” (italics added)
 - 1 Maccabees 9:27
 - “So there was great distress in Israel such as had not been since the time a prophet had last appeared among them.”
 - The greatest Jewish historian, Josephus (born c. AD 37/38), explained, “From Artaxerxes [king of Persia from c. 464 to 425 BC] to our own times a complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets” (*Against Apion* 1.41).
 - Rabbinic literature reflects a similar conviction in its repeated statement that the Holy Spirit (in the Spirit’s function of inspiring prophecy) departed from Israel. “After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel . . .” (*Babylonian Talmud*, Yoma 9b, Sota 48b)
 - Writings subsequent to about 435 BC were not accepted by Jewish people generally as having equal authority with the rest of Scripture (1 QS 9.11; 2 Baruch 85.3; Prayer of Azariah 15).

What about the Apocrypha?

1. These books were never accepted by the Jews as Scripture.

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1994). In this section and after.

2. The earliest Christian evidence is decidedly against the Apocrypha as Scripture, but the use of the Apocrypha gradually increased in parts of the church until the Reformation.
3. Jerome included them in his Latin Vulgate translation (completed AD 404), but Jerome himself said they were not “books of the canon” but merely “books of the church” that were helpful and useful for believers.
4. The Apocrypha is never quoted in the New Testament.
5. The earliest Christian list of Old Testament books is by Melito, bishop of Sardis, in AD 170.
 - “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 Kingdoms², 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, Ezra³.”
6. The Apocrypha was officially declared to be a part of the canon at the Council of Trent in 1546. This was a response to the teachings of Martin Luther and the rapidly spreading Protestant Reformation. The Apocrypha contains support for the Catholic teaching of prayers for the dead and justification by faith plus works, not faith alone. By affirming the Apocrypha within the canon, the Roman Catholics would hold that the church has the authority to constitute a literary work as “Scripture,” while Protestants have held that the church cannot *make* something to be Scripture but can only *recognize* what God has already caused to be written as His own words.

Jesus and the Old Testament

1. In the New Testament, we have no record of any dispute between Jesus and the Jews over the extent of the canon.
2. According to one count, Jesus and the New Testament authors quote various parts of the Old Testament Scriptures as divinely authoritative nearly 300 times, but not once do they cite any statement from the books of the Apocrypha or any other writings as having divine authority.
3. Luke 24:27, “Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”
4. Jesus said in Matthew 23:35, “so that upon you may fall *the guilt of* all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” Abel’s murder is recorded in Genesis 4 and the murder of Zechariah is recorded in 2 Chronicles (24:20–22), which is the last book in the Hebrew Bible. In essence, Jesus is saying, “from the first to the last murder in the Bible.”

² This is 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings.

³ Ezra in the Hebrew Scriptures includes Ezra and Nehemiah.

The New Testament Canon

1. John 14:26. What did Jesus say the Holy Spirit will do for the apostles? _____

 2. John 16:13–14. What did the Holy Spirit guide the apostles into? _____
 3. 2 Peter 3:2. Who do the apostles have authority equal to? _____
 4. 1 Corinthians 14:37. What does Paul equate his writings to? _____
 5. 2 Peter 3:15–16. What does Peter equate Paul’s writings to? _____
 6. 1 Timothy 5:18. What Scripture says, “The laborer is worthy of his wages?” _____
- Because the apostles, by virtue of their office, had authority to write words of Scripture, the written teachings of the apostles were accepted by the early church as part of the canon of Scripture. Therefore, apostolic authorship would include Matthew; John; Romans to Philemon; James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Revelation. Five books were not written by apostles: Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, and Jude.
 - Mark, Luke, and Acts were acknowledged very early by the church probably because of their close association with the apostles (Mark with Peter; Luke with Paul). Jude was included by virtue of his close connection with James and the fact that he was the brother of Jesus.
 - Hebrews was assumed by many in the church as Pauline, but Origen (c. AD 254) said, “But who actually wrote the epistle, only God knows.” It was recognized to be in the canon because the early church was convinced, as believers are today, that its ultimate author can only have been God Himself.

The Key Distinction in Canonicity

- God’s people did not _____ the canon; instead, they merely _____ it.

How do we know we have the complete canon?

1. The faithfulness of God proves it. Since God’s Word is more precious to us than anything else in the world, we know God will not withhold something from us that we absolutely need.
2. The Holy Spirit confirms it. As we read the pages of Scripture, we are convinced by the Holy Spirit that the books we have in Scripture are all from God and are His words to us. The pages of Scripture speak to our hearts like no other book does. In Scripture we find an authority, power, and persuasiveness that no other writings possess.

“The ultimate criterion of canonicity is divine authorship, not human or ecclesiastical approval.”
– Wayne Grudem