

# How We Got Our Bible

## Lesson 2: Canonicity

by Kit Johnson

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### I. Introduction

#### A. Definitions

1. “Inspiration indicates how the Bible received its authority; canonization tells how the Bible received its acceptance. Canonicity deals with the recognition and collection of the God-inspired books” (William Combs, “How We Got Our Bible” syllabus).
2. Definition of Canon: “The list of all the books that belong in the Bible (from the Greek *kanōn*, ‘reed; measuring rod; standard of measure’)” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1237).
3. Definition of Canonicity: “Canonicity is the historical process by which the Spirit of God led the church to recognize those writings that were genuinely inspired. This historical process produced the canon we have today” (Combs).

- B. Qualification: “Evangelical scholars have long recognized that the canon was not created by any human being. The only human role in the making of the canon was recognizing and receiving texts that God had already established. As so the question isn’t, ‘Who created the canon?’ The correct question is, ‘How and when did God’s people recognize the texts that God had already established as authoritative?’” (Timothy Paul Jones, *How We Got the Bible*, p. 52). Canonization did not make the biblical books inspired; it acknowledged the inspiration they already possessed.

### II. Old Testament Canon

#### A. The Process

1. The Law: “God spoke directly with Moses throughout Israel’s exodus, and the words that Moses wrote in ‘the book of the covenant’ were immediately received as the words of God (Exodus 24:3–7; 33:11; Numbers 11:10–35). By the time Moses died, the Israelites already possessed a functional canon” (Jones, pp. 52–53).
2. The Prophets and Writings
  - a. Israel divided the Scriptures into the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.
    - The Law is the Pentateuch.
    - The Prophets include Joshua-Kings, the Major Prophets (excluding Daniel), and the Minor Prophets.
    - The Writings include Ruth, Psalms, the Books of Wisdom, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

- b. Israel recognized these books as canonical based on their consistency with the Pentateuch. They also tested the prophets based on whether or not their prophecies came true (Deut 18:21–22).
  - c. Canonization normally happened quickly. For example, Daniel 9:2 states that Daniel had a collection of Scripture, which he simply called “the books.” His collection included the prophecies of Jeremiah, who had died only a few decades earlier (Dan 9:2–19; cf., Jer 25:11–12).
3. Shortly after the completion of Malachi, the Jews recognized that God had ceased speaking. “Three times in the apocryphal books of Maccabees, the author pointed out that he lived in an era when prophecy had come to an end” (Jones, p. 53).

#### B. Our Arrangement

1. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, King Ptolemy II, who reigned in Alexandria, Egypt commissioned Jewish scholars to translate the OT into Greek. It was called the Septuagint, because 70 men worked on the translation. It is often referred to by the Roman numerals LXX, in modern literature.
2. The editors of the Septuagint grouped the OT books by genre and rearranged them in roughly chronological order. The Latin Bibles followed this pattern, as do our English translations.

#### C. What about the Apocrypha?

1. The Apocrypha is a group of 14 books/additions to Scripture that were produced after the close of the OT canon.
  - a. The Jews never considered the Apocrypha to be Scripture. 3xs in books of Maccabees, the author states that he lived in a time when prophecy had ceased.
  - b. For unknown reasons, the translators of the LXX decided to include the Apocrypha in their translation.
  - c. 400 years later, Christians used the LXX to translate the Bible into Latin, and they chose to include the Apocrypha in their Latin Bibles.
  - d. Jerome (AD 347-420) included the Apocrypha in the Latin Vulgate; however, he stated that the Apocrypha should not shape church doctrine.
  - e. Augustine (AD 354–430) disagreed and treated the Apocrypha as inspired Scripture. Three North African councils agreed with Augustine. As a result, the Apocrypha is still included in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Bibles.
2. 3 Reasons We Reject the Apocrypha (from Jones, pp. 58–59)
  - a. “The authors of the New Testament never quoted the Apocrypha.”
  - b. “The Jewish people never recognized the Apocrypha as Scripture.”
  - c. “Jesus recognized the three-part Hebrew and Aramaic canon as Scripture (Luke 24:44; Matt 23:35).”

### III. New Testament Canon

#### A. How did questions develop?

##### 1. Recognition of Apostolic Authority

- Ignatius wrote in 110, "I do not order you as did Peter and Paul; they were apostles, I am a convict; they were free, I am even until now a slave" (cited from Grudem, p. 66).

##### 2. Production of Apocrypha and Pseudopigrapha

- a. Pseudo-Barnabas (70–79): The author "does not claim divine authority, and...is not the Barnabas named among the apostles" (Geisler and Nix, *From God to Us*, p. 122).
- b. The Epistle to the Corinthians (96) by Clement of Rome
- c. Shepherd of Hermas (115-140): This was the most widely read and accepted apocryphal book.
- d. Didache (100-120): It was highly regarded, and some accepted it as Scripture.

##### 3. Divergent Views

###### a. Homologoumena (Books Accepted by All)

- 4 Gospels, Acts, 13 Pauline Epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John
- These books were accepted as authoritative from the beginning and were never called into question.

###### b. Antilegomena

- Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, Revelation
- These seven books were not universally accepted immediately. However, they were largely accepted from the beginning.

- c. The heretic Marcion published his canonical list in 140, which only included Luke and Paul's epistles, excluding the Pastoral Epistles.

##### 4. Persecution

##### 5. Constantine

- When Constantine converted to Christianity, he wanted the Scriptures copied. Reproducing the Scriptures required knowing what they were.

#### B. What criteria were used to determine canonicity?

- The process of NT canonization was not as simple as the OT. The Church Fathers didn't have a measuring stick like the Pentateuch or all the fulfilled prophecies of Daniel, etc.

##### a. Divine Imprint (Ps 19:7–10; 2 Tim 3:16–17)

- Divine Authority/Prophetic Character
- Pure and Harmonious Theology
- Dynamic, Efficacious, Profitable

b. Apostolic Origin (Luke 10:16)

- “The apostles are the link between the redemptive events themselves and the subsequent announcement of those events” (Kruger, p. 109).
- Mark (Peter), Luke and Acts (Paul), Hebrews (Paul), James (Jesus and Apostles), Jude (Jesus and Apostles)

c. Corporate Reception (John 10:5, 27)

- This attribute is closely related to Scripture’s character as self-authenticating.
- While there was some debate over the Antilegomena, the 27 books of the NT were overwhelmingly favored over any other work among orthodox fathers.

C. How was the NT canon recognized?

1. The earliest Church Fathers recognized the unique authority of the canonical books.

2. During the second century, the Church Fathers began to create canonical lists.

- a. The most ancient list we have is the Muratorian Canon (170). It includes all of the NT books except for Hebrews, James, and 1, 2 Peter.
- b. P46 dates to around 200 and includes 8 Pauline epistles and Hebrews. It’s incomplete, so it may have included all thirteen originally (Kruger, p. 242).
- c. We also have very old collections of the Gospels, and we have translations of the Scriptures into other languages.
- d. The Syriac (East) translation included all 27 books except 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.
- e. The Latin (West) translation included all 27 books except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter.

3. The canon was ultimately agreed upon during the fourth century.

- a. Eusebius (340): He writes that 21 books were universally accepted. James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude were disputed. Eusebius rejected Revelation.
- b. Athanasius (373) (“The Father of Orthodoxy”) affirmed all 27 books.
- c. Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) affirmed all 27 books.
- d. Orthodox Christians have not raised any serious objections since the fourth century.

IV. Conclusion: “Although the story of the development of the New Testament canon, with all its extensive and complicated historical details, is important to understand, it should not distract us from the final outcome...When all the dust had settled, the church had reached an impressive degree of unity about which books it recognized as speaking with the voice of its Master...The fact that the church was able to reach such unity in the midst of such diversity would indicate that more was in play than just the random flow of history. Indeed, such a scenario gives us good reason to think that the church reached unity on these books precisely because Christ himself was speaking in them (Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, p. 287).