How We Got the Bible

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# The Canon of the Scriptures

## Introduction

Much has been given to the transmission of the Bible text – how and under what conditions the text has come down to us, and how we can be sure that we have the exact words of this text. It is now time to take up another phase of the history of the Bible: the collection of books that comprise *Scripture*. Many books were written during the period of the Old and New Testaments. Which of these books rightfully belongs to the Bible, and which should be excluded from it? On what grounds are some writings to be accepted as Scripture and others to be rejected? The answer to these questions can be found in the study of what is known as the “canon” of the Scriptures.

The English word “canon” goes back to the Greek word *kanon* and then to the Hebrew *qaneh*. Its basic meaning is “reed,” or English word “cane” being derived from it. Since a reed was sometimes used as a measuring rod, the word kanon came to mean a standard or rule. Thus, if one speaks of the “canonical” writings, one is speaking of those books which are regarded as having divine authority and which comprise our Bible.

There is a difference between the canonicity of a book and the authority of that book. A book’s canonicity depends on its authority. When Paul, for example, writes to the Corinthians, his letter is to be acknowledged as possessing divine authority (1 Cor.14:37). This letter had authority from the moment he wrote it, yet it could not be referred to as canonical until it was received in a list of accepted writings formed sometime later. At a later time it was accepted as canonical because of its inherent authority.

A book first has divine authority based on its inspiration, and then attains canonicity due to its general acceptance as a divine product. No church council by its decrees can make the books of the Bible authoritative. The books of the Bible possess their own authority and, indeed, had this authority long before there were any councils of the church.

## The Canon of the Old Testament

By the time of Jesus, the canon of the Old Testament had been fixed. Jesus and his apostles quoted from a distinctive body of authoritative writings. They designated them as “the Scripture” (John 7:38; Acts 8:32; Rom. 4:3) “the Scriptures” (Matt. 21:42; John 5:39; Acts 17:11), “the Holy Scriptures” (Rom. 1:2), the Sacred Writings” (2 Tim. 3:15), and so forth. They often introduced their quotations with “it is written,” that is it stands firmly written and it is indisputably true.

When Jesus is applying the Scriptures and their fulfillment to himself, he speaks of “the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms” (Luke 24:44). This threefold division is undoubtedly equivalent to the three divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. We should keep in mind that the Jewish order of the Old Testament differs from ours, and that Chronicles is placed at the end of the Hebrew Bible.

Some scholars have argued that toward the close of the first century Jewish leaders at Jamnia determined the limits of the Old Testament canon. All we can be sure of is that discussions were held in Jamnia sometime in the 1st century about certain books such as Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. The canon was substantially fixed long before Jamnia, and discussions there did not admit certain books into the canon but allowed these books to remain.

Additional evidence come from the writing of Flavius Josephus in his letter known as *Against Apion* written in about 95 A.D., he defends the Jews by arguing that they possessed an antiquity unmatched by the Greeks. From his writings we can draw several conclusions.

1. Josephus stated in his writing that there were 22 books. By joining Ruth and Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah, and remembering that the Jews enumerated their books differently, the twenty-two books mentioned by Josephus are the same as the thirty-nine books in our Bible today.
2. The division of the books is according to a three-part pattern, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.
3. The time covered in these books is expressly limited. Josephus believed that the canon extended from Moses to Artaxerxes (464-424 B.C.). This corresponds with the Jewish belief that prophetic inspiration ceased with Malachi, who apparently was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah. This was the period of Artaxerxes.
4. The text of these books is sacred. No one has dared to cancel or alter it, since to every Jew these writings are decrees of God.”

Josephus goes on to state how highly the Jews esteemed their Scriptures:

*“We have given practical proof of our reverence for out own Scriptures. For, although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable; and it is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them as the decrees of God, to abide by them and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them.”*

Confirmation of the number of books accepted by Josephus comes from early Christian writers such as Origen and Jerome. Origen counts twenty-two books of the Old Testament. Giving both their Hebrew and Greek titles, he lists them as follows:

(1-5) the Five Books of Moses – known as the Law

(6) Joshua

(7) Judges-Ruth

(8) 1 and 2 Samuel

(9) 1 and 2 Kings

(10) Chronicles

(11) Ezra-Nehemiah

(12) Psalms

(13) Proverbs

(14) Ecclesiastes

(15) Song of Solomon

(16) Isaiah

(17) Jeremiah-Lamentations

(18) Daniel

(19) Ezekiel

(20) Job

(21) Esther

(22-29) Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk,

Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)

At the end of the fourth century, Jerome staunchly maintains that the number of books in the Hebrew Old Testament must be no more than twenty-two. He cannot admit other books because they are not in the Hebrew canon.

*"Make knowledge of the Scripture your love … Live with them, meditate on them, make them the sole object of your knowledge and inquiries."*

## The Canon of the New Testament

About the middle of the second century, a Christian writer, Justin Martyr, stated that on Sundays in the Christian worship assemblies the “memoirs of the apostles” were read together with the “writings of the prophets.” Not long after the close of the apostolic age the New Testament writings were being read generally among the churches. How was it possible that within a short time the writings of the apostles were being used for public reading as well as the writing so the Old Testament prophets?

When the church of Christ was first established, it had not thought of a New Testament. Its Bible was the Old Testament and its new teachings were based on the authority of Christ as personally mediated through the apostles. Soon, inspired men began to put in writing divine regulations both for churches and for individuals. Ig was inevitable that these written instructions would become normative, for Christians could not have less respect for them than for their Christ. Thus Paul’s letters were carefully gathered into a single whole; next came the collections of the Four Gospels, and then all the others followed.

Because the collections were made at different times and places, the contents of the various collections were not always the same. This explains why not all of the New Testament books were at first received without hesitation; while in other instances uncertainty of a book’s authorship, as in the case of Hebrews, presented temporary obstacles to universal acceptance. By the middle of the second century, the apostles” letters became widely read in public meeting.

## New Testament Books Appear

Muratorian Fragment – Earliest list of New Testament books written around 170 A.D. Found in the Ambrosian Library in Milan by Father Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750), the most famous Italian historian of his generation, and published in 1740. The list contains the following:

* The Gospel of Luke and referred to as the “third” Gospel, indicating that Matthew and Mark were before Luke.
* John
* Acts
* 13 Letters of Paul
* Jude
* 2 Letters of John
* Revelations

The only books not included in the list are Hebrews, James 1 and 2 Peter, and perhaps 3 John. Notwithstanding these omissions this early list provides in broad outline the substance of our modern New Testament. In addition, the Muratorian Fragment accepts two other books, the Wisdom of Solomon and the Apocalypse of Peter. Other books were excluded, including the Shepherd of Hermas.

Regardless of the different views of some of the books of the New Testament Origen had, the New Testament of the third century is very much like ours today.

Eusebius, the great church historian, distinguishes three categories of books: (1) those that are universally acknowledged, (2) those that are disputed, and (3) those that are rejected.

1. The books acknowledged are the Four Gospels, Acts, fourteen letters of Paul, 1 John, 1 Peter; and Revelation.
2. The disputed books include James, Jude, 2 Peter; and 2 and 3 John, but these are recognized by the majority.
3. The rejected books, among others, are Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Teaching of the Apostles.

In A.D. 367 Athanasius of Alexandria published a list of twenty-seven books of the New Testament that were accepted in his time, and these are the same twenty-seven that are recognized today. Immediately after his list of books, Athanasius adds: *“These are the springs of salvation…. Let no one add anything to them or take anything away from them.”* More discussions on the canon would continue, but by this time a general consensus had been reached.

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, canon is not something that once and for all can be proved. The study of canon is a study of history, and each generation must give itself to that study. This is but another reason why we should try to learn more about the Bible and how it has come down to us.

The word “canon” as used in this study refers to the list of books which are acknowledged as being divinely inspired and are included in the Bible. It is important to emphasize that no church council made the canon of Scripture. No church by its decrees gave to or pronounced on the books of the Bible their infallibility. The Bible owes its authority to no individual or group. The church does not control the canon, but the canon controls the church.