

I. The canon

The Bible is an unusual book. Unlike most modern books, the Bible is composed of many smaller books written by various authors in different times and different places. Naturally, this raises questions about how these books were collected together to form a single volume. When did this happen? Who made the critical decisions? And why should we think they got it right? All these questions pertain to what is known as the biblical canon.

The term canon, from a Hebrew-Greek word meaning “cane” or “measuring rod,” passed into Christian usage to mean “norm” or “rule of faith.” The Church Fathers of the 4th century AD first employed it in reference to the definitive, authoritative nature of the body of sacred Scripture.

Canon refers to the 66 Books of the Bible which are to be received as the authoritative work of God that He has given his people. These books were grouped together corporately by God’s people relatively early, with the OT being settled and stable by the birth of Jesus at latest, and the NT gaining large agreement even before the end of the second century.

Although it wasn’t until 497 AD that the NT canon was officially decided, there is good reason to have historical confidence in the process.

Questions regarding the canon can be divided into two broad categories: *historical* and *theological*. Historical questions about the canon pertain to the when and the how. At what point in history do we see our OT and NT books collected into a functioning corpus? And what forces or individuals influenced that process?

Theological questions are focused more on legitimacy and authority. Do we have a reason to think these are the right books? Can we even know whether we have the right books?

Historical Questions

Old Testament

As for the OT, there are good reasons to think there was an established corpus of books by the time of Jesus.

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus offers a list of 22 OT books accepted by the Jews which appears to match our current 39 book collection (Against Apion, 1.38–42).

For Josephus, at least, the OT canon seems quite settled: “For although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured neither to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable” (Against Apion, 1.42).

The comments of Josephus find confirmation in another first-century Jewish source, namely Philo of Alexandria. Philo hints at a three-fold division to the OT canon: “the laws and the sacred oracles of God enunciated by the holy prophets ... and psalms” (On the Contemplative Life, 25).

This three-fold structure seems to match Jesus’s own words about the OT being composed of “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). Other echoes of a three-fold division to the OT can be found in the Jewish work Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) and a fragmentary text from Qumran known as 4QMMT.

One of the other ways to ascertain the state of the OT canon in the first century is to consider the way NT writers utilize OT books. Even though the OT is cited frequently by NT writers, there is no indication of any dispute over the boundaries OT canon. Indeed, there is not a single instance anywhere of a NT author citing a book as Scripture that is not in our current thirty-nine book canon. And while Jesus himself had many disagreements with the Jewish leadership of his day, there appears to be no indication that there was any disagreement over which books were Scripture—a reality that is hard to explain if the OT canon was still in flux.

In sum, we can agree with Stephen Chapman when he says, “by the turn of the millennium, a Jewish canon of Scripture was largely in place, if not absolutely defined and delimited in scope” (see his article “The Old Testament Canon and Its Authority for the Christian Church,” 137).

New Testament

As for the NT canon, there appears to be a core collection of scriptural books—approximately 22 out of 27—functioning as Scripture by the middle of the second century. Generally speaking, this core would have included the four gospels, Acts, thirteen epistles of Paul, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation.

Books that were “disputed” tended to be the smaller books such as 2 Peter, Jude, James, and 2-3 John.

Even so, it seems Christians were using NT writings as Scripture even before the second century. The book of 2 Peter refers to Paul’s letters as “Scripture” (2 Pet. 3:16), showing that a corpus of Paul’s letters was already in circulation and regarded as on par with the OT books. Similarly, 1 Timothy 5:18 cites a saying of Jesus as Scripture: “the laborer deserves his wages.” The only known match for this saying is Luke 10:17.

In the second century, we see this usage of NT writings continue. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, appears to receive at least the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, as well as 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation, and maybe some of Paul's epistles (see Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 3.39.15–16).

By the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr has an established fourfold Gospel collection that is read in worship alongside OT books (see his 1 Apology, 47.3). And by the time of Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons in the late second-century, we see a nearly complete NT corpus. His canon consists of about twenty-two out of twenty-seven NT books which he regards as Scripture and cites over one thousand times.

In sum, the early Christians formed around the NT books remarkably early. While it was not until the fourth century that the disputes over some of the peripheral books were resolved, the core of the NT canon was already in place long before.

Theological Questions

Even though the historical evidence surveyed above answers questions about when and how the canon was formed, there are still lingering questions about its authority and validity. How do we know that these are the right sixty-six books? Is there a way for the church to know a book is given by God?

These books were largely decided on by virtue of three factors:

- their divine qualities,
- reception by the churches,
- connection to an apostle.

Most of the NT books were composed directly by one of the apostles (including Paul), and those that were not have close links to the testimony of the apostles themselves.

Divine Qualities

The first attribute to consider, and one often overlooked, is that we have good reasons to think books from God would contain within themselves evidence of their divine origin. The Reformers referred to these as divine qualities or indicators (*indicia*). If God is genuinely the one who stands behind these books, then we would expect these books to share God's own qualities.

After all, we know that the created world is from God by seeing God's own attributes revealed therein (Ps. 19: Rom. 1:20). Likewise, we would expect God's special revelation, his written word, to do the same. Examples of such qualities in God's word would be beauty and excellency (Ps. 19:8; 119:103), power and efficacy (Ps. 119:50; Heb. 4:12–13), and unity and harmony (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

Through these divine qualities, Christians recognize the voice of their Lord in the Scriptures. As Jesus himself declared, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me” (John 10:27).

Of course, non-Christians will object to the idea of divine qualities in Scripture because they don’t personally see such qualities. But we must remember that humans are corrupted by the fall and darkened by sin. In order to see these qualities rightly, they need what the Reformers called the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. For those in Christ, the Spirit opens our eyes to see the divine qualities in these books that are objectively present.

Corporate Reception

It is important to note that the work of the Spirit does not happen only on an individual level, but also on a corporate level. Thus, there are good reasons to think that God’s collective, covenantal people would eventually recognize the books that are from him. If so, then we can look to the consensus of God’s people (in both old and new covenant times) as a reliable guide to which books are from him.

This does not mean that we should expect God’s people to have instantaneous and absolute unity over the canonical books. There will always be pockets of disagreement and dissension (just like there would be over any doctrine). But we can expect a predominant or general consensus through the ages—which is exactly what we find. As Herman Ridderbos argued, “Christ will establish and build his church by causing the church to accept just this canon and, by means of the assistance and witness of the Holy Spirit, to recognize it as his” (H.N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scripture*, 37).

Authoritative Authors

A final attribute of canonical books is that they are written by God’s chosen agents, his inspired prophets and apostles. Put simply, not just anyone can speak for God; only those commissioned to be his mouthpiece. In the OT this included the prophets and other inspired spokesmen (Rom. 1:2; 2 Pet. 3:2). In the NT it included the apostles, Christ’s authoritative witnesses (Mark 3:14–15; Matt 10:20; Luke 10:16).

We have good historical evidence (which cannot be explored here) that the books in our Bible can be traced either directly to apostles/prophets or at least to a historical situation where that book could reasonably retain the teachings of an apostle/prophet. For example, we accept the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible) as from God because we believe Moses was the author. Likewise, we accept the books like 1 and 2 Corinthians because we think the apostle Paul was the author. And we even accept anonymous books like

Hebrews because we have good reasons to think the author received his information directly from apostles (Heb 2:3–4; 13:23).

II. Prophecy

So what is prophecy? Some see it as the receiving of direct revelation from God and speaking it. Spirit empowered speaking of the Word of God which presses deep in the hearts and minds of people. The heart of prophecy isn't the receiving of revelation as much as the power speaking of revelation. The speaking within prophecy is the ongoing work of God.

Is God still speaking today? The simple answer is yes because he speaks through the Holy Bible. Does he speak beyond Scripture? Some people say no but others say that God led me to do this or that. This is God speaking!

Others would say that God never stops speaking; in fact, the primary work of God is God speaking directly to his children. I believe that God does speak today but it always must be tested.

From 1 Thessalonians 5 where Paul is finishing up; he has a few short points: rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances. Then in verse 19, he says not to quench the Spirit and don't treat prophecies with contempt but test them all, hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. This means that the Holy Spirit is working today. So I think God speaks today but we have to test it. We also have 1 Corinthians 14:29 and 1st John 4 and there are others. It seems to me that we should test prophecy against Scripture and against the character of the prophet.