

Apologetics – Canonicity

“Canon” = “standard” or “measuring rod. It is a term used to refer to what books meet the standard of being inspired Scripture.

- 1. With reference to Scripture, the canon is the collection of those writings which come from God and are therefore authoritative for faith and practice.** When we talk about the canon of Scripture, what we mean is that these 66 books have been measured and found to measure up so that we recognize them as authoritative for faith and practice.
- 2. We must distinguish between the authority of the writing and the recognition of that authority by humans.** A lot of discussions of canonicity get sidetracked and centre around the issue of recognition rather than the authority. Properly speaking, church councils, synods, bishops, popes, do not and cannot canonize Biblical books. All that anyone can do is to recognize the canonicity of the books. The books are properly canonical whether recognized as such or not. The authority does not come from the church, but from God.
- 3. The recognition of canonicity is a matter of faith.** We recognize certain books as authoritative only because God enables us to do that. But in principle it is always possible for us to go back and re-evaluate whether all the 66 should be there or another one should be there. In principle we could do that; in practice we cannot. (If for no other reason, we do not have the original information from eyewitnesses at our disposal from the apostolic era to help us in determining canonicity.) The books were written over time, recognized as authoritative, guarded, kept, and circulated within the believing community. There is an element of faith that enters into this.

I. The Old Testament Canon.

A. Christ used the Old Testament widely, quoting from most of the Old Testament books and from every section of the Old Testament.

B. This was received by the church directly from Israel.

The apostles recognized and used the Old Testament writings as Scripture. Their writings are riddled with Old Testament quotations and allusions. Esther is the only Old Testament book that is not quoted in the New Testament.

C. We know little about the actual process by which the Old Testament canon was recognized.

1. There was some controversy about the law being more authoritative than the writings and the prophets. Some Jewish Rabbis thought that the law was more authoritative than the writings and the prophets, but Christ and the apostles seemed to use all divisions with equal authority.

2. Some believe that Ezra was responsible for the compilation of the Old Testament canon. Ezra may have helped put the canon into shape, but there had to be an Old Testament canon before Ezra.

(Think of all the references of various kings, *e.g.*, Josiah, reading the Scriptures.)

II. The OT Apocrypha

1 Esdras (Vulgate 3 Esdras)

2 Esdras (Vulgate 4 Esdras)

Tobit

Judith ("Judeth" in Geneva)

Rest of Esther (Vulgate Esther 10:4 – 16:24)

Wisdom

Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach)

Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremy ("Jeremiah" in Geneva) (all part of Vulgate Baruch)

Song of the Three Children (Vulgate Daniel 3:24–90)

Story of Susanna (Vulgate Daniel 13)

The Idol Bel and the Dragon (Vulgate Daniel 14)

Prayer of Manasseh (Daniel)

1 Maccabees

2 Maccabees

A. The Jews did not accept the apocryphal books as Scripture, though they did believe that they were profitable.

1. The content was often theologically and historically inaccurate.
2. Some were written in languages other than the Semitic languages of Hebrew and Aramaic.
3. The writings come from a late period: the rabbis accepted only those written in a period from Moses to Artaxerxes.

B. The approach of the Church

1. **The NT writers never use the apocrypha as authoritative. They never refer to or quote the Apocrypha.** (Jude possibly quotes book of Enoch (?), but it wasn't in the Apocrypha; Enoch is one of the pseudoepigraphical works written just before or just after the New Testament era.
2. **The early church rejected the apocrypha for at least the first three centuries.**
4. **There was no official recognition of the canonicity of any apocryphal book until the Council of Trent after the Reformation (1545-1563)** The impetus to canonize the *Apocrypha* in the West appears to stem from: (1) very high view of the Latin Vulgate, since Jerome bound them with it, they must be part of the inspired Vulgate; and (2) some Roman Catholic doctrines get support from the *Apocrypha* that they don't get anywhere else in Scripture.

III. The New Testament Canon

A. The writers of the NT held that their writings were both authoritative and a part of Scripture.

1. The things Paul wrote, he said, were commanded by the Lord. (I Cor. 14:37; I Thess. 4:2)
2. The NT writers equated their writings with Scripture.
 - a. Peter refers to Paul's writings as Scripture. (2 Pet. 3:15-16).
 - b. Paul sets a quotation from Deut. 25:4 alongside a quotation from either Matt. 10:10 or Luke 10:7, and Paul refers to both as Scripture (I Tim. 5:18).

But as we get into the second century, there is a growing need for some kind of standard. Of course, whatever was from the apostles was considered to be inspired. But it got more difficult than that.

After all, there are a number of good letters and epistles floating around, but people are unsure if they are Scripture, such as the First Letter of Clement. The Didache dates to around 120, and was it supposed to be part of Holy Scripture?

More dangerously, some false Gospels are emerging, claiming apostolic authorship: the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Judas. Plenty of pseudepigrapha appear: works claiming to be authored by a biblical figure, but are not.

B. The view of the early church.

- a. Irenaeus (115-202)
- b. The Muratorian Fragment (170)

Aside from Irenaeus, a second important artifact shows how canonicity was developing in the second century. Muratorian Canon (c. 180) is oldest list of NT books, named after L. A. Muratori, (1740) who discovered and edited a Latin codex translated from a Greek original, c. 170-180.

The author accepts 4 Gospels (Luke and John are named, but the names of the first two are missing—almost certainly Matthew and Mark, the Acts of the Apostles, all 13 Pauline letters, 1 & 2 John, possibly 3 John, Jude & Revelation. Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter are not mentioned.

He also includes the Apocalypse of Peter and the Wisdom of Solomon.

Now what is happening is that very early, the church is recognising the marks of inspiration. But not everyone has the same access to the same books, and some things are being rejected that should not be, and some are being included that should not be.

You can see the to and fro taking place in the writings of men in the first centuries. Origen (184-253) accepts 4 Gospels, Acts, 13 Pauline epistles., 1 Peter, 1 John, Rev, but he rejects Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, Shepherd of Hermas.

Eusebius (260-340) accepts 4 Gospels, Acts, Paul's epistles 1 Peter, 1 John, but he rejects James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Revelation, Shepherd of Hermas, Didache.

There was very little dispute over Gospels, Acts and Paul's letters, but there was dispute over what are now called the General Epistles.

Hebrews was thought to be Pauline in the East, but thought to be a forgery in the West

James was thought to be genuine in the East, but authorship in doubt in the West

2 Peter was thought to be genuine in the East; not the West.

2-3 John was thought to be genuine in the East, not in the West.

Jude was thought to be genuine in the East, not in the West.

Revelation – Apostolic acceptance in the East but Eusebius led in the rejection in the West because of his anti-chiliasm.

The West was far more sceptical and took more persuading. But it is not as if the East simply accepted everything. Because of late dates, uncertain origins, and doubtful authenticity, eventually both West and East rejected The Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, and Revelation of Peter.

Athanasius (Paschal letter of 367) represented final acceptance in the East and included our present canon. Finally the synod of Rome (382) also accepted our present canon and represented final acceptance in the West. The Council of Carthage (397) was the church-wide acceptance of our present canon.

Again, the question to keep in mind is, was the church **creating** the standard of inspired Scripture, or was it **recognising** the standard? Did the church create the Bible or did the Bible create the church? If the Bible is the final authority, no human authority could pass judgement on it. It must contain its own authority. It must be self-authenticating. How would a self-authenticating Scripture be recognised?

First, it would exhibit divine qualities. The writing should contain **beauty** in its truth and composition. It should exhibit **power**: power to convert and transform. It should have efficacy, ability to effect change. It should contain **unity**: a doctrinal, thematic, and structural unity not only with itself, but with what had already been recognised as Scripture. The church was reading a lot of letters, and they considered whether it had the qualities of divine authorship.

Second, it would have apostolic authorship or apostolic testimony. The apostles were recognised as the appointed ministers of the new covenant. Just as Moses was the minister of the old, and penned the Law, so the apostles would be those delegated to pen the new covenant. Any Scripture by an apostle immediately received this stamp of authority, Matthew, John, and his epistles, the letters of Paul. Close association with an apostle counted as apostolic testimony, so Luke and Acts was accepted because of Luke's association with Paul, Mark was accepted because of his association

with Peter. When the church became sure that the epistles of Peter, John, and Revelation were written by John and Peter, they were accepted. James and Jude were verified as the work of the half-brothers of Jesus, and accepted. Hebrews was accepted as either being written by Paul, Barnabas, or Luke.

Third, there would be corporate reception by God's people! This is a powerful but difficult thing to understand. God providentially worked through the disagreements and disputes of the church to develop a consensus. Could they have been wrong? Certainly, but we have to believe God was guiding the process of acceptance and rejection, using a very sceptical West, and a more tolerant East to balance each other out, and recognise those that were truly inspired.

Here is another reason not to despise tradition. While the Bible contains its own authority, God used the collective wisdom of His people to curate and canonise what was inspired all along. The Bible does not contain within itself a contents page. But God does work in corporate reception, just as He used the doctrinal councils. They are not infallible, but where they faithfully represented what was always in the text of Scripture, they represent a gift of God. It means you do not have to go through the process of canonicity yourself, re-inventing the wheel every generation. You can stand on the shoulders of the church, accept their judgements, and question them when necessary.