

**Intro:**

Our next subject after inspiration and inerrancy is called ‘The Canon’.

Does anyone know what ‘canon’ means?

The word refers to a rule or standard by which something is measured. It came to refer to the books of the Bible this way:

1. First used in the early church to refer to creeds: statements of faith, rules of belief.
2. In the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century (350s), came to refer to the list of accepted books acknowledged to make up the Bible.
3. “Actually the word *canon* has a twofold meaning. It refers to the list of books that met certain tests or rules and thus were considered authoritative and canonical. But it also means that the collection of canonical books becomes our rule of life.”<sup>1</sup>

**I. Underlying considerations concerning canonicity****A. The Bible is self-authenticating**

1. Inspiration demands it: the moment written, the books of the Bible were part of the Word of God. [Why? Because of the fact of inspiration]
2. No need to wait for councils to determine canonicity.
3. Men and councils only served to recognize inherent canonicity of any particular book.

**B. The history of councils**

1. The early councils of the church had to wrestle with the question since some churches used and supported the inclusion of non-inspired books.
2. The councils had to collect the authentic books and recognize their distinction from non-inspired books.
3. The process of recognition resulted in disputes about some books, including inspired books.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology : A Popular Systemic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1999). 118.

“However, these debates in no way weaken the authenticity of the truly canonical books, nor do they give status to those that were not inspired by God.”<sup>2</sup>

### C. The process finalized

1. In AD 397 the church recognized two things:
  - a. The whole Bible had been collected and identified.
  - b. No additional books of the Bible had been produced since the time of the apostles — the canon was closed.
2. Even if a letter of one of the apostles should be found today, it wouldn't be included in the canon.
  - a. The apostles wrote many letters (references in 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians) that were not preserved.
  - b. The un-preserved (or unused) letters are not inspired; the apostles wrote things that were not inspired.
  - c. Even if such a letter were entirely doctrinally correct, it wouldn't be inspired, because it wasn't preserved.
  - d. The words Jesus wrote in the dust when the woman caught in adultery was led to him were not inspired — *i.e.*, ‘breathed out’ by God as Scripture — even though they were true, miraculous, and very convicting to those who read them.
3. The writings of various cults and non-Christian religious figures are not inspired – they have no authority like the Bible's authority.

## II. The Canon of the Old Testament

### A. Evidence from the Old Testament itself

1. OT gives evidence that the Mosaic Law is authoritative
  - a. Josh 1.7–8, 23.6
  - b. 1 Ki 2.3
  - c. 2 Ki 14.6, 21.8, 23.25
  - d. Ez 6.18
  - e. Neh 13.1
  - f. Dan 9.11
  - g. Mal 4.4

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<sup>2</sup> Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 120.

2. The prophets claimed authority and prophecies were recognized as authoritative
  - a. Josh 6.26 || 1 Ki 16.34
  - b. Josh 24.29–33 || Jdg 2.8–9
  - c. 2 Chr 36.22–23 || Ez 1.1–4
  - d. Dan 9.2 || Jer 25.11–12.
3. Mal 4.5: “In Malachi 4:5 there is an indication that the prophetic witness would end with Malachi and not begin again until the coming of an Elijah-type prophet in the person of John the Baptist (Matt. 17:11–12).”<sup>3</sup>

#### B. Evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls

1. Demonstrate what OT books were recognized as sacred in period between OT and NT
2. Number of documents:
  - a. 175 out of 500 are biblical documents
  - b. Several copies of many books
  - c. All OT books represented except for Esther
3. “The existence of biblical books among the scrolls does not in itself prove their canonicity since some of the noncanonical books are also present. However, many of the Dead Sea Scrolls are commentaries, and so far all of those commentaries deal only with canonical books. That seems to show that a distinction between canonical and noncanonical books was recognized. Also twenty of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are quoted or referred to as Scripture. In summary, the scrolls give positive evidence for the canonicity of all but Chronicles, Esther, and the Song of Solomon.”<sup>4</sup>

#### C. Other Evidence

1. *Prologue to Ecclesiasticus*.
  - a. Non-canonical book
  - b. Refers to three-fold division of books: Law, Prophets, Hymns and precepts

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<sup>3</sup> Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 121.

<sup>4</sup> Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 121.

- c. Said this division was known to writer's grandfather (about 200 BC)
  2. Philo (ca. AD 40) referred to same three-fold division
  3. Josephus (AD 37-100)
    - a. Said Jews held 22 books as sacred
    - b. Exactly same as our 39, but no divisions like 1 & 2 Kings, etc.
  4. Jamnia (AD 90)
    - a. Teaching house of rabbis
    - b. Debated what books should be accepted (questions over Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon)
    - c. Existing canon assumed
  5. Church fathers
    - a. Teachers of the early church
    - b. All church fathers except Augustine accepted the 39 books of OT
    - c. Augustine also accepted what we call the Apocrypha, although he did not acknowledge them to be fully authoritative
    - d. The church at large never accepted the Apocrypha
    - e. The Roman Church erroneously accepted the Apocrypha only at the council of Trent (AD 1546)
- D. The Evidence of the New Testament
  1. Quotations of OT in NT
    - a. Approx 250 quotes of OT in NT
    - b. None from Apocrypha
    - c. One quote from 'Book of Enoch' (Jude 14) but this is a non-canonical book, and not in Apocrypha
    - d. All OT books are quoted from except Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon
  2. Mt 5.17: Jesus said all of the Law and the Prophets would be fulfilled (designation covers whole OT)

## 3. Lk 11.51

a. Jesus condemned the Jews for killing God's messengers through their history, 'From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias'

- 1) Murder of Abel recorded in Genesis
- 2) Murder of Zacharias recorded in 2 Chr 24

b. Jewish order of OT books goes from Genesis to Chronicles

"So the Lord was saying, "From the first to the last murder recorded in the Old Testament." Now, of course, there were other murders of God's messengers recorded in the Apocrypha, but the Lord does not include them. Evidently He did not consider the books of the Apocrypha to be of equal authority with the books from Genesis to 2 Chronicles."<sup>5</sup>

### III. The Canon of the New Testament

#### A. The process of acknowledgement

##### 1. The apostolic period

- a. Testimony that their own writings were authoritative (Col 4.16; 1 Th 5.27)
- b. Testimony concerning the writings of other NT writers
  - 1) 1 Tim 5.18 quotes Dt 25.4 and Lk 10.7 as Scripture
  - 2) 2 Pt 3.16 [near end of Peter's life and Paul's writings] calls Paul's writings Scripture

##### 2. The post-apostolic period (AD 70-170)

- a. All NT books cited as Scripture in other writings
- b. Church Fathers collectively recognized all 27 NT books [though not necessarily individually]

"By the end of the 1st century all of the books of the New Testament were in existence. They were, as treasures of given churches, widely separated and honored as containing the word of Jesus or the teaching of the apostles."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> J. S. Riggs "Canon of the New Testament," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James S Orr, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939)

“Omitting many details, we may turn to the three great witnesses of the earliest age. Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp all wrote between A.D. 95 and about 118, They show by quotation or clear allusion, that they knew and used all our NT books except Luke, Revelation, Colossians, Philemon, II Peter, II and III John and Jude. ... Moreover, these authors held the apostles in such high repute that their writings would obviously be treasured and accepted. Clement rather clearly ascribes inspiration to Paul. Actually, the omission of some of the books is not significant, Revelation and II and III John were possibly not yet written when Clement wrote in A.D. 95.”<sup>7</sup>

c. Marcion, a heretic, accepted only Luke and ten of Paul’s epistles — which shows Paul’s writings were being collected

### 3. Conclusions of the church by the end of the second century

a. Muratorian canon: a list from about AD 170 that includes all NT books except Heb, Jas, 1 & 2 Pt (all had been accepted earlier, but are not listed in this document for some reason).<sup>8</sup>

- 1) There is a break in manuscript, so rejection not certain
- 2) Specifically rejected ‘extra’ books of the period like ‘Shepherd of Hermas’

“The period from 170 AD to 220 AD — This is the age of a voluminous theological literature busy with the great issues of church canon and creed. ... In passing into it we come into the clear light of Christian history. There is no longer any question as to a New Testament canon; the only difference of judgment is as to its extent. What has been slowly but surely shaping itself in the consciousness of the church now comes to clear expression.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> R. Laird Harris, “Canonicity”, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library [Zondervan Publishing House], 1967) 144-146, 146

<sup>8</sup> R. Laird Harris, “Canonicity”, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library [Zondervan Publishing House], 1967) 144-146, 145

<sup>9</sup> J. S. Riggs “Canon of the New Testament,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James S Orr, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939)

“All the Fathers at the close of the second century agree in appealing to the testimony of antiquity as proving the authenticity of the books which they used as Christian Scriptures. And the appeal was made at a time when it was easy to try its worth.”<sup>10</sup>

B. The extent of the canon settled – AD 200-400

1. Generally speaking, the books of the NT as we have them today were universally accepted.
  - a. Acceptance was slow for some of the books, however. Origen called the universally accepted books the ‘homologoumena’ and the books that were questioned ‘antilegomena’. The books under discussion were: Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude, and Revelation.<sup>11</sup>

“We ought not to wonder too much at this hesitancy of some leaders of the early Church to accept these seven books. It is clear that no one regarded them as written by James, Peter, John, and Jude and yet rejected them; the question was whether the books that bore these names were really written by these persons. Were not many pseudonymous books appearing still under the names of the Apostles? Had not Paul (2 Thess. 2:1, 2) and John (1 John 4:1) specifically warned their readers to be on their guard against spurious epistles and false prophets? Besides, the internal evidence for these books is peculiar. Hebrews does not give the author’s name and differs in vocabulary and style from the recognized Epistles of Paul; 2 Peter differs from 1 Peter in the same way; in James and Jude the writers are represented as ‘servants’ of Christ, not as apostles; and in 2 and 3 John the author calls himself a ‘presbyter,’ not an apostle. Jude was also questioned because it was thought to quote from an apocryphal book. Furthermore, these books were written either to Christians generally, or to private individuals, not to specific churches. No one was, therefore, from the human standpoint, immediately interested in preserving

<sup>10</sup> Westcott, *On the Canon of the New Testament*, 314, quoted in H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943) 9

<sup>11</sup> H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943) 10-11

them. Perhaps that is the reason why the external evidence for them is more scanty. All these factors militated against the early reception of these books. Gradually, however, the so-called antilegomena came also to be universally accepted.”<sup>12</sup>

b. The debate over which books to include varied somewhat by region

- 1) Syria, Asia Minor, and Thrace (East of Macedonia, modern Balkans)
- 2) Egypt and Palestine
- 3) Italy, Gaul and North Africa

Some of this difference would depend on availability of books, travel ease, commerce routes, interests and work of leading preachers of each region, and so on. The fact that there was a debate indicates the care which the early pastors of the church took in seeking out the clear word of God. They were not gullible, but careful. ‘Swift to hear, slow to speak,’ as James says.

c. Origen’s view (Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt)

“The Gospels, the Pauline epistles, the Acts, he accepts without question. He discusses at some length the authorship of He[brews], believes that ‘God alone knows who wrote it,’ and accepts it as Scripture. His testimony to the Apocalypse is given in the sentence, ‘Therefore John the son of Zebedee says in the Revelation.’ He also gives sure witness to Jude, but wavers in regard to James, 2 Peter, 2 John, and 3 John.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943) 11-12

<sup>13</sup> J. S. Riggs “Canon of the New Testament,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James S Orr, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939)

2. Other highly regarded books, but not accepted...<sup>14</sup>
- a. 1 Clement, a letter of Clement of Rome (about AD 96) - highly regarded, read in a public service in Corinth in AD 170
  - b. 2 Clement, falsely ascribed to Clement, not as widely known, more known in the East (both of these documents included in Codex Alexandrinus - Greek manuscript of NT - but neither accepted as canonical in the Western church)
  - c. The Didache (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), written about AD 120, only accepted in Egypt as Scripture, although well known elsewhere
  - d. The Epistle of Barnabas, about AD 130, treated as canonical in Egypt, but not elsewhere
  - e. Shepherd of Hermas, about 140, written by a brother of a bishop of Rome, accepted by Irenaeus (an early church father) but not by other prominent church fathers such as Tertullian or Clement of Alexandria.

These are the major 'extra-biblical' works, there are many others, often written in the name of one of the apostles, but did not really receive serious consideration.

3. The factors leading to a settling of the question
- a. Constantine's alliance with the church (320s)

"The advance of Christianity under Constantine had much to do with the reception of the whole group of books in the East. The task which the emperor gave to Eusebius to prepare 'fifty copies of the Divine Scriptures' established a standard which in time gave recognition to all doubtful books."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943) 6-7

<sup>15</sup> J. S. Riggs "Canon of the New Testament," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James S Orr, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939)

## b. The Council of Carthage (397)

## 1) Augustine

“The Third Council of Carthage (397) gives us the first Counciliar decision on the Canon. Augustine was an influential member of this Council. One of the Canons of this gathering demands that nothing be read in the Church under the title of divine Scripture except the ‘canonical’ books. Then it gives a list of the books that are canonical, which embraces exactly our twenty-seven books.”<sup>16</sup>

## 2) Jerome

“In the West, Jerome and Augustine were the controlling factors in its settlement of the canon. The publication of the Vulgate (Jerome’s Latin Bible, 390-405 A.D.) virtually determined the matter.”<sup>17</sup>

4. The four tests: Apostolicity, Contents, Universality, Inspiration.<sup>18</sup>

a. Inspiration: “did the book give evidence of being divinely inspired? This was the ultimate test; everything finally had to give way to it.”

b. Universality: “was the book universally received in the church?”

“As the books circulated they had to gain acceptance by the churches. Actually there was no book that was doubted by any large number of churches that eventually was accepted into the canon.”<sup>19</sup>

c. Contents: “were the contents of a given book of such a spiritual character as to entitle it to this rank?” (This test eliminated most of the extra books.)

<sup>16</sup> H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943) 26

<sup>17</sup> J. S. Riggs “Canon of the New Testament,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James S Orr, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939)

<sup>18</sup> H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943) 10

<sup>19</sup> Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 123.

- d. Apostolicity: “was the book written by an apostle, or, if not, did the author of the book sustain such a relation to an apostle as to raise his book to the level of the apostolic books?”
- 1) In OT the book required the authority of a lawgiver [Moses], a prophet, or a leader in Israel
  - 2) In NT a book must have the authority of an apostle behind it
    - a) Direct author as an apostle, or ...
    - b) Close association and supervision by apostle

#### IV. Summary timeline of the NT canon

- A. AD 100 - by this point all of the NT is written
- B. AD 200 - essentially all of the NT books were regarded with the same respect we have today
- C. AD 300 - debate over Revelation in the East and Hebrews in the West. All extra biblical books dismissed by this point.
- D. AD 400 - debate settled in the West, influence of Jerome and Augustine (Western) as well as Athanasius (Eastern) largely contribute to this.
- E. AD 500 - by this point the issue has been settled, the whole church confirms the canon as we know it today.
- F. AD 1500 - as the Church grew in power, the accepted canon remained the one approved by Augustine in the 3rd Council of Carthage. The Church began to exert more and more control over the Bible and eventually forbade the common people having a copy of any part of it.
- G. AD 1600 - period of the Reformers brought new controversy:
  1. Erasmus (Roman Catholic scholar) denied Paul wrote Hebrews, but accepted it, questioned value of James.
  2. Luther excluded Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation, putting them at the end of his German New Testament.
  3. Calvin accepts all but 2 & 3 John and Revelation receive no notice from him.
  4. Others had similar misgivings on some of the ‘antilegomena’.
  5. The Catholic Council of Trent settled the question for Catholics: accepted all of what we have today, plus the Apocrypha (OT extra books).

6. The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (1562, 1571) accepted the standard list.
7. Westminster Confession (1643) likewise.

But see this quote from Ryrie: “Sometimes it is claimed that Martin Luther rejected the book of James as being canonical. This is not so. Here’s what he wrote in his preface to the New Testament in which he ascribes to the several books of the New Testament different degrees of doctrinal value. ‘St. John’s Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul’s Epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and St. Peter’s Epistle—these are the books which show to thee Christ, and teach everything that is necessary and blessed for thee to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book of doctrine. Therefore, St. James’ Epistle is a perfect straw-epistle compared with them, for it has in it nothing of an evangelic kind.’ Thus Luther was comparing (in his opinion) doctrinal value, not canonical validity.”<sup>20</sup>

- H. Modern Times - the attack on the Bible today is not on the lists, but on the content. Some liberals try to devalue the content by making the books of the Bible mere human books and deny (outright or by suggestion) the supernatural inspiration of the books of the Bible.

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<sup>20</sup> Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 124.

## Conclusion:

“From the close of the second century the history of the Canon is simple, and its proof clear. It is allowed even by those who have reduced the genuine Apostolic works to the narrowest limits, that from the time of Irenaeus the New Testament was composed essentially of the same books which we receive at the present, and that they were regarded with the same reverence as is now shown to them.”<sup>21</sup>

“It is a remarkable fact that no early Church Council selected the books that should constitute the New Testament Canon. The books that we now have crushed out all rivals, not by any adventitious authority, but by their own weight and worth. This is in itself a strong proof of the genuineness and authenticity of the books that have survived. It is not until the close of the fourth century that any Council even discussed the subject.”<sup>22</sup>

**Athanasius (c. 300-373, bishop of Alexandria from 328-373, champion of orthodoxy at the Council of Nicea, 325):** “These are the wells of salvation, so that he who thirsts may be satisfied with the sayings in these. Let no one add to these. Let nothing be taken away.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Westcott, *On the Canon of the New Testament*, 6, quoted in H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943), 8-9

<sup>22</sup> H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943) 25

<sup>23</sup> J. S. Riggs “Canon of the New Testament,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James S Orr, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939)