



THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

The word *canon* comes from the Greek *kanon* meaning *standard* or *rule*. Used in the context of Scripture, the term refers to the Old and New Testaments.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

No greater authority could be given to the Old Testament canon, than that provided by Jesus himself. He definitively set its limits to “Moses and all the prophets”, and “all the scriptures”. In other words, he supported the prevailing belief in the canon’s threefold division:

- THE LAW (“Torah”).
- THE PROPHETS (“Nebiim”).
- THE WRITINGS (“Kethubim”). The Writings, also called “The Psalms”, included the remaining books of the Old Testament scriptures.

Supporting text: Luke 24:27,44.

The Law or Pentateuch.

Judaism has always accepted the books from Genesis to Deuteronomy to be divinely authoritative. Moses was known to have written “all the words of the Lord”, which he later handed to the priests as the custodians of God’s Word. His successor, Joshua, read it to the entire nation. Certainly, by BC 721/722, when the Assyrians captured Samaria, the existence of the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch was evidence that the “Torah” had been accepted widely as canonical.

Supporting texts: Exodus 24:4; Deuteronomy 31:9-11; Joshua 8:35.

The Prophets.

These mighty men of God were the anointed mouth pieces for his message. Therefore, it was essential that their words should be recorded on parchment. Equally, it was considered imperative to remember God’s sovereign activities in history. Consequently, the inspired writings (“thus saith the Lord”) of the “former” prophets recorded in “Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, as well as those of the “latter” (Isaiah to Malachi [excluding Daniel]) were added by the Jews to the existing canon. Not surprisingly, a large part of the Psalms written by David were also included.

Supporting texts: Deuteronomy 17:18, 19; 1 Chronicles 29:29-30; Jeremiah 36:1-4; Acts 2:25-28; 2 Peter 1:21.

If the collation of the scrolls appears to have been partially accomplished by the time of the exile (BC 605–586)—Daniel refers to “the books” and to “Jeremiah”— it was certainly completed with the close of the prophetic voice. This close was spoken of by the LORD through the prophet Zechariah. It was determined by God and not by a council of scholars. The unique prophetic ministry gradually dried up, creating the 400 years of the inter-testament period. These “silent years” were not broken until the sudden appearance of John the Baptist.

Supporting texts: Daniel 9:2; Zechariah 13:2-5; Malachi 4:5.

The Writings, Psalms, or Hagiographa (Septuagint).

This section consists of material acknowledged by the Jews as being authentically “of God” (Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther and Job). Some of it had originally been associated with “the Prophets” (Ruth with Judges, Lamentations with Jeremiah), but was later transferred to The Writings to be part of the “volumes’ [“Megilloth”] to accompany Solomon’s Song, Ecclesiastes and Esther. Daniel was included here because it is apocalyptic



rather than prophetic. The Apocrypha was not considered inspired, and was therefore excluded.

Supporting text: Psalm 40:7.

The official date for the completion of the Old Testament canon is uncertain, but in BC 200 a reference was made to the three sections in The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirac. In other words, by that time the limits of the canon had been fixed, and it was to this that Jesus referred when he stated that “the scripture cannot be broken”. His contemporaries would have understood what he meant.

Supporting text: John 10:35.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The development of the New Testament canon was driven by two beliefs. The *first* was Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah, and that in him the Old Testament had been fulfilled. Thus, his words were recorded in the Gospels and read alongside the existing canonical books on account of their equal authority. *Secondly*, there was the belief that the apostles had been especially chosen by the Lord to be his constant companions. Thus, it was deemed necessary for their writings to be placed alongside the Gospels. Together, the Gospels and apostolic writings formed the definitive exposition of Christianity’s teaching and practice.

Supporting text: Matthew 5:17, 21-22.

The recognition of the New Testament canon was a process guided by the Holy Spirit which nevertheless took many years. Historically, the process unfolded in three stages.

Stage one: From the composition of the books to the close of the second century.

By the second century, the early church had accepted the authenticity, authority, and inspiration of the four Gospels, Act, thirteen of Paul’s Epistles (excluding Hebrews), 1 John and 1 Peter (although a question mark hovered over the last two). We know of this acceptance from the extant literature associated with Clement of Rome (AD 96). Ignatius and Polycarp (AD 115), Papius (AD 140), Justin Martyr (AD 148) and Tatian (AD 175).

In other words, the canon of that period consisted of twenty out of the twenty-seven New Testament books known today. It was not unusual for the phrase “it is written” to introduce a quotation from them. This is substantiated by the four major strands of Christian thought at the close of the second and opening of the third centuries; the Latin translation from the Greek (circa AD 170), Irenaeus of Gaul (AD 180), Clement of Alexandria (AD 190–210] and Tertullian of North Africa (AD 195–220]. It was Tertullian who was the first to use the term *New Testament* when referring to the Christian scriptures.

Stage two: AD 200 to 325.

These years witnessed great strides forward as Christianity’s influence spread throughout the empire. The era culminated in Emperor Constantine granting official acceptance of Christianity in AD 313. Three years later, according to Eusebius, the church as a whole, under the inspired guidance of the Holy Spirit, applied its collective wisdom to the matter of the New Testament canon, thus adding to the twenty books already accepted another seven: Hebrews (of disputed



authorship), Revelation, plus James, 2 Peter, 2/3 John and Jude. Some other well-known works of the time, which were under consideration—Didache, The Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermes and the Epistle of Barnabas—were rejected. In the meantime, libraries were established in strategic places such as Jerusalem, Caesarea, Alexandria, Antioch and Rome, which contained manuscripts of the Scriptures as well as commentaries.

The third stage: From AD 325.

The stage is marked by authoritative pronouncements, first by individuals, no doubt representing local churches, and later by Councils about the canon of Scripture. In the East, Athanasius, in his Paschal Letter of AD367, was the first to put forward a canon, coinciding exactly with our New Testament. In the West, exactly thirty years later, the Council of Carthage did likewise. These decisions were finally and officially confirmed in AD 691 at a Council in Constantinople.

~~~