

## “The Canonicity of the Bible, part 2”

Various passages

We've been considering the subject of **canonicity** which simply refers to how we know that we have the right books. The word ‘canonicity’ comes from the Greek word ‘kanon’ which means rule or standard of measurement.

### **Galatians 6:16 - “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule.”**

You're familiar with the phrase ‘rule of faith.’ The rule of faith is the standard of sound doctrine. Over time, ‘canon’ also came to mean a catalog or list—used in this case to describe the authoritative list of books that make up the Bible. In our study thus far, we've considered doctrines such as revelation and inspiration.

Well, the doctrine of ‘canonization’ tells us how the Bible received its acceptance as men recognized the authority of God’s inspired writings. It is the process by which the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God was recognized as such by men of God and then collected and preserved by the people of God.

The Bible is one book from one divine Author, though it was written over a period of some 1500 years by approximately 40 different men. Beginning with the record of creation in Genesis 1-2, written by Moses around 1400 BC, and extending to the account of eternity future in Revelation 21-22, written by the apostle John around 95 AD, God progressively revealed Himself and His redemptive purpose in the inspired Scriptures.

The Bible that you are holding in your hand contains 39 books in the Old Testament, and 27 books in the New Testament. How do we know that we have the right books? Consider:

- Why are the apocryphal books not included in our Bible?

- Why is the Book of Mormon not inspired Scripture?

All of these are questions that deal with the subject of **canonicity**. How can we know which books were to be included in the canon of Scripture and which ones were to be excluded? That's what I want to show you tonight.

Over the centuries, three widely recognized principles were used to affirm those writings that constituted inspired and divine revelation. Consider:

1. *The writing had to have been authored by a recognized **prophet** or **apostle** or by someone closely associated with one. (Authenticity)*
2. *The writing could not disagree with or **contradict** any previous Scripture. (Authority)*
3. *The church had to display a general **consensus** that a writing was an inspired book. (Antiquity)*

Most of the books of the developing New Testament were acknowledged from early on, and the first list of all 27 appeared in 367.<sup>1</sup> When various councils met in church history to consider the canon, they held no official vote for the canonicity of a book but rather recognized universally after the fact that it was written by God and belonged in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Long process!

Last week, we began with the Old Testament and its authorship. God was the very first One who wrote down His words, then commissioned Moses and subsequent prophets who would follow. For the better part of 1000 years, God progressively revealed more and more of His redemptive plan. It began with a

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<sup>1</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 57.

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), Kindle loc 2973.

covenant He established with Abraham and His descendants, but it all pointed forward to a coming Savior.

The last prophet of the Old Testament era was Malachi, who wrote somewhere around 425 B.C. At the time of his prophecy, a remnant had returned and both the city of Jerusalem as well as the temple had been rebuilt. After his brief ministry, things get quiet. The time period between the Old and New Testament is known as the 400 silent years. Things were being written, but nothing that was inspired by God's Spirit and authoritative for God's people. Some of the literature is what we know as the 'Apocrypha,' which comes from a word that means hidden or unclear. It was given that name for a reason.

You should know that the Jews never treated these books as Scripture. They were never placed on the same shelf as the other books of the Old Testament. The authors of these texts, and there is around 15 of them, never really intended for them to be grouped with the rest of the Bible. In fact, the author of one of these books specifically pointed out that he lived in a time when prophetic revelation had ceased!<sup>3</sup>

What are these books? They are simply other Jewish books besides the ones we have in our Old Testament were written after the Old Testament times. Much of it is history and even some poetry, but none of it is inspired and authoritative.

These include:

- The First Book of Esdras
- The Second Book of Esdras
- Tobit

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Paul Jones, *How We Got the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Rose Publishing, 2015), 47.

- Judith
- The Addition to the Book of Esther
- The Book of Wisdom
- Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach)
- Baruch
- The Letter of Jeremiah
- The Prayer of Azariah (Additions to Daniel)
- Suzanna (Additions to Daniel)
- Bel and The Dragon (Additions to Daniel)
- The Prayer of Manasseh
- The First Book of the Maccabees
- The Second Book of the Maccabees
- The Third Book of the Maccabees (Eastern Orthodox)
- The Fourth Book of the Maccabees (Eastern Orthodox)

It is extremely important to point out the fact that the Jews did not accord to the Apocrypha the same authority that they did of the canonical books. Consider:

The Rabbinical literature (Babylonian Talmud):

*“After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel...”*

1 Maccabees 4:45-46 (about 100 BC) on the cessation of prophecy:

*“So they tore down the altar and stored the stone in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them.”*

1 Maccabees 9:27:

*He refers to great distress “such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them.”*

Josephus, (Against Apion):

*“From Artaxerxes [end of OT era] to our own times a complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets.”<sup>4</sup>*

As a Jewish historian, he was very familiar with the writings of the Apocrypha but did not regard them as canonical. That is not to say that they are not of some value. They do provide a valuable historical perspective on the era between the final Old Testament prophets and the births of John the Baptist and Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Martin Luther even made the remark:

*“These are books that, though not esteemed like the holy Scriptures, are still both useful and good to read.”<sup>6</sup>*

So how did these books end up being excluded from our Protestant canon while being included in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox canon?

Timothy Paul Jones explains:

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 56.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

*“It all began in the third and second centuries BC when the Old Testament began to be translated into Greek; these Greek renderings of the Old Testament became known as the Septuagint. No one knows precisely why, but the editors of the Septuagint included a range of books that was broader than the Hebrew and Aramaic Scriptures. Nearly 400 years later, Christians began translating the Bible into Latin, and some of them used the Septuagint as their source for translating the Old Testament. In the process, deuterocanonical texts from the Septuagint were translated into Latin alongside the Jewish Scriptures. When a Christian leader named Jerome developed a new Latin translation of the Old Testament, he used the Hebrew and Aramaic Bible as his primary source, but he translated some deuterocanonical texts from the Greek Septuagint as well. He called these texts ‘Apocrypha’—meaning ‘obscure’ or ‘hidden things’—and he made it clear that they should never shape any doctrines of the church.”<sup>7</sup>*

There was another leader in the early church who disagreed with Jerome, a leader who became very influential. You've probably heard of him before. His name was Augustine. He was a leading theologian and thinker, as well as the bishop of Hippo. Augustine believed that the Holy Spirit had not only inspired the authors of the original texts of Scripture, but that He also inspired the translators of Septuagint. So he took every text in the Septuagint, including the Apocrypha, which the Jews had never treated as Scripture, to be the authoritative Word of God. Three church councils agreed with Augustine, and that is how they ended up being included with the Old Testament (Catholic, Greek Orthodox).<sup>8</sup>

I've passed around my copy of a Catholic Bible, as well as copy of the Septuagint that you will notice included these Apocryphal books. Take a look!

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<sup>7</sup> Jones, 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Not everyone in the early church agreed with Augustine. Again, even the Jews didn't put the Apocryphal books on the same shelf as the rest of the Old Testament. That's why the Reformers came along later and refused to include them in the Protestant canon; they emphasized that the canon of Jesus and the apostles ought to be the canon of the church. (See Dr. Gregg Allison, p. 56-57)

*“The issue of the canon of Scripture resurfaced in the Reformation. Protestants insisted that the church’s Old Testament should correspond to the shorter Hebrew Bible, not the Septuagint with its additional apocryphal writings. Key to this position was the fact that the Bible of Jesus and the apostles was Jewish Scripture. Additionally, the Apocrypha had **not** been considered canonical by the early church. Moreover, following Jerome’s distinction, the Reformers admonished the church to appeal to canonical Scripture alone to formulate its authoritative doctrines. Accordingly, Protestants rejected purgatory and the practice of praying for the dead, because they were based on an apocryphal writing (2 Maccabees). Furthermore, the Reformers modified or abolished certain church practices, like the sacrament of penance, because they were based on an inferior Latin Vulgate translation and not supported by the Greek New Testament.”<sup>9</sup>*

As you can imagine, the Roman Catholic church did not take kindly to the work of the Reformers because they were exposing certain papal abuses and calling the church back to Scripture alone for the basis of faith and practice. At the Council of Trent in 1546, the Roman Catholic church proclaimed the Latin Vulgate as its official version of the Bible, complete with the Apocrypha, and confirmed that they belonged in the official canon of the Old Testament. This is why one of the main divisions between Catholics and Protestants is the canon!

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<sup>9</sup> Allison, 57.

Geisler provides some helpful explanation:

*“The actions of the Council of Trent were polemical, prejudicial, and unbiblical. In debates with Luther, the Roman Catholics quoted the Maccabees in support of prayer for the dead (see 2 Macc. 12:44-45). Luther, and other Protestants following him, challenged the canonicity of that book, citing the New Testament, the early church fathers, and Jewish teachers for support. The Council of Trent responded to Luther by canonizing the Apocrypha... Trent shows how fallible a supposed infallible pronouncement of the Roman Catholic Church can be.”<sup>10</sup>*

A long line of Christians throughout history have come to the same conclusion about the Apocrypha for several reasons:

*1. The authors of the New Testament never quoted the Apocrypha as Scripture.*

The writers of the New Testament frequently used phrases like, ‘it is written,’ or ‘Scripture says’ when quoting from the Old Testament. Yet no New Testament author ever applied any of these clauses to any apocryphal text.

*2. The Jewish people never recognized the Apocrypha as Scripture.*

They knew that the time of inspired prophecy had ended with the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Again, this was even acknowledged in some of the Apocryphal books themselves.

*3. Jesus recognized the three-part Hebrew canon as Scripture.*

This last point may in fact be the most crucial. As Christians, we take our cues from Jesus and His apostles. They followed the perspective of their fellow Jews and recognized a three-part Old Testament that included the same texts as our

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<sup>10</sup> Norman Geisler, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 126-127.

Old Testament today. Jesus affirmed it, and so should we.<sup>11</sup> The New Testament refers to the three-fold division of the Old Testament as the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44). Most common is the simple expression ‘the Law and the Prophets’ (Matt. 7:12; Rom. 3:21).

We must understand this fundamental principle that God, not man, determined the canon of Scripture. If we do not believe and affirm that the God who guided human beings to write Scripture also guided those human beings to collect it and compile it into one Book, then our entire doctrine of Scripture crumbles.

Why make such a big deal out of this? The Bible has been the way it is for hundreds and hundreds of years. Is this something that we really need to spend time on in study?

The answer is yes. This is not just an issue from ancient history. It has major implications as we seek to witness to lost people in a post-Christian culture. One of the founding fathers of our country, Thomas Jefferson, was a deist, and took a pen knife and cut out the parts of the gospels that he himself did not personally believe. There is a more recent example than that.

Several years ago, an author by the name of Dan Brown wrote a book called “The DaVinci Code,” and made the outrageous claim that there was an entire period of Jesus’ life that was written down but later suppressed by the church because it conflicted with the ‘official’ story of Jesus as recorded in Scripture. The book was later made into a movie starring Tom Hanks. The real issue is unbelief.

The subject of Scriptural authority has been debated on TV, in magazines, and on college campuses—and the real issue is **unbelief**.

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, 58-59.

The canon of Scripture is a lot like gravity.

**Tony Evans** — *“You and I didn’t create the law of gravity, and we can’t control it. All we do is recognize, use, and submit to this law that God created. You don’t have to like the law of gravity for it to be in effect. Your decision to demonstrate your freedom from gravity by jumping out of a tenth-floor window won’t change anything except the way your body is arranged. So it is with those who have tried to ignore, defy, and deny the truth that God superintended the process by which each of the sixty-six inspired books was admitted into the Bible’s canon.”*<sup>12</sup>

The books of the Bible had **standards** of admission.

Just as college administrators have admission standards that applicants must meet before being accepted at the school, the early church had standards for each book of the Bible. These strict standards of admission had to be met for a piece of writing to be recognized as Spirit-inspired and admitted to the canon of Scripture.

- it had to carry the authority of an apostle
- it had to be recognized by the church

The church did not create the Bible, rather the Bible created the church! This is a monumental understanding. To go back to what I’ve already pointed out, in order for a book to be admitted into the canon, it had to have been written by a true prophet or apostle, or by someone who was also a close associate of them. It had to have the stamp of prophetic/apostolic authority. The legitimacy and authenticity of its message was confirmed by accompanying supernatural acts of God (Acts 2:22; 2 Cor. 12:12; Hebrews 2:4).

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<sup>12</sup> Tony Evans, *Theology You Can Count On* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 1114.

Let's consider Matthew, which was written by one of Jesus' original twelve disciples. There was also a text floating around in the early church that claimed to be a 'gospel' written by Thomas, who was just as much a disciple of Jesus as was Matthew. The gospel of Thomas was just one of dozens of so-called other gospels and epistles in existence that claimed divine authority. (Gnostic texts)

How did the early church recognize that Matthew was part of God's authentic revelation, while the gospel of Thomas was a fraud? Can we be sure today that we're not missing something God wanted us to know, but that God left out of the Bible?

The answer is that the church ran both books under the scanner of the Holy Spirit's sovereign guidance and direction, and the gospel of Thomas didn't cut it. Church leaders examined the books carefully for internal evidence of inspiration, and checked out the external evidence for their authenticity, following specific criteria by which a book claiming to be Scripture either authenticated or disqualified itself.<sup>13</sup>

Thus Matthew, and John, and Peter's writings all met that standard. Other books like Mark, Luke, Acts, James, and Jude all qualified because they were written by firsthand associates of the twelve apostles, and were men who carried the apostles' stamp of approval. But above and beyond this...

Whether it be one of the 39 books of the Old Testament, or whether it be one of the 27 books of the New Testament, each one carries the Holy Spirit's stamp of approval. We don't have to worry. Rather, you and I can be sure that what we have in our possession is indeed the Word of God. Amen!

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<sup>13</sup> Evans, 1113-1114.