

## THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

Sunday evening service, October 20 and 27, 2024

Before we learn how to read and understand the ancient books of the Bible, the first questions we should ask are, “Why these books? Why this Bible?” We want to know what the Bible says because we have given scripture absolute authority over our lives. When Paul urges us to action, we want to know what Paul is really asking of us so we can live accordingly. As followers of Jesus, we live under the authority of the apostle’s command. Or if John is recounting to us something about our Jesus, we want to understand what John is saying because John saw, heard, and touched our Lord.

So who decided that these books are really different than any other book? When was it decided? How was it decided? Before we allow our lives to be shaped by the contents of these books, I think we ought to stop and ask, “Why these books? Why this list? And why not other writers of antiquity?”

We call the list of authoritative books “the Canon” – the canon of scripture. Together, we have 66 books – 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament – that the church has designated as comprising the only real library that matters.

What does the word “canon” mean? Isn’t a “cannon” a weapon of war used between the North and the South? Well, c-a-n-n-o-n – two “Ns” in the middle – is a giant gun mounted on wheels. But c-a-n-o-n (one N) – the canon that we are speaking of today – is a list of books that have authority.

The word “canon” comes from the Greek term meaning “reed.” The ancients often cut off long reeds to use for measuring things. These reeds operated like a primitive ruler. So “canon” came to be used as a metaphor for any standard. A canon is that to which you compare things, checking to see whether they measure up. Therefore, these books are the true canon because all of life, all of truth, is measured against their contents.

### *OLD TESTAMENT*

Let’s look at the Old Testament canon first, those 39 books starting with Genesis and ending with Malachi. First of all, we might ask, “Does the Old Testament still have authority over our lives? Is it still important? Or should we cut our canon down to the 27 books of the New Testament? Wasn’t the Old Testament for the Jews, and why does it still have authority over our lives as Christians today? Why can’t we just be ‘the New Testament’ church?”

Actually, the Old Testament is awfully important. We would do well to remember that the Old Testament itself was Jesus’ Bible.

The Christian church started its existence with a book, but it wasn’t the New Testament. It was the Old Testament, a book that we shared with the Jewish people. In fact, the first members of the church were, without question, Jews.

Yes, the Old Testament matters. It is the only Bible that Jesus quotes! Jesus came announcing “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:4). In doing so, Jesus was

saying that the long-awaited day prophesied by Daniel had actually come into being with His very presence (Daniel 2:44; cf. 7:14; 7:27). Or remember in the programmatic sermon Jesus preached in his own hometown of Nazareth, He reads from Isaiah 61:1ff., and declares that He has been anointed to preach the good news to the poor, to release the captives, to recover sight for the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18f.). “Today,” Jesus says (Luke 4:21), “that scripture has been fulfilled.”

Throughout His entire ministry, the Old Testament mattered to Jesus. Jesus, in all that He said and did, was a fulfillment of the Old Testament – His scripture.

In His resurrected state, Jesus appeared to the disciples and assured them that His suffering and rising again, together with the consequent proclamation gospel to all the nations, formed the subject matter of what was written [in scripture] (Luke 24:25-27, 46).

Because the Old Testament was Jesus’ Bible, it was also the Bible of the early church. Two communities – the Christians and the Jews – used the same book in different ways, as one (the church) read it through the lens of the Jesus event.

Since the 16th Century Reformation, Protestants – not Catholics – have accepted only the 39 books from Genesis to Malachi as properly comprising the Old Testament. Protestants defend their shorter version of the Old Testament (as compared to the Catholic version of 46 books) by noting that these 39 books were the only books that the Jews at the time of Jesus accepted into their canon or list of scripture. The other books that made it into the Catholic Bible came from the intertestamental period (400 years) after the time of Malachi (Old Testament) and before the time of Matthew (New Testament). The church also noted that Jesus didn’t quote, and the apostles didn’t teach, from any books outside of the Jewish scripture. And the Jews themselves never believed that the intertestamental books were inspired in the same way as the earlier (39) books of the Bible. The Jews clearly believed that prophesy, or divinely inspired writing, ceased after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the latest of the Minor Prophets – Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

The books not included in our Old Testament that you might find in the Bible of your Catholic friends include some apocryphal or deuterocanonical works – Baruch, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Sirach, Tobit, and Wisdom.

Yes, the New Testament writers quote the Old Testament, but only from those early 39 books. In fact, most biblical scholars would say it is very safe to assume that the Old Testament that the Jews (and early church) used was identical to the books we use today.

It is true, however, that the Old Testament books in the Jewish Bible were probably in a different order than we have them today. Remember, they were originally written on separate scrolls. The ancient Jewish tradition was the Law (Genesis-Deuteronomy), the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the 12 minor prophets), and the Writings (Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles). The present order of your Old Testament is based upon the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. In this version, the Prophets and the Writings are interspersed with each other in order to create a past-present-future sequence. Genesis through Esther described the history, first of the human race and then of Israel from

creation to the 5th Century B.C. Job through Song of Songs includes Psalms and wisdom for present living. And Isaiah through Malachi preserves that form of prophecy that is mostly proclamation (foretelling and forth telling rather than historical narrative). We, therefore, have the same books in our scripture as the Jews have in theirs, but just in a different order. One can hardly put too much emphasis on the Bible Jesus (or Paul) used. The Old Testament (39 books) was the first canon or list of authoritative books.

### *NEW TESTAMENT*

So why do we have a New Testament? If the Old Testament was good enough for Jesus, Paul, and Peter, why do we have another 27 books which Jesus did not have in His Bible? Why this second canon?

The early Christians believed, just like we believe, that one's most important decision was how one might respond to Jesus. Therefore, we needed a good source to tell us who Jesus was, what He said, and what He did – capturing both His walk and talk so we could understand how we must respond to the Jesus event.

The early church would soon be infiltrated by false teachers, especially of the Gnostic sort. Both Jesus and His apostles warned that the wolves were coming to try to devour the sheep. But how do you tell a wolf from a sheep? How do you discern truth from error, a true teacher from a false teacher? The only way to measure anything is to have a canon, a yardstick, by which to measure.

The New Testament church actually had three different canons or three different measures of truth in addition to the Old Testament. As the first and second canons disappeared, the third (our 27 books) became pre-eminent. Let me explain.

The first two canons were people, or groups of people. The first canon was Jesus Himself. The second canon was the apostles, those who had been closest to Jesus. They had heard Jesus teach, watched Him heal, and helped Him perform exorcisms. And Jesus Himself had assigned them the task of extending His work. Do you realize that Jesus didn't ever write anything Himself, other than scribbling in the sand with His finger when the woman was caught in adultery? But the apostles did write. Paul, an apostle – not one of the original twelve, but one who had seen the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus – was prolific with a pen. An apostle's authority was most evident when he was present with a church – when Paul was there or when Peter was there. But when an apostle couldn't be there in person (hindered travel plans), he wrote. The apostle's letter was a substitute for his presence – and no less authoritative.

If the writer of a New Testament book wasn't really an apostle – one of the twelve or Paul and company – then he must be closely associated with Jesus or an apostle. James' book made it into the New Testament, though with some struggles, because James is, after all, the brother of Jesus. Or Mark. Mark is not an apostle, he's not one of the twelve. But we know that Mark learned at the feet of the apostle Peter and represents Peter's teachings. Or Luke – Luke traveled with Paul. Luke is not an apostle, but Luke is associated with the apostle Paul.

It would be only natural for those early churches that Paul planted to yield to his authority. And when there were false teachers or false teaching entering into the community, the church would

turn to Paul. “What do you think, Paul?” And Paul would rebuke false teachers and bad doctrine by penning an epistle.

The early church, therefore, had the scriptures, the Old Testament. They also had traditions from what some had penned down about what Jesus said and taught. And then they had the presence of the apostles themselves – Paul or Peter traveling around. Given the apostles’ presence, it really didn’t seem necessary at the time to have a collection of books. No ease of a printing press in those days. Paul would write to Corinth (or Thessalonica) and believers there would hear what Paul had to say to them. But as the apostles starting dying off, the church asked, “How do we now hold close to our heart what the apostles have taught about our Jesus?” As a result, they started collecting and combining authoritative books.

Our first list of New Testament books comes from the middle of the second century. It comes from a heretic, a false teacher named Marcion. Though wrong, at least Marcion got the discussion started. His bad list (he excluded some really good books) showed the church they needed to come up with the right list. Tertullian (second century) recognized 23 of our 27 books – he left out James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. He didn’t say they weren’t in; he simply didn’t say anything about them.

Early in the third century, Origen refers to all 27. But the early lists indicate that not as many churches utilized Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude. At last, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in his Easter time festal letter dated A.D. 367, was the earliest known Christian writer to endorse, without hesitation, the 27 books that now comprise our New Testament. His views were ratified by the Councils of Hippo in A.D. 393 and Carthage in A.D. 397. And since that time, no Christian really disputes that these books – and only these books – are the word of God in the New Covenant.

Yes, there are some other books that didn’t make it. One called the Didache, one called 1 Clement, The Shepherd of Hermas, and others. They might be helpful, but they did not ever hold the authority of the 27 books.

Thus, the church no longer had Jesus and she was losing the apostles who had sat at His feet. Therefore, the church wanted to collect all the sayings and writings about Jesus (and what the apostles themselves had learned and taught from the Lord) to be preserved to keep church teaching on the right track of truth. A plumb line. A canon, a reed, a measuring stick by which to make sure the church is in the right place, close to the teachings of her Lord and His apostles.

Early on in that process, there were some little collections shared among the churches. There was a writing called *The Gospel*, containing Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And there was a collection of writings in a separate book called *The Apostle*, which included Paul’s letters. These subset collections were shared among the churches to help keep everyone anchored to the truth.

It’s true that all the books of the New Testament were finished by A.D. 100 (at least by then). But the authoritative list became officially closed, at least by the written records that exist, in A.D. 367.

Can we now add to the New Testament? Of course not – unless an apostle re-emerges and starts writing or Jesus shows up and starts teaching. Until then, there is not a word spoken or penned that will equal that of the Messiah and His apostles. The canon is closed. Period.

So how did they choose which books were in and which books were out? They asked: Was the book written by an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus? You will notice that some of the writers say up front, “I’m not making this up; I was there.” It reminds me of 1 John, “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the World of Life...” I am an eyewitness! So the first question is, “Was this person an eyewitness to the words and work of Jesus?”

Secondly, was the person writing this book an apostle or related to an apostle? Peter, you’re in because you are an apostle. Mark, you’re in because you’re associated with Peter. Paul, you’re in because you are an apostle (even if later to the party). Luke, you’re in, because you travel with Paul.

And then, finally, was the work useful? Was the work copied and recopied and circulated among the churches because it was useful for faith and practice?

So, there you go. Sixty-six books. The first 39 set by Jesus and the apostles themselves as they used the books in the Hebrew Jewish Bible, the 39. Sometimes they quoted from the Greek version, but they never cite anything outside of the 39. Our Old Testament is Jesus’ Old Testament.

The second 27, our New Testament, emerged through not only divine inspiration but divine preservation. God preserved through the church the books that He wanted to be called the Word of God.

Some of you may say, “I didn’t know it was so complicated or took that long.” It was, and it did. And that’s good. Beware of religions who say their golden tablets fell from heaven and were interpreted through magic spectacles or glasses. Such claims lack credibility and confirmation. But, these 66 books are the inspired word of God, preserved by God’s people over time – as God always seems to be at work in the movements of history, revealing and preserving His revelation so that we can always walk the path of truth. “Thus sayeth the Lord God Almighty....”

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