

CANONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

II. The Canon of Scripture

- A. Canon (Definition): The books of the Bible officially accepted as Holy Scripture.¹
- B. There were many religious documents circulating in the 1st century.
- C. How was it decided which were canonical?

II. The Old Testament Canon

A. The five tests used to determine canonicity:

1. Was the book authoritative?
2. Was it written by an acknowledged prophet? man of God?
3. Was it authentic? The Hebrews had the attitude: "If in doubt, throw it out."
4. Was it dynamic, that is, did it come with the promises of the life-transforming power of God?
5. Was this book received, collected, and used by the Church?

B. Organization of the Hebrew Canon

1. The Hebrew Scriptures, though containing the same writings, was and (still is) arranged differently.
2. The Hebrew Old Testament is composed of three major sections.
 - a. The Law (Torah)

תּוֹרָה

- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus

- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

b. The Prophets (Nebihim)

נְבִיאִים

1) The Former Prophets

- Joshua
- Judges
- Samuel²
- Kings³

2) The Latter Prophets

- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel
- The Twelve⁴

c. The Writings (Kethubim)

כְּתוּבִים

- Psalms
- Proverbs
- Job
- Song of Songs
- Ruth
- Lamentations
- Esther
- Ecclesiastes

- Daniel
- Ezra-Nehemiah
- Chronicles⁵

C. Christ's witness to the Old Testament canon:

1. Luke 11:50-51:

Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.

Abel was the first slain, Genesis 4:8. Zechariah was the last prophet slain, 2 Chronicles 24:20-21. Note that Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew Old Testament. Chronicles is the last. Christ, thus, shows his acceptance of the entire Hebrew canon as it was in His day (and as it is in our day).

2. Luke 24:44:

He [Jesus] said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Notice here how Jesus mentions and accepts the three-fold division of the Hebrew Old Testament, namely, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, the Book of Psalms being the first book of the Writings.

III. The New Testament Canon

A. The tests for canonicity:

1. The chief test was this: Is the writing apostolic? That is, can it be said to come from the eyewitness account of an apostle?

The chief test was this: Is the writing apostolic?

A book or epistle need not be written by an apostle, but it must be written at the behest of an apostle. A writer, then, would write in the place of an apostle. The writer was, thus, a *schaliach* or commissioned representative of the apostle, with the same force and binding authority as the apostle himself.

a) Mark's Gospel was written at the behest of Peter.

That this is Peter's Gospel (i.e., the record of Peter's testimony concerning Christ) is confirmed by reliable sources. For example, Eusebius (an historian in the early Church era) quotes Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (who wrote c. A.D. 130): "Mark, having become Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, as many as he remembered of the things said or done by the Lord."

Mark is, thus, the evangelist who faithfully recorded Peter's eyewitness testimony (2 Peter 1:16) concerning the life of our Lord. Mark is an inspired writer even though the revelation was given to Peter.

b) Luke's Gospel was written at the behest of Paul.

Paul's epistles were considered by the Church to be apostolic, i.e., and, hence, canonical, 2 Peter 3:15-16.

Regarding the Gospel of Luke, Martin Franzmann notes the relationship between Paul and Luke. He writes:

The ancient church, from the second half of the second century onward, uniformly ascribes the third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to Luke, "the beloved physician," Paul's companion on his journeys and his faithful friend in his imprisonment. He was probably a Gentile, for Paul distinguishes him from his Jewish co-workers (Col. 4:10, 11, 14). He joined Paul at Troas during the Second Missionary Journey, as the use of the first person plural in Acts 16:11 indicates, accompanied Paul as far as Philippi on that journey and apparently remained there for the next seven years. He rejoined Paul A.D. 56 when Paul passed through Philippi on his last journey to Jerusalem and was with him continually thereafter. According to 2 Tim. 4:11 he was with Paul in his last imprisonment also.⁶

2. The seven books spoken against by some: The *antilegomena*

a) Hebrews - author not uniformly known.

b) James - not written by an apostle, faith vs. works.

c) 2 Peter - the epistle most widely spoken against. Style and vocabulary unlike 1 Peter. Chapter 2 is virtually identical to Jude. Not widely attested in the ancient Church.

d) 2 John - author is not named.

e) 3 John - author is not named.

f) Jude - not written by an apostle. He seems to quote or allude to apocryphal writings. It bears a strong resemblance to 2 Peter 2.

g) Revelation - different in style than John's Gospel, the author identifies himself as John the servant, not John the apostle, highly apocalyptic, millennialism of chapter 20.

Came to be Accepted as Canonical

Though the author of Hebrews is not known to us today, it found its way into the canon, probably because the vast majority in the early Church knew it to have apostolic credentials.

James and Jude, so far as we know, were not apostolic in the true sense of the word. It would appear, however, that the apostles accepted their writings. Why? Probably because both men were half-brothers of Jesus, i.e., children born to Mary and Joseph, and who, thus, grew up with our Lord. James became the leader of the Church in Jerusalem and his counsel was highly valued by the apostles themselves. See Acts 15 (the so-called "Apostolic Council"), in which the recommendation of James is accepted by the apostles. Note verses 2, 4, 6, 22, 23 (of Acts 15) where we see that the Council was truly apostolic, i.e., the apostles were present.

2nd Peter, the 2nd and 3rd epistles of John, and The Revelation of John were ultimately accepted because:

1. The majority of the Church accepted them from the beginning.
2. The objections against them were overcome.
3. The remaining 20 were never spoken against: They are called the *homologoumena*.
4. The Apocrypha

The heretic Marcion (A.D. 140) had developed his own canon and began to propagate it. His list of canonical books excluded the entire Old Testament and included only certain New Testament writings.

The 14 books which comprise the so-called apocrypha were written in the period of time between the writings of the Old and the New Testaments. Among Bible translations, the *Septuagint* (the Greek translation of Hebrew Old Testament, circa 200 B.C.) and Jerome's Latin *Vulgate* (both Old and New Testaments, A.D. 405)

included the apocryphal writings. Although the early Church never considered these writings to be canonical, i.e., among the list of inspired Scripture, they were included in early translations as writings worthy to be read. The Roman Catholic Church, at the Council of Trent (A.D. 1545-1563), elevated nine of these apocryphal books to canonical status, primarily to support doctrines which the Protestant Churches (and the early Church!) rejected (e.g., purgatory).

B. Reasons for determining the New Testament canon.

1. The heretic Marcion (A.D. 140) had developed his own canon and began to propagate it. His list of canonical books excluded the entire Old Testament and included only certain New Testament writings. These were:

The Gospel of Luke
Ten epistles of Paul

2. Many Eastern churches were using questionable books.

3. The Edict of Diocletian (A.D. 367) declared that the sacred books of the Christians be destroyed. If a Christian was called upon to die for his faith, then he must know which books were canonical. One should not die for a doctrine taught only in non-canonical books.

4. The Council of Hippo (A.D. 393) and the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) confirmed the canonical status of the present 27 books of the New Testament.

These councils did not establish the canon of the New Testament, but merely confirmed what the Church had heretofore held to be true.

ENDNOTES

1 *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation. All rights reserved.

2 Includes First and Second Samuel.

3 Includes First and Second Kings.

4 "The Twelve" are the 12 Minor Prophets from Hosea through Malachi.

5 Includes First and Second Chronicles.

6 Martin H. Franzmann, *The Word of the Lord Grows* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 197.