

A Study of the Canonization of Scripture

Intro: One area of faith that concerns many Christians is the question, “How do we know that our NT contains all of the documents given by the Holy Spirit for the edification of the church?” Or, “how do we know that books have been omitted or some improperly included? Several people have lately mentioned this issue to me and asked me to preach a lesson on this subject. The question involves an important discussion that is sometime called the study of the canon of Scripture.

Historically the list of books that are believed to reveal God’s will has been controversial. Most modern English Bibles contain 39 OT books and 27 NT books. Not all of them have been always accepted without question. However, the Catholic Bible also contains the works collectively known as the “apocrypha” or “deutero-canonical” books.

What is the meaning of the word “canon”?

In ancient Hebrew and Greek “reeds” were used for measurement. The Hebrew word for “reed” is “ganeh”; the Greek word is “kanon”. Even our English word “cane” is derived from these sources.

The Greek word “kanon” was used by early church writers to describe a “standard of faith” by which to measure and evaluate all teachings. It came to describe the list of books that served as that authoritative standard.

When then we speak of the “canon” of Scripture, we are simply speaking of the collection of books that have been accepted as come from God.

How was the canon formed? I.e. how did the NT we possess come to have 27 books?

First let’s clear up a common misconception, viz., that a group of church men (an ecclesiastical council) gathered around a table with a pile of Christian documents before them and decided for all time which books should be accepted as canonical and made them authoritative by church decree. Indeed, church councils did exist that discussed the issue of canonicity of NT books; but what is important to stress is that they simply ratified the established consensus of the church which had existed for many years.

Second it is important to emphasize that, though the NT did not drop out of heaven one day, the processes that produced it were natural to the faith of the early church and able to produce a reliable collection of documents. Let’s take a few moment to describe that process. How did ancient believers come to their conclusions about what writings were from God and worthy of preservation as Scripture?

Facts about the shaping of the canon

We know that the first century apostles and prophets were considered the authoritative spokesmen of Jesus Christ. Allusions to this fact abound in the NT.

which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; (Ephesians 3:5)

We know that the apostles taught the gospel by means of writing as well as word of mouth.

If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. (1 Corinthians 14:37)
So well-established was this concept that originators of false teachings felt compelled to send them in the name of an apostle (Cf. 2 Thes. 2:2)

We know that the apostles were aware of possible spurious documents that might arise and took precautions to prevent this.

Paul even signed his letters so that forgeries could be prevented.

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; *this is the way I write.* (2 Thessalonians 3:17)

Letters were sent by messengers who could verify apostolic origin.

We know that the apostles urged them to be shared with other churches.

And when this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea. (Colossians 4:16)

What we should expect from these processes should produce a corpus of apostolic writings in every church. And we can see evidence of this in the literature of the second century church. Let's take a few historical "snapshots" from that literature.

Clement of Rome wrote a single letter to the Corinthians around AD 96 and in it quoted as Scriptures portions from Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, 1 Corinthians, Titus, Hebrews, and 1 Peter.

Ignatius (AD 70-110) was Bishop of Antioch and died a martyr. In his seven epistles he quotes from Matthew, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, James, and 1 Peter.

What these quotes make clear is that there was a well-defined body of literature regarded as Scripture by the second century church. But the rise of a false teacher named Marcion (AD 140) prompted more statements by the second century church about what was recognized as Scripture. Marcion had insisted, because of his heretical views, that only an edited version of the gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's epistles were canonical. The church was bound to respond to his position and respond they did affirming that there were four gospels that were apostolic.

In 1740 L.A. Muratori discovered a Latin manuscript describing the contents of the NT canon (thus called the Muratorian canon) that dates from the late second century. The list includes all of our NT books except the book of Hebrews, James, and 2 Peter. It includes an apocryphal work called "Wisdom" and an "Apocalypse of Peter" which is acknowledged was not read on all churches.

Irenaeus who lived about the same time also presents a similar picture affirming the canonicity of four gospels, acts, all Paul's epistles except Philemon, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation.

Origen of Alexandria writing about 230 lists the same books including Philemon and adds that some books were disputed by some (Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, James, Jude).

Eusebius, the early church historian, at the beginning of the 4th century acknowledged that all our present NT books were universally regarded as

apostolic, except for five that were disputed (James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John).

By 367 the issues with these five had been settled and Athanasius acknowledged our present 27 books of the NT as being apostolic.

Finally in 393 the North African Synod of Hippo by decree affirmed that the 27 books of our NT were the only books of apostolic origin and were to be accepted as Scripture. But note, that what they were essentially doing is ratifying the majority view that had been in existence for some time.

Some important observations about the process and the results

As we look at the historical process we are able to see that the early church had every reason to be careful about what books were accepted as authoritative and which ones were to be rejected.

We are also able to see that the primary factor in their determination of canonicity was whether or not a book could trace its origin to the apostles (either personally or by means of apostolic oversight).

Most of the NT books were so manifestly apostolic that there was no debate.

In the cases where there was doubt the church sought establish the facts about its origin and claims. As a result some books were rejected:

The lack of claim to divine authority or source (Epistle of Barnabas or Clement or Shepherd of Hermas)

No clear authentication as coming from a prophet including inability to identify the prophetic source (Didache)

Incompatibility with known canonical books (heretical positions)—Acts of John, Acts of Paul

Those books about which there had been doubts were investigated more carefully and determinations were made on the basis of the same criteria.

The claim to speak for God (i.e. “thus saith the Lord”)

Signs from God accompanying the life and claims of the prophet

Harmony with earlier authenticated revelations

Acceptance by past believers who had access to the facts concerning the writing’s author and work

Summary: What the evidence shows us is that the process of receiving, authenticating and preserving the Scripture was important to all believers from ancient times. They were dependent upon revelations from God for their faith and actions; therefore, they were careful and serious in testing the writings that appeared. Consequently, our present canon is not the result of a formal decision of any group of men in history; but instead the accumulative result of the natural processes of faith that existed from their first appearance among men. With this evidence, we may also add the divine promise that his word will endure forever and live with the assurance that the books that make up our Bible preserve God’s will for His people for the ages.

Thus, we too can be reasonably sure that the NT that we presently possess contains all the information we need to know God’s will for His church today. If you have personal doubts about any book, you can do the same thing the early church did (study both the internal

and external evidence and reach a judgment). After having done this myself for many years, I feel confident that the books we possess in our NT authentic writings of their purported authors and thus are inspired by God.