



Session 1: Introduction & Canon

1. THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

Before we can talk about Scripture - that is, the book which God has inspired - we need to know what books are considered Scripture. God inspired some books, but not all books. This mere fact means that there must be some limitation to our Bibles. This is what we call the 'canon of scripture.'

A. Definition Of 'Canon'

The term 'canon' - from the Greek word κανών (kanōn) - simply means "measuring rod, standard". It refers to the standard by which you assess something, or determine the limits of something. When we use it in terms of the Bible, we mean the limits of the books that belong in the Bible. **It is speaking of the list of books which are divinely authoritative and deserve to be in our Bibles.**

"The canon is an artifact of revelation, not an object of revelation itself. It is known infallibly to God by necessity and to man with a certainty directly related to God's purpose in giving the Word to the church. The canon exists because God has inspired some writings, not all writings. It is known to man in fulfillment of God's purpose in engaging in the action of inspiration so as to give to His people a lamp for their feet and a light for their path."

(James R. White, Scripture Alone, 101)

B. The Importance of the Canon of Scripture

Why is it important that we have a Canon of Scripture? Why do we need a collection of God-inspired writings preserved for us today?

This idea of not adding to or taking away from the books/writings which God has given to us comes from God himself.

“You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Deut. 4:2).

It is reiterated in the last book of our Bibles:

“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” (Rev. 22:18-19)

So we see from the Bible itself that this is a very serious issue. Theologian, Wayne Grudem, says this in his Systematic Theology:

“To add to or subtract from God’s words would be to prevent God’s people from obeying him fully, for commands that were subtracted would not be known to the people, and words that were added might require extra things of the people which God had not commanded.”

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 54)

The Apostle Paul says this of the scriptures:

“Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” (Romans 15:4)

God superintended what was written earlier by the OT authors so that it was not just for them and their audience in their time, but also for us and His people throughout time.

What is at stake here in the doctrine of the canon of scripture is nothing less than what God requires of us to be saved! Roman Catholicism and certain cults add to the canon of scripture and thereby add to (or take away from) the material that God has given us. From these additions come distortions of the true Gospel - and thus this is a matter of eternal significance. We must know what books are scripture in order to know what we must believe.

2. OLD TESTAMENT CANON

The earliest collection of written words from God actually comes from the hand of God Himself on Mount Sinai! The Ten Commandments, written on tablets of stone, form the beginning of the Biblical canon - and it was God himself who chose to do it.

And he gave to Moses, when he had made an end of speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God" (Ex. 31:18).

"And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God graven upon the tablets" (Ex. 32:16; cf. Deut. 4:13; 10:4).

The tablets eventually were deposited in the ark of the covenant (Deut. 10:5). This collection grew in size as Israel's history continued. Moses added words to be deposited in the ark (Deut. 31:24-26), which was probably the book of Deuteronomy. It is indicated that Moses also wrote the other four of the first five books of the Old Testament, called the Torah (see Ex. 17:14; 24:4; 34:27; Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:22)

So we see - from very early in God's formation of His people, He intended that they would be 'a people of the book' - that they would keep and treasure His Word.

After Moses, other authors, under the guidance and direction of God, wrote and added to the books which made up the Old Testament - such as Joshua (see Josh. 24:26). Later, many prophets, under the direction of the LORD, wrote additional words which we likewise added to the OT canon (see 1 Sam. 10:25; 1 Chron 29:29; 2 Chron. 20:34; 1 Kings 16:7; 2 Chron. 26:22 & 32:32; Jer. 20:2).

A. The Close of the OT Canon

"...after approximately 435 B.C. there were no further additions to the Old Testament canon. The subsequent history of the Jewish people was recorded in other writings, such as the books of the Maccabees, but these writings were not thought worthy to be included with the collections of God's words from earlier years."

(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 55-56)

According to Jewish literature outside the OT, we see that the Jews commonly believed that divinely authoritative words from God had ceased after the last book of the OT was written at about 435 B.C.

In 1 Maccabees (about 100 B.C.) the author writes of the defiled altar, "So they tore down the altar and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them" (1 Macc. 4:45-46).

Apparently, they had a memory of authoritative prophets among the people but knew that there weren't any around at their time. Hence the author speaks of a great distress "such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them" (1 Macc. 9:27; cf. 14:41).

The first century historian, Josephus (born c. A.D. 37/38) wrote,

"From Artaxerxes 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" (Against Apion 1.41).

The writings of the Jewish Rabbis also confirm this conviction - repeatedly stating that the Holy Spirit had departed from Israel and not inspired any new prophecy after the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had died.

"...In the New Testament, we have no record of any dispute between Jesus and the Jews over the extent of the canon. Apparently there was full agreement between Jesus and his disciples, on the one hand, and the Jewish leaders or Jewish people, on the other hand, that additions to the Old Testament canon had ceased after the time of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi."
(Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 56-57.)

The way the Jewish scriptures were organized is often called the Tanak today. It's an acronym that stands for Torah, Nev'im and Ketu'vim - that is, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. This is exactly how Jesus referred to the OT in Luke 24:44,

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses (Torah) and the Prophets and the Psalms (Writings) must be fulfilled."

The Hebrew Canon (according to the Talmud)

<i>The Law</i>	<i>The Prophets</i>	<i>The Writings</i>
Genesis	Joshua	Ruth
Exodus	Judges	Psalms
Leviticus	Samuel	Job
Numbers	Kings	Proverbs
Deuteronomy	Jeremiah	Ecclesiastes
	Ezekiel	Song of Songs
	Isaiah	Lamentations
	Twelve Minor Prophets	Daniel
		Esther
		Ezra–Nehemiah
		Chronicles

B. The Apocrypha

The Roman Catholic Bible, while it has the same NT books as the Protestant Bible, contains extra OT books called the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha includes seven extra books: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch and 1 & 2 Maccabees, as well as additional sections to the books of Esther and Daniel. This word “Apocrypha” simply means “hidden” - so these were hidden writings. These books were never embraced as authoritative by the Jews.

How did the Apocryphal books get into the Roman Catholic Bible?

After the conquest of Alexander the Great, the common language of the Greek empire which later became the Roman empire was Greek. Thus, most Jews living in the area were more fluent in Greek than in Hebrew, and the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek in a translation known as the Septuagint (sometimes represented as LXX). Along with the inspired Hebrew books of the Old Testament, the other writings of the Apocrypha were also translated into Greek and kept alongside the Old Testament books, but yet still kept distinct from them.

At the time of Jesus and the apostles, the common language was still Koine Greek - which is why the New Testament was written in Koine (common) Greek. However, at the beginning of the second century after Christ, the language most widely spoken around the Roman empire had shifted from Greek to Latin. So, there was a need to translate the scriptures into the common language of the people.

“Beginning in the second century after Christ, a Latin translation of the entire Bible was undertaken, reflecting the shift from Greek to Latin as the universal language of the Roman Empire. The version of the Old Testament originally translated was the Septuagint, not the Hebrew Bible. As the church began to adopt Latin as its language, the Latin translation including the Apocrypha became its Bible.”
(Gregg R. Allison, Historical Theology, 48)

So, the Apocryphal books ended up coming in through the Latin translation of the Bible.

Jerome (c. 347 - 420 AD)

The person who did the translation into Latin is Jerome (c. 347 – 420 AD). When Jerome was translating Samuel and Kings, in the preface to these books he wrote a list of canonical Scripture which only included the writings of the Hebrew Bible (the same books we have in our Protestant canon). He considered these alone to be scripture.

“Elsewhere, Jerome indicated his rejection of Baruch, and though he did translate the additional stories in Daniel of the LXX, he placed them in an appendix to the book. Thus, he relegated the Apocrypha to secondary status in comparison with canonical Scripture.”
(Gregg R. Allison, Historical Theology, 48–49)

Commenting on the use of the Apocryphal books, Jerome said this:

“As then the church reads Judith, Tobit, and the books of Maccabees, but does not admit them among the canonical Scriptures, so let it read these two volumes for the edification of the people, not to give authority to doctrines of the church.”

From Jerome himself - the author of the Latin Vulgate - he considered that the Apocryphal books may be of some use, but they were not authoritative for the establishment of church doctrine.

So why did Jerome include the Apocryphal writings in his Latin Vulgate translation? It was at the request of Augustine he translated the Greek Septuagint, which included the Apocryphal writings, instead of from the Hebrew scriptures.

“Unlike Jerome, Augustine could not read Hebrew—he was not overly skilled in Greek either—and he mistakenly thought the Jews had likewise embraced those

books as canonical.”

(James R. White, Scripture Alone, 115–116)

For over a thousand years after this, the Latin Vulgate including the writings of the Apocrypha would be used as the Bible in churches until the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. During the Reformation, the motto “ad fontes” - meaning “back to the sources” - drove the Reformers to go back to the original Hebrew texts of the Old Testament and realize that the Apocryphal writings were not originally part of the OT. They realized that the translator of the Latin Vulgate had himself recognized this distinction.

READ & DISCUSS - 2 Maccabees 12:39-45

“On the next day, as had now become necessary, Judas and his men went to take up the bodies of the fallen and to bring them back to lie with their kindred in the sepulchres of their ancestors. Then under the tunic of each one of the dead they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was the reason these men had fallen. So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; and they turned to supplication, praying that the sin that had been committed might be wholly blotted out. The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had fallen. He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.”
(2 Maccabees 12:39-45)

- What Roman Catholic beliefs do you notice from this passage?
-

C. The Reformation & the Vulgate

During the Reformation, the Protestant Reformers critiqued the use of the Apocrypha in the church for three main reasons:

I. The Development of Unbiblical Practices

The Roman Catholic medieval church had developed beliefs and practices based on the Vulgate translation.

For example, the classic proof text for the belief in purgatory and the practice of praying for the dead was 2 Maccabees 12:38–45.

II. Poor Translation of Certain Passages

They also realized that the Latin Vulgate was a poor translation of the Greek New Testament in certain places. This was important in several key passages where Roman Catholic church beliefs were skewed because of the Latin version.

“For example, the Vulgate version of Jesus’ evangelistic preaching (Matt. 4:17) had “do penance.” This command of the Lord was used as the biblical foundation of the church’s sacrament of penance, a means of receiving God’s grace after sinning by praying, giving to the poor, forgoing certain physical pleasures, and so forth.”
(Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 50–51)

III. Inconsistency within Roman Catholicism over the Apocrypha

“Ironically even a pope has rejected the apocrypha - Pope Gregory the Great. Gregory cited an incident from 1 Maccabees 6:46 and specifically said Maccabees was “not canonical.” And the New Catholic Encyclopedia pointedly confirms his rejection of the canonicity of Maccabees.”
(James R. White, *Scripture Alone* 114)

“...even Cardinal Ximenes, in his introduction to the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament, presented the same rejection of full canonical status to the apocrypha that Cardinal Cajetan documented, and yet Pope Leo X still approved the publication of the work. It is simply beyond controversy that at the beginning of the Reformation, the dogmatic stance taken at the Council of Trent was not the view of the best read and scholarly Roman Catholic leaders of the communion.”
(James R. White, *Scripture Alone*, 115)

Furthermore, in the Councils of Carthage in the 3rd to 5th centuries, they used the Greek Septuagint - containing 1 and 2 Esdras. However, the Council of Trent in the 16th century used the Latin Vulgate which didn’t include those additions and definitively removed the material of 1 Esdras. The material of Carthage’s canon was included in papal decrees of Pope Innocent I, Gelasius, and Hormisdas. So, how could the Council of Trent (1546) declare non-canonical what popes a thousand years earlier had accepted? This means that if you had followed the Roman bishop’s guidance concerning the canon, you would have embraced non-inspired documents as canonical for more than a thousand years!

The Roman Catholic church responded to the Protestant critique of the Vulgate by issuing this warning at the Council of Trent (which still stands today):

“If anyone does not receive, as sacred and canonical, these books, with all their parts, as they have been read in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the old Latin Vulgate edition, and knowingly and deliberately rejects the above mentioned traditions, let him be anathema [cursed].”

Thus we see that Protestants and Roman Catholics are still separated on this issue of canon. Francis Turretin (1623-1687) wrote:

“The Jewish church, to which the oracles of God were committed (Rom. 3:2), never considered them as canonical, but held the same canon with us (as admitted by Josephus, Against Apion)...They are never quoted as canonical by Christ and the apostles like the others. And Christ, by dividing all the books of the Old Testament into three classes (the law, the Psalms and the prophets), clearly approves of the canon of the Jews and excludes from it those books which are not embraced in these classes. The Christian church for four hundred years recognized with us the same and no other canonical books....The authors were neither prophets and inspired men, since they wrote after Malachi (the last of the prophets); nor were their books written in the Hebrew language (as those of the Old Testament), but in Greek. Hence Josephus acknowledges that those things which were written by his people after the time of Artaxerxes were not equally credible and authoritative with those which preceded “on account of there not being an indisputable succession of prophets.” (Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 1, p.102)

Grudem concludes that the books of the Apocrypha should not be regarded as Scripture because:

1. They do not claim for themselves the same kind of authority as the Old Testament writings
2. They were not regarded as God’s words by the Jewish people from whom they originated
3. They were not considered to be Scripture by Jesus or the New Testament authors;
4. They contain teachings inconsistent with the rest of the Bible.

Thus, we conclude that they are not God-breathed words like the words of Scripture. They do, however, have some value for historical information, and they contain a number of helpful stories about the courage and faith of many Jews during the intertestamental period.

3. NEW TESTAMENT CANON

After the close of the OT Canon, there was a period of about 400 years of silence, as far as divinely inspired writings are concerned. To be sure, there were many books written during

this period between the testaments (known as the intertestamental period), and even some that claimed to be divinely inspired. However, the Jews never recognized any other writings than what already was in their collection of inspired scriptures which we now called the Old Testament.

So why were new books added to the Bible after 400 years of silence? There are three main reasons:

A. The NT is foreshadowed by the OT

The Old Testament ends with the words of Malachi, expecting the promised Messiah to come (see Mal. 3:1-4; 4:1-6). So, it makes sense that there would be no further Scripture written until the next stage in redemptive history occurs. Just as each of the great acts of redemption of God were interpreted for us in the Old Testament, the New Testament records and interprets for us the greatest act of redemption - the sending of Jesus Christ, God's Son, to be the Saviour of the world.

B. Jesus equipped his apostles & disciples to write the NT

Jesus himself promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to his apostles and disciples which would teach and bring to their remembrance all things, guiding them into all truth (see John 14:26; 16:13-14). This is why the New Testament primarily is comprised of the writings of the apostles and disciples of Jesus.

C. The apostles claimed the authority to write Scripture

The apostles claimed the authority equal to that of the Old Testament prophets to speak and write the very words of God. Peter encourages his readers to remember "the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles" (2 Peter 3:2). To lie to the apostles (Acts 5:2) is equivalent to lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3) and lying to God (Acts 5:4)." Paul tells the Corinthians that, "If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37). (See also 2 Cor. 13:3; Rom. 2:16; Gal. 1:8-9; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:8, 15; 5:27; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14)

This recognition of the writings of the apostles and disciples of Jesus as Holy Scripture was not a development that happened later on. In fact, right in the NT itself we have Peter classifying Paul's epistles as scripture. Peter says, "So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, **as they do the other scriptures**" (2 Peter 3:15-16). Here Peter classifies Paul's writings with the 'other scriptures' - referring to the Old Testament canon.

A second example of this is found in 1 Timothy 5:17-18. Paul says:

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.” ’

The first quotation of ‘scripture’ Paul uses is from Deuteronomy 25:4. However, the second quotation is actually from Luke 10:7 - it uses exactly the same Greek words as the text in Luke. So, here we have Paul, quoting the writings of Luke alongside a clearly accepted OT canonical book (Deuteronomy), and calling it scripture. So we see from these two passages, clear evidence that even from very early in the church, the writings of the apostles and disciples of Jesus were considered as Scripture. Thus, as more of the NT books were written, the canon of Scripture expanded as guided by the Holy Spirit.

D. The Early Church and the Canon

The early church father, Tertullian (155 - 220 AD) noted:

“The law and the prophets she unites in one volume with the writings of the evangelists and apostles; from which she drinks in [receives] her faith.” ’

And Irenaeus said:

“I have pointed out the truth, and shown the preaching of the church, which the prophets proclaimed but which Christ brought to perfection, and the apostles have handed down. From which the church, receiving [these truths], and throughout all the world alone preserving them in their integrity, has transmitted them to her sons.”

(Irenaeus - c. 130 - 202 AD, Against Heresies, 5.preface, in ANF, 1:526.)

In the early years of the Christian church in the first centuries after Christ and the apostles, the Bible in its entirety with all the writings of the NT was not readily available to all Christians. Remember that this was prior to the internet and printing press - so transmission was a lot slower than it is today! Much of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles was transmitted via oral tradition in the first centuries of the church.

Tradition and the Rule of Faith

This leads to the question of the place of tradition within the Christian church. Roman Catholics make a big deal of Tradition as the apostolic teaching handed down to the church via the apostolic succession of Popes. This “Tradition” supposedly contains teachings confirming Roman beliefs about Mary, Indulgences, Papal infallibility, etc. However, is this really what was transmitted via this oral tradition of the early church?

“These written records and unwritten tradition were seen as two parts of a unified whole, and the early church appealed to both to express its doctrine and to fight heresy. “The only true and life-giving faith, which the church has received from the apostles and imparted to her sons,” was referred to as “the glorious and holy rule of

our tradition," "the rule of faith," and "the rule (or canon) of truth."¹ This tradition was essentially fixed and agreed upon by all the churches,² with its content being a succinct statement of essential Christian doctrine.³ Whatever was believed in the church had to conform to this rule of faith. Indeed, true doctrine could be distinguished from false by tracing its origin to "the tradition of the apostles." Moreover, this rule of faith was public knowledge, accessible to everyone. Thus, it stood in contrast to certain heresies that claimed a "secret knowledge" of the truths of the Christian faith. This hidden wisdom was reserved for the elite of these erring movements and often went against biblical teaching. Not so for apostolic tradition: It was public knowledge in conformity with Scripture." (Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 39–40)

The Apostles Creed (which is dated by some as early as the 2nd century) is perhaps an example of this "rule of faith" which the early church used. It contains a concise summary of the essential teaching of the Christian faith. The tradition which the early church referred to was a summary of biblical truth which was readily available and widely known by the Christian church. Roman Catholics wrongly ascribe their later definition of traditions to this early tradition of the church as a means to try to give legitimacy to their extra-biblical practices and beliefs. However, no firm support can be given from the early church for much of Rome's later dogmas and beliefs.

But this leads us into the question of how did the church recognize which books are canonical and which aren't?

4. RECOGNIZING THE CANON

The Roman Catholic view of the canon believes that it is the papal magisterium which pronounces certain books as canonical and gives them scriptural status. However, this puts the church over the Bible instead of God's Word over the church. This type of model makes it impossible to reform the church by His Word, because if the church determines what His word is, then it cannot be reformed by that which it gets to define.

However, the church did not form the canon of scripture, but rather God's Word - scripture itself - formed the church. Gregg Allison, in his book - *Historical Theology* - writes,

"Quoting Paul, Calvin affirmed that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20); thus, Scripture preceded the church, and it cannot owe its existence to church authority. The church recognized and affirmed

¹ See Clement of Rome, *Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians*, 7.2, in Holmes, 37; ANF, 1:7; Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 12, in ANF, 3:249; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.22.2, in ANF, 1:347. Irenaeus also calls it "the sure tradition from the apostles." *Against Heresies* 5.20.1, in ANF, 1:548.

² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.2, in ANF, 1:331.

³ Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 13, in ANF, 3:249; cf. *Against Praxeas*, 2, in ANF, 3:598–99. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.1, in ANF, 1:330.

the divinely inspired writings that God intended for placement in the canon, but it did not create or determine the canon of Scripture.”

(Gregg R. Allison, Historical Theology, 53.)

As the church was formed, it recognized the books of Scripture. Thus, there is an interconnected relationship between scripture and the church.

If the scriptures are what they say they are - the very Word of God - then they bear ultimate authority and thus would be self-attesting to their truthfulness and authority. Their canonicity and authority would be something intrinsic to them even from the time the ink was written on the parchment of the original autographs. So, the canon would exist from the very time the Spirit inspired the originals to be written - not as some later human invention.

Therefore the question of canon isn't one of "how did the church MAKE these books canonical" but rather, "how did the church recognize the books which are canonical?"

There are three features which helped the church recognize canonical books:

- A. Divine Qualities**
- B. Apostolic Origins**
- C. Corporate Reception**

A. DIVINE QUALITIES

The Westminster Larger Catechism asks the question:

Q. 4. How does it appear that the Scriptures are of the Word of God?

A. The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the Word of God, by their majesty (Hos. 8:12; 1 Cor. 2:6-7, 13; Psa. 110:18, 129) and purity (Psa. 12:6 & 119:140); by the consent of all the parts (Acts 10:43 & 26:22), and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God (Rom. 3:19, 27); by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation (Acts 18:28 & 20:32; Heb. 4:12; Jam. 1:18; Psa. 19:7-9; Rom. 15:4); but the Spirit of God bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very word of God (John 16:13-14; 1 John 2:20, 27).

Just as all of creation declares God's glory as His handiwork and creation evidences its Maker, so too God's Word has an intrinsic quality of declaring the glory of the Lord in their majesty and message - they bear the marks of His handiwork. John Piper calls this quality of scripture, the 'peculiar glory' of the word of God. This quality of scripture is seen by those who humbly apply themselves to study it.

“If the heavens declare the glory of God and therefore bear witness to their divine creator, the Scripture as God’s handiwork must also bear the imprints of his authorship.”

(John Murray)

“the holy, biblical Scripture, because it is the Word of God, has standing and credibility enough in and of itself.”

(Heinrich Bullinger)

I. Prophecy

One of the ways scripture shows its Divine Qualities is through fulfilled prophecy. Only the Sovereign Lord of history can ‘declare the end from the beginning’ (cf. Isa. 46:10) and the scriptures, as His word, bear record of this truth. There are hundreds upon hundreds of prophecies and fulfillments in God’s Word. According to some datasets, in terms of Messianic Prophecies (concerning Jesus Christ) alone, there are around 300 specific prophecies in scripture! The odds of one person fulfilling even only 8 of those prophecies are astronomical - 1×10^{28} or 1 in 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000.

II. Majesty

Another way that the scriptures show their Divine qualities are in their majesty. When one considers the amazing truths they proclaim, they are not the sorts of inventions that people would come up with. Who would invent such a God as ours? One who is totally uncontrollable and terrible in might? One who sovereignly predestines and elects on the basis of sheer grace, not of any actual or foreseen merit? They show it in their purity - that God’s laws and standards are morally perfect and pure - beyond even our highest human moral aspirations, going even to the heart and intentions of people. They show it in the consistency of all the parts and the scope of the whole of redemptive history - as all weaving together a tapestry of a grand narrative far bigger and more marvellous than any human dare to dream.

III. Power

They show it in their power to convert sinners and create a people of God who are ‘zealous for good works’ (Tit. 2:14). They show it in their abilities to comfort, build-up, rebuke and sanctify the believer (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The teachings of Scripture prove to bring wisdom (Ps. 119:98; 2 Tim. 3:16), give joy to the heart (Neh. 8:8-12; Ps. 119:111), provide “light” to the dark paths of life (Ps. 119:105), give understanding to the mind (Ps. 119:144), give peace and comfort (Ps. 119:50), expose sin and guilt (2 Kings 22:11-13; Acts 2:34-37; Heb. 4:12-13), and lead to prosperity and blessing (Ps. 1:1-3).

Jonathan Edwards said it this way:

“The gospel of the blessed God does not go abroad a-begging for its evidence, so much as some think: it has its highest and most proper evidence in itself... The mind

ascends to the truth of the gospel but by one step, and that is its divine glory.”
(Jonathan Edwards)

Jesus said it this way:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27)

Since all the scriptures testify to Christ (John 5:39), his sheep will hear his voice in the Scriptures through the majesty, purity, consistency, scope and power of their message. Notice how all of these qualities are only available to be seen by the one who applies themselves to read and understand scripture? This is why we cannot put down our sword! This is why we must lead our unbelieving family and friends to God’s Word. Scripture is a means of grace to transform people’s lives. It is powerful, sharp and Spirit-empowered. It is in exposure to God’s word that its self-attesting power can bear itself upon a person’s conscience and bring conviction of its truthfulness.

B. APOSTOLIC ORIGINS

New Testament scholar, Michael J. Kruger writes,

Not only did the apostles themselves write many of these New Testament documents, but, in a broader sense, they presided over the transmission of the apostolic deposit and labored to make sure that the message of Christ was firmly and accurately preserved for future generations, through the help of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:1–4; Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3; Gal. 1:9; Phil. 4:9; Col. 2:6–8; 1 Thess. 2:13–15; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14; 2 Pet. 2:21; Jude 1:3). Thus, the New Testament canon is not so much a collection of writings by apostles, but a collection of apostolic writings—writings that bear the authoritative message of the apostles and derive from the foundational apostolic era (even if not directly from their hands).
(Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited*)

Many early Christian writings testify to this fact. For example, the letter of 1 Clement, written very early (somewhere around c.96AD) says:

“The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus the Christ was sent from God. The Christ, therefore, is from God and the Apostles from the Christ.”
(1 Clement 42:1-2)

Part of what determined the apostolic origins of a book was the fact that it could reliably be traced back to the apostolic time of the first century.

There are simply not many other writings outside of the NT that can be dated to that time, and thus there aren’t many legitimate candidates for canonicity other than the books of the NT which we have today.

The reason why we have confidence today of the apostolicity of the books of the NT canon is that the earliest Christians used these criteria (as well as others) to screen the books they were considering as scripture. Irenaeus testified to this saying:

“We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.”
(Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3.1.1 - c.130-202 AD)

C. CORPORATE RECEPTION

Corporate reception is connected with the previous two attributes. The church over time recognizes the voice of the Shepherd in the books of scripture through their divine qualities and apostolic origins. Thus, the role of the church in recognizing the canon is more like a thermometer than a thermostat. A thermometer recognizes the temperature of a room, whereas a thermostat determines the temperature of a room. The church simply recognized what the canon was by its self-attesting qualities to those who received it by the Spirit’s testimony.

Augustine expressed it thus:

“Let us treat scripture like scripture, like God speaking; don’t ... look there for man going wrong. It is not for nothing, you see, that the canon has been established for the Church. This is the function of the Holy Spirit. So if anybody reads my book, let him pass judgment on me. If I have said something reasonable, let him follow, not me, but reason itself; if I’ve proved it by the clearest divine testimony, let him follow, not me, but the divine scripture.”

In a treatise written between 396-427 AD, after the supposedly authoritative decision of Pope Damasus and a council in Hippo about the canon, Augustine wrote:

“In the matter of canonical Scriptures he should follow the authority of the greater number of catholic Churches, among which are those which have deserved to have apostolic seats and receive epistles. He will observe this rule concerning canonical Scriptures, that he will prefer those accepted by all catholic Churches to those which some do not accept; among those which are not accepted by all, he should prefer those which are accepted by the largest number of important Churches to those held by a few minor Churches of less authority. If he discovers that some are maintained by the larger number of Churches, others by the Churches of weightiest authority, although this condition is not likely, he should hold them to be of equal value.” (Augustine, On Christian Doctrine)

(The use of the word ‘catholic’ here should be understood in its original meaning of ‘universal’ - speaking to the unity of churches - not in the ‘Roman Catholic’ sense as that

developed later on) This shows that Augustine did not see councils or popes as the authoritative final word on the canon, but rather urged all students of Scripture to examine the consensus among the people of God.

Corporate reception also does not mean absolute unity regarding the canon of scripture for primarily two reasons: availability of scriptures (you cannot receive what is not available to you - some books took a bit of time to be circulated after they were written) and the distorting effects of sin and our fallen nature. However, what it does mean is that throughout the ages, though there may be some pockets of differing opinions, the church as a whole experienced predominant unity around the canon.

This corporate reception of the canonical books is evidenced by the historical record we have of the writings of the early church. Many of the early church fathers - bishops, pastors, etc - wrote letters and commentaries on the scriptures and cited the books that were authoritative as scripture. Some even produced lists that reflected the books that they knew to be divinely inspired, such as the Muratorian Fragment (c.180AD) which contains a list of 22 out of the 27 books of the NT.



Diritti Biblioteca Ambrosiana. Vietata la riproduzione. Aut. No. F 157 / 05

The Muratorian Fragment

Lines 32-85

Other more complete lists such as found in Athanasius' Festal Letter, which lists all 27 books of the NT, were published as the books of the NT continued to be circulated, copied and distributed.

In these three attributes - divine qualities, apostolic origins and corporate reception - the Spirit is at work helping the believer rightly recognize their presence and validity.

Further Questions

Are there any other candidates for the Canon of Scripture?

Today there exist no strong candidates for addition to the canon and no strong objections to any book presently in the canon.

Even the Early Church Fathers expressly stated that their own writings were not to be viewed as authoritative. Ignatius, for example, about A.D. 110, said,

“I do not order you as did Peter and Paul; they were apostles I am a convict; they were free, I am even until now a slave” (Ignatius, To the Romans 4.3; compare the attitude toward the apostles in 1 Clement 42:1, 2; 44:1–2 [A.D. 95]; Ignatius, To the Magnesians 7:1; 13:1–2; et al.).

Other early writings such as “The Shepherd of Hermas” teach unbiblical concepts such as the necessity of penance, that baptism forgives sins and a confusion about the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. (See Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, p. 641).

The Gospel of Thomas which for a time was held by some to belong to the canon, ends with the following absurd statement (par. 114):

Simon Peter said to them: “Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said: “Lo, I shall lead her, so that I may make her a male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

We can clearly see that the Gospel of Thomas is here teaching something utterly ridiculous and not in keeping with the teaching of the rest of scripture.

Regarding these other early writings which were claiming canonical authority, Origen (184-253 AD) said: “The church receives only four gospels; heretics have many, such as the gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of Thomas, etc. These we read, that we may not seem to be ignorant to those who think they know something extraordinary, if they are acquainted with those things which are recorded in these books.” Ambrose (c.340-397 AD) is credited with saying, “we read these that they may not seem ignorant; we read them, not that we receive them, but that we may reject them; and may know what those things are, of which they make such a boast.” So, we see that the early church fathers were aware of these spurious writings, but rejected them.

Every other existing document of the early church outside the NT which might be considered for inclusion in the canon contain either explicit disclaimers by their author that they are not authoritative or include some doctrinal aberrations that make them unworthy of inclusion. On the other hand, there are no strong objections to any book currently in the canon.

What if we found a ‘lost letter of Paul’ today?

At this point someone may ask a hypothetical question about what we should do if another one of Paul’s epistles were discovered, for example. Would we add it to Scripture?

This is a difficult question, because two conflicting considerations are involved. On the one hand, if a great majority of believers were convinced that this was indeed an authentic

Pauline epistle, written in the course of Paul's fulfillment of his apostolic office, then the nature of Paul's apostolic authority would guarantee that the writing would be God's very words (as well as Paul's), and that its teachings would be consistent with the rest of Scripture. But the fact that it was not preserved as part of the canon would indicate that it was not among the writings the apostles wanted the church to preserve as part of Scripture.

Moreover, it must immediately be said that such a hypothetical question is just that: hypothetical. It is exceptionally difficult to imagine what kind of historical data might be discovered that could convincingly demonstrate to the church as a whole that a letter lost for over 1,900 years was genuinely authored by Paul, and it is more difficult still to understand how our sovereign God could have faithfully cared for his people for over 1,900 years and still allowed them to be continually deprived of something he intended them to have as part of his final revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. These considerations make it so highly improbable that any such manuscript would be discovered at some time in the future, that such a hypothetical question really does not merit further serious consideration.

In conclusion, are there any books in our present canon that should not be there? No. We can rest our confidence in this fact in the faithfulness of God our Father, who would not lead all his people for nearly two thousand years to trust as his Word something that is not. And we find our confidence repeatedly confirmed both by historical investigation and by the work of the Holy Spirit in enabling us to hear God's voice in a unique way as we read from every one of the sixty-six books in our present canon of Scripture.

(Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 68)

"The entire idea of "lost scripture" requires us to believe that God would go through the work of inspiring His Word so as to provide for His church guidance and instruction and encouragement; but then, having inspired His Word, be shown incapable of protecting and preserving it and leading His church to recognize it for what it is."

(James R. White, *Scripture Alone*, 110)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why is it important to your Christian life to know which writings are God's words and which are not?
- How would your Christian life be different if you had to look for his words that were scattered among all the writings of Christians throughout church history?

- Have you had doubts or questions about the canonicity of any of the books of the Bible? What caused those questions? What should one do to resolve them?
- Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of other cults have claimed present-day revelations from God that they count equal to the Bible in authority. What reasons can you give to indicate the falsity of those claims? In practice, do these people treat the Bible as an authority equal to these other "revelations"?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- [Know How We Got Our Bible](#) by Ryan Matthew Reeves
- [Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books](#) by Michael J. Kruger

SCRIPTURE MEMORIZATION

- 2 Timothy 3:16-17
- 2 Peter 1:20-21