



# Overview of The Canon

- “Canon” means “rod” or “standard.”
- Refers to those books that Christian scholars recognize as inspired.
- Not selected by church councils, but was rather officially recognized after it had independently met certain criteria.
- The Bible is not merely a book written and compiled by a bunch of people. It is a collection of inspired messages given by God to people throughout History.

# Why Should We Study This?

- As Christians, what the Bible contains has the potential to profoundly affect what we believe, how we live, and even how we spend eternity.
- But since God didn't just hand us a big book of Scripture, it's hard to know exactly which writings make the cut.
- Much of this study will come from the excellent article "History, Theology and the Biblical Canon: an Introduction to Basic Issues" by Dr. Eckhard Schnabel, professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Source:

•[http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/canon\\_schnabel.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/canon_schnabel.pdf)

# The Old Testament Canon (1/3)

- The concept of a recognized canon of Scripture goes back to the Pentateuch (Law) of the Old Testament.
- Deuteronomy 4:2
  - “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.” (NASV)
- And clearly, the Jewish nation understood the laws of God to be divinely inspired, otherwise they would not have preserved or recognized them for so long.
- The Prophetic books are harder to establish historically, but most scholars believe that part of the canon to have been settled in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

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# The Old Testament Canon (2/3)

- We don't know precisely how the Old Testament Canon became established, but it is clear that there was a set of Jewish texts considered authoritative by the time Jesus lived.
- Jesus quotes from twenty-four Old Testament books, implying that He and His audience were familiar with them.
- It is also clear that at Jesus' time, the Old Testament had already been sorted into collections: the torah (law), neviim (prophets) and kethubim (writings).
  - Jesus: "These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."
    - (Luke 24:44, NASV)
  - Jewish historian Josephus also cites these three collections.

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# The Old Testament Canon (3/3)

- If Jesus and the New Testament writers recognized the books in our Old Testament as authoritative, that makes a pretty solid case that they should be included in the Bible.
- There are 5 Old Testament books not mentioned in the New Testament, but all are included in a collection along with books which are quoted.

Source:

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# The Old Testament Apocrypha

- Refers to a set of books not found in the Hebrew canon but which do appear in the later Greek Old Testament called the Septuagint.
- Apocryphal books are largely of historical rather than spiritual significance and lack the historical acceptance and New Testament references that help establish the others' canonicity.
- The later inclusion of the apocryphal books led to them being translated along with the rest of the Bible and eventually the average Christian just assumed they were always there.
- The Old Testament apocrypha are not bad or heretical works, but their acceptance by some as authoritative is a historical mistake.
- The modern Catholic Bible still includes them, perhaps out of tradition as much as anything, but Protestants have justifiably left them out in order to preserve the Bible's authoritative quality.

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# The New Testament Canon (1/3)

- The very early Christian church did not have a New Testament, but rather a collection of writings from various church leaders, including the apostles.
- Churches in different regions often preferred certain Christian writings over others, but the writings in the modern New Testament were generally held above the rest.
- The Four Gospels, the Pauline epistles and Acts, 1 Peter and 1 John became widely and independently accepted by many churches by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
- Revelation endured some debate, but was generally accepted by 400 AD.
- Initially James, Jude, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John, 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter and Hebrews were “disputed books” – that is, accepted by some churches but doubted by others.

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# The New Testament Canon (2/3)

- In 367 AD, Bishop Athanasius compiled a formal list of books he considered canonical. His list contained the Old Testament (not including the Apocrypha) and all 27 books of the modern New Testament.
- By the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, this canon had become widely accepted.
- Although The Athanasian canon was new in the sense that it was a comprehensive list of authoritative Christian books, it wasn't Athanasius who determined what to include.
- The church as a whole had long ago recognized these books as authoritative.
- The “disputed books” which Athanasius included may have had less universal acceptance, but were still widely recognized as authoritative. Questions over their authority have arisen since, but the church as a whole generally agrees that their inclusion in the canon is warranted.

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# The New Testament Canon (3/3)

- What led early Christians to accept some writings as authoritative and not others?
  - Apostolicity: Canonical letters had to be written by someone who had first-hand experience with Christ or worked with someone who did.
  - Rule of Faith/Truth: Canonical letters also had to be useful and sound in their teaching and not contradict other established Scriptures.
- Though there has been some debate over certain books meeting these criteria, the vast majority of Christian scholars agree that the canonical scriptures do not directly contradict one another and all enjoyed early acceptance by the Church.
- Those books which were rejected from the canon were either written too late to be apostolic in origin, or contained theology that directly contradicted that of established Scripture.
  - The Gospel of Thomas, for example, was never widely accepted and attributes statements to Jesus which contradict His other teachings.

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# Divine Involvement

- The fact that we believe Scripture to be the Word of God means that He has undoubtedly been involved in its preservation, acceptance and distribution all along.
- It is thus reasonable to conclude that the modern canon's widespread acceptance is not an accident or a purely human accomplishment, but is the result of God's guidance throughout History.

Source:

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# Schnabel's Conclusion

“The lack of precise answers for many specific questions, the undeniable human element in the history of the canon, and the time factor in the process of canonization all show the human side of the Bible. The canon of Scripture is not a book which fell from heaven. The canonical process and our knowledge of it reflect the very nature of Scripture. As Scripture is both a human record of Israel's and the apostles' experience in history and the divinely inspired revelation of God's will, so the canon of Scripture is the outcome of human appreciation and evaluation of foundational documents and at the same time the result of God's sovereign will.”

Source:

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# The Documentary Evidence

- Since there are no surviving original documents from the New Testament, it's important to know why existing copies are considered accurate.
- In his book "The Case for Christ," Lee Strobel interviews New Testament expert Dr. Bruce Metzger on the documentary evidence for the New Testament.
- Metzger and Strobel discuss a number of factors that establish the accuracy of the New Testament, and then address the discrepancies that do exist.

Source:

• "The Case for Christ" by Lee Strobel

# Quantity and age of copies from different geographical areas

- The first six books of 2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman historian Tacitus' *Annals of Imperial Rome* exist today in only one copy, dating from around 850 AD.
- We have just nine Greek manuscripts of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish historian Josephus' *The Jewish War*, all copied after the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and only one Latin manuscript from the 4<sup>th</sup> century.
- In contrast, more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament have been found (many from between 100-300 AD).
  - This is the most of any ancient book (Homer's *Iliad* is the only one that comes close, at 650 manuscripts copied nearly 1000 years after it was written).

Source:

• "The Case for Christ" by Lee Strobel

# Quantity of translations and early quotations

- In addition to early Greek manuscripts, the entire New Testament exists in the form of early Latin, Syriac and Coptic translations.
- If all early translations were lost, the New Testament could still be reproduced from the many quotations existing in commentaries, sermons, letters, etc. of the early church fathers.
- The evidence has led scholars all over the world to conclude as did Sir Frederic Kenyon, former director of the British Museum:
  - “The last foundation for any doubt that the scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed.”

Source:

• “The Case for Christ” by Lee Strobel

# Discrepancies

- There are thousands of “variants” between the New Testament manuscripts, many of which are grammatical or spelling differences which have no affect on the meaning of the passage.
- Where some manuscripts contain portions not found in others, the omission of these has no affect on Christian doctrine.
- According to Metzger:
  - “The more significant variations do not overthrow any doctrine of the church. Any good Bible will have notes that will alert the reader to variant readings of any consequence. But again, these are rare.”

Source:

• “The Case for Christ” by Lee Strobel