

Chapter 3: The Canon of Scripture: What belongs in the Bible and what does not belong?

Explanation and Scriptural Basis

The canon of Scripture is the list of all the books that belong in the Bible. We must not underestimate the importance of determining which books belong in the Bible because:

1. The words of Scripture are the words by which we nourish our spiritual lives.
Deut. 32:47: For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.
2. To add to or subtract from God's words would be to prevent God's people from obeying him fully.
Deut. 4:2: You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.

A) The Old Testament Canon (54-59)

1) The Bible itself testifies to the historical development of the canon.

a) The earliest collection of written words was the Ten Commandments, which God himself wrote on two stone tablets.

Ex. 32:16: The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

b) The collection of authoritative words from God grew in size throughout the time of Israel's history.

i. Moses wrote additional works: the first 5 books of the Bible

Ex. 24:4: And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Ex. 34:27: And the Lord said to Moses, "Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel."

Num. 33:2: Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the Lord, and these are their stages according to their starting places.

Deut. 31:22, 24-26: So Moses wrote this song the same day and taught it to the people of Israel... When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, "Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there for a witness against you.

ii. Joshua added to the words "in the book of the law of God." **Josh. 24:26:** And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.

- a. In view of the command that the Lord gave through Moses not to add to the law, Joshua must have been convinced that God authorized the additional writing.
 - Deut. 4:2:** You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you.
 - Deut. 12:32:** Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.
 - iii. Others in Israel, usually those who filled the office of prophet, wrote additional words from God.
 - 1 Sam. 10:25:** Then Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship, and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord. Then Samuel sent all the people away, each one to his home.
 - 1 Chron. 29:29:** Now the acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the Chronicles of Samuel the seer, and in the Chronicles of Nathan the prophet, and in the Chronicles of Gad the seer,
 - 2 Chron 20:34 [cf. 1 Kings 16:7]:** Now the rest of the acts of Jehoshaphat, from first to last, are written in the chronicles of Jehu the son of Hanani, which are recorded in the Book of the Kings of Israel.
 - 2 Chron. 26:22:** Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last, Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz wrote.
 - 2 Chron. 32:32:** Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah and his good deeds, behold, they are written in the vision of Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz, in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel.
 - Jer. 30:2:** Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you.
- c) The content of the Old Testament canon continued to grow until approximately 435 BC with the completion of Malachi.
 - i. The subsequent history of the Jewish people was recorded in other writings, but they were not considered worthy to be included with the Scriptures.
 - 1 Macc. 4:45-46 (164 BC):** And they thought it best to tear it down, so that it would not be a lasting shame to them that the Gentiles had defiled it. So they tore down the altar, and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until a prophet should come to tell what to do with them.
 - 1 Macc. 9:27 (about 160 BC):** So there was great distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them.
 - 1 Macc. 14:41:** The Jews and their priests decided that Simon should be their leader and high priest forever, until a trustworthy prophet should arise,
 - Josephus (39-100 AD) *Against Apion* 1.38-42 (written 95 AD):**
 - We do not possess myriads of inconsistent books, conflicting with each other. Our books, those which are justly accredited, are but two and twenty, and contain the record of all time.
 - Of these, five are the books of Moses, comprising the laws and the traditional history from the birth of man down to the death of the lawgiver. This period falls only a

little short of three thousand years. From the death of Moses until Artaxerxes, who succeeded Xerxes as king of Persia, the prophets subsequent to Moses wrote the history of the events of their own times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.

From Artaxerxes to our own time the 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.

We have given practical proof of our reverence for our own Scriptures. For, although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable; and it is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them.

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 11a: Our Rabbis taught: Since the death of the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachai, the Holy Spirit [of prophetic inspiration] departed from Israel; yet they were still able to avail themselves of the *Bath-kol*. [literally, “daughter of a voice”; that is, an echo or a voice from heaven]. Once when the Rabbis were met in the upper chamber of Gurya’s house in Jericho, a *Bath-kol* was heard from Heaven, saying: ‘There is one amongst you who is worthy that the *Shechinah* should rest on him as it did on Moses, but his generation does not merit it.’ The Sages present set their eyes on Hillel the Elder [**active 30 BC – 10 AD**]. And when he died they lamented and said: ‘Alas, the pious man, the humble man, the disciple of Ezra [is no more].’

Tosefta, Sotah 13:3, sections A-D:

A. When the latter prophets died, that is, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, then the Holy Spirit came to an end in Israel

B. But even so, they made them hear [Heavenly messages] through an echo.

C. מ'ש'ה ש': Sages gathered together in the upper room of the house of Guria in Jericho, and a heavenly echo came forth and said to them, “There is a man among you who is worthy to receive the Holy Spirit, but this generation is unworthy of such an honor.”

They all set their eyes upon Hillel the elder.

D. And when he died, they said about him, “Woe for the humble man, woe for the pious man, the disciple of Ezra.”

[Similar story: **b.Yoma 9b; SongR 3.9.3**]

Prayer of Azariah and the Prophet, Song of the Three Young

Men 15 (1-2 century BC): And at this time there is no prince, or prophet, or leader.”

Dead Sea Scrolls, The Scroll of the Rule 11 (before 70 AD):

Until the coming of the Prophet and the Anointed of Aaron and Israel.

Sirach 49.10 (180 BC): May the bones of the twelve prophets revive from where they lie, for they comforted the people of Jacob and delivered them with confident hope.

Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra 14b-15a: Who wrote the Scriptures?—Moses wrote his own book and the portion of Balaam and Job. Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and [the

last] eight verses of the Pentateuch. Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the Book of Judges and Ruth. David wrote the Book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, [15a] and the three sons of Korah. Jeremiah wrote the book which bears his name, the Book of Kings, and Lamentations. Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote (Mnemonic YMSHK) Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. The Men of the Great Assembly wrote (Mnemonic KNDG) Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets, Daniel and the Scroll of Ester. Ezra wrote the book that bears his name* and the genealogies of the Book of Chronicles up to his own time. This confirms the opinion of Rab, since Rab Judah has said in the name of Rab: Ezra did not leave Babylon to go up to Eretz Yisrael until he had written his own genealogy. Who then finished it [the Book of Chronicles]?—Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.

* This includes Nehemiah.

The Books of the Apocrypha

1. The First Book of Esdras
2. The Second Book of Esdras
3. Tobit
4. Judith
5. The Additions to the Book of Esther
6. The Wisdom of Solomon
7. Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach
8. Baruch
9. The Letter of Jeremiah
10. The Prayer of Azariah and the song of the Three Young Men
11. Susanna
12. Bel and the Dragon
13. The Prayer of Manasseh
14. The First Book of the Maccabees
15. The Second Book of the Maccabees

ii) Additionally there is no record of any dispute between Jesus and the Jews over the extent of the canon, a fact not only confirmed by the testimony of other contemporary Jewish literature, but also by the New Testament authors' use of the Old Testament. Neither Jesus nor his apostles cite any of the books of the Apocrypha or any other writings as having divine authority.

iii) What about the Apocrypha?

(a) These books were never accepted by the Jews as Scripture.

(b) The early church was of a mixed opinion on the issue, although most of the evidence is decidedly against viewing the Apocrypha as Scripture.

(i) The earliest Christian list of Old Testament books (AD 170) by Melito of Sardis does not include the Apocrypha.

(ii) Eusebius and Athanasius both rejected the Apocrypha as being part of the canon.

(iii) The Roman Catholic Church did not officially declare the Apocrypha to be part of the canon (with the exception of 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh) until 1546 at the Council of

Trent.

(c) Thus the writings of the Apocrypha should not be regarded as part of Scripture: (1) they do not claim for themselves the same authority; (2) they were not regarded as canonical by the Jews; (3) they were not considered Scripture by Jesus and the apostles; and (4) they contain teachings inconsistent with the rest of the Bible.

B) The New Testament Canon (60-68)

1) The New Testament canon begins with the writings of the apostles, who were given the ability from the Holy Spirit to recall and interpret accurately the words and deeds of Jesus.

John 14:26: But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

John 16:13-14: When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

a) Furthermore those who have the office of apostle in the early church claim an authority equal to that of the Old Testament prophets.

2 Peter 3:2: that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles,

Acts 5:2-4: and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

1 Cor. 2:9, 13: But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"—And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

1 Cor. 14:37: If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.

2 Cor. 13:3: since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.

2) Some of the New Testament writings are placed alongside the Old Testament canon as part of Scripture.

2 Peter 3:16: as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

1 Tim 5:17-18 [cf. Luke 10:7]: 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 treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

3) If we accept the arguments for the traditional views of authorship of the New Testament writings, then we have most of the New Testament in the canon because of direct authorship by the apostles.

4) What about:

a) Mark, Luke, Acts

i) All three were commonly acknowledged very early, probably because of the respective authors' close association with an apostle (Mark with Peter and Luke with Paul).

b) Jude

i) Not accepted as early because of his quotation of 1 Enoch, but accepted in virtue of the author's connection with James and the fact that he was the brother of Jesus.

c) Hebrews

i) Acceptance was urged by many in the church on the basis of assumed Pauline authorship. However, many others rejected Pauline authorship (e.g. Origen). Therefore its acceptance was not due primarily to a belief in Pauline authorship, but rather the intrinsic qualities of the book.

d) Ultimately for a book to belong in the canon, it is absolutely necessary that the book have divine authorship.

5) Historical Evidence

Athanasius' Easter Letter (367 AD), Letter 39.5, 7

5. Again it is not tedious to speak of the [books] of the New Testament. These are the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark Luke, and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans, then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John.

7. But for the greater exactness I add this also, writing of necessity; that there are other books besides these not indeed included in the Canon, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness. The Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Sirach, and Esther, and Judith, and Tobit, and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd. But the former, my brethren, are included in the Canon, the latter being [merely] read; nor is there in any place a mention of apocryphal writings. But they are an invention of heretics, who write them when they choose, bestowing upon them their approbation, and assigning to them a date, that so, using them as ancient writings, they may find

occasion to lead astray the simple.

1 Clement, 44.1-2 (95 AD): Our Apostles also knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the title of bishop.

2. For this cause, therefore, since they had received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have been already mentioned, and afterwards added the codicil that if they should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministry.

Ignatius to the Romans 4.3(110 AD): 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 Trallians 3.3b(110 AD): I do not think myself competent, as a convict, to give you orders like an Apostle.

The Gospel according to Thomas, 114 (110 AD): 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.

6) Should we expect more writings to be added to the canon?

a) There is a finality to the revelation of God in Christ and once this revelation has been completed, no more is to be expected. The apostles and their close companions report Christ's words and deeds and interpret them with absolute divine authority; therefore the canon is now closed.

Heb. 1:1-2: Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

Rev. 22: 18-19: 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.

7) How do we know that we have the right books in the canon of Scripture?

a) Primary confidence based on the faithfulness of God.

b) We are persuaded personally by the work of the Holy Spirit as we read Scripture, and the historical data are helpful in informing us and giving additional confirmation

8) Are there any books, hypothetical or actual, that deserve a place in the canon or are there any strong objections to any book currently in the canon?

9) The canon of Scripture today is exactly what God wanted it to be, and it will stay that way until Christ returns.