

# The Canon

When you first open your Bible you realize it is a book of many books. It has 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament—a total collection of 66 books. God's Word would be of little value if one Bible had 24 books, another had 42, and still another one had 101. Have you ever wondered how this remarkable set of 66 books came together? It's highly unlikely that the books just "wound up" this way, as if when Hosea finished his book, he handed it to the person in charge of "the set", and when Jude completed his letter he sent his to the Bible clearing-house. So just how did this miracle come about?

## What is a Canon?

The selection of books that make up the Bible is called the **Canon**. The word canon comes from the Greek word **Kanon** meaning a measuring rod or ruler. In later years it came to mean the "rule of faith" or the "accepted writings." Today the term canon speaks of the 66 books we have in our Bibles.

First it is important to establish a few important facts:

- 1. NEVER did this collection of 66 books come about as a result of a decree of a council or by the whim of any individual.**
- 2. No single church ever announced that certain books were inspired and others were not. The church cannot and does not control the canon.**
- 3. The canon came about because God willed it to be. People simply discovered the books that God had planned all along to be included in his Holy Book.**
- 4. It should also be realized that only these 66 books serve as the basis for each and every doctrine.**

## There Were Lots of Books

People in the Bible could read and write. This may sound like a strange comment, but sometimes one gets the idea that the only book being written and read by anyone was the Bible. There were other books available in those days, some of them even mentioned by name in the Bible. Did you know that the Bible names at least 18 books and epistles? Many of these were reliable sources of history or perhaps even letters written by the apostles, yet they were not chosen to be a part of the canon we have today. They did not become part of the Holy Scripture.

What are the titles of some of these books?

Numbers 21:14

1 Chronicles 29:29

2 Chronicles 20:34

Joshua 10:13

2 Chronicles 9:29

Colossians 4:16

These books did not meet the criteria necessary to become an accepted canonical book. They didn't share the same specific standards as the 66 accepted books. What were these standards?

- 1. They all had to claim divine authority. "Thus says the Lord", or "The Word of the Lord came to. . ."**
- 2. They had to be written by men of God. These people all had hearts that were inclined toward the Lord.**
- 3. The early fathers needed to be convinced that the writing was authentic.**
- 4. The book needed to possess the power of God in its content.**
- 5. The book needed to be accepted by the people.**

## The Old Testament Canon

There is evidence that by the time Jesus began his ministry, the Old Testament set of 39 books (24 in the Hebrew set) was complete. The gospels make mention of “*the Scripture*”, “*the Scriptures*”, and “*the Holy Scriptures*”. (See Matthew 21:42, John 7:42, and Romans 1:2.) Jesus often used the phrase “*it is written.*” In other words, “It is true, this truth was recorded in the Old Testament, and I learned it.”

Well before the time of Jesus there are hints of this collection taking shape. Moses’ books were carefully kept beside the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 31:26). Samuel had his writings preserved (1 Samuel 10:25). Josiah discovered God’s Word (2 Kings 23:24). Ezra read the Laws of Moses (Nehemiah 9:3). Daniel spoke of the Scriptures (Daniel 9:2). Each of these references points to a specific collection of books.



Thus the Old Testament gradually took shape. Eventually the Hebrew Bible was formed. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew Bible used today in the local synagogues contains exactly the same books that we have in our Old Testament. The only difference is the order in which they are placed. The Hebrew Bible’s table of contents reads:

**The TORAH (The 5 Books of Moses) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy**

**The NEVI’IM (The 8 Books of the Prophets) Joshua, Judges, Samuel (two books in one), Kings (two books in one), Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, The Twelve (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)**

**The KESUVIM (The 11 Books of Writings) Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Nehemiah (includes Ezra), Chronicles (two books in one)**

This is undoubtedly the order of books to which Jesus referred in Luke 24:44. It is also this same order to which Jesus referred when he mentioned, “From the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah,” in Luke 11:51. Abel was the first martyr mentioned in the Old Testament and Zechariah was the last (see Genesis 4:8 and 2 Chronicles 24:20,21). In essence Jesus was saying, “From the first to the last book of the Scripture.”

Another early mention of the Old Testament canon was made by Josephus, a well respected Jewish historian of the first century A.D. He writes, “*Our books, those which are justly accredited, are but 22, and contain the record of all time. (At that time Ruth was joined with Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah.) 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 decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them.*”

Again, we find the Christian writer Origen in the third century A.D. mention 22 books in the Old Testament, and later Jerome claims that the number of books in the Old Testament “will not exceed 22.”

Thus the Old Testament was sealed and no books were to be added.

## The New Testament Canon

In the New Testament we deal with a completely different set of circumstances. Remember that to the early Christians, their Bible was the Old Testament. It was while the church was growing that more books were being prepared for God's final volume.

It is estimated that Revelation, the last New Testament book written, was penned by John about A.D. 100. Soon afterward it became necessary to establish a set number of books to be included in the New Testament. Several factors made this decision imperative. First, in A.D. 140, a heretic named Marcion submitted his own set of New Testament books that he claimed were canonical. This needed to be countered. Also, many of the churches were becoming concerned about the books they were using in their worship. They needed some consensus. Add to this the fact that in the early 300's it was declared by Rome that all sacred books of the Christians were to be destroyed. Thus it was important to come to a conclusion as to which books would be included in the true canonical books of Scripture.

Christian author Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165) mentioned that on Sundays the early Christians met to worship and read out loud the "*writings of the prophets*" and "*the memoirs of the apostles*." This tells us that there was a collection of perhaps Paul's letters that was beginning to circulate among the churches. Soon the Gospels were also added to this collection, and so the New Testament began to slowly emerge.

Another interesting historical item was discovered in the 1700's. An old fragment was found that dated to the middle of the second century. This fragment mentioned: "*Luke—the third gospel, John, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, Jude, two letters of John, and Revelation.*" What books were not included? Remember this is only 50 years after Revelation was written. Origen, who previously wrote about the Old Testament also mentions the same list of books as did the fragment. Regarding the rest of the books, Origen also mentioned Hebrews, but said that some did not yet accept it. Second Peter, he also wrote, was possibly from Peter but was being disputed. Regarding 2 and 3 John, Origen said, "*John has possibly left a second and third epistle, but not all consider these to be genuine.*" However, later writings of Origen mention a list of 27 New Testament books. It is important to realize that although some books took longer for acceptance—perhaps because they were not as readily available for circulation as were the rest—the 27 books we have included in our New Testament **is the complete set of books that God willed for us to have.**

In A.D. 367, Athanasius of Alexandria published a list of 27 books. To this list he added, "*These are the springs of salvation...Let no one add anything to them or take anything away from them.*"

It is interesting to note that there were other books circulating among the early Christian Church at that time, especially the "*Epistle of Barnabas*" (which was not written by Barnabas) and the "*Shepherd of Hermas*". Although it was agreed that these books contained interesting information, they were not inspired by God, and were not to be included with the 27 chosen books. (These and other books written at that time are often referred to as the New Testament Apocrypha.)

## The Apocryphal Books

The Roman Catholic Bible includes several additional books inserted between the Old and New Testaments called the **Apocryphal** books or "hidden books." The Roman Catholic Church calls these books "deutero-canonical" meaning they were not part of the original canon. This set of 15 books was written between 300 B.C. and A.D. 100. The list includes:

**1 and 2 Esdras**

**Tobit**

**Judith**

**Additions to Esther**

**Wisdom of Solomon**  
**Ecclesiasticus**  
**Baruch**  
**Letter of Jeremiah**  
**Prayer of Azariah**  
**Susanna**  
**Bel and the Dragon**  
**Prayer of Manasseh**  
**1 and 2 Maccabees**

The history behind the Apocrypha dates back to the Jews living in Egypt. They held these books in high regard and they were included in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the **Septuagint**. However, they were not regarded as the inspired Word by the Jews living in Palestine, the home of the Jewish canon, and thus they were not considered canonical. In A.D. 1546 at the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church declared them to be canonical. Protestants however reject these books for the following reasons:

- 1. None of these books was ever quoted by Jesus.**
- 2. The New Testament never refers to the Apocryphal books.**
- 3. The early church fathers regarded them as not inspired.**
- 4. They do not appear in the Hebrew Bible.**
- 5. They contain some unbiblical teaching.**
- 6. They contain several historical and geographical errors.**

Some of the Apocryphal books are historical, some are prophetic, and others are devotional in nature. Although these books may make for interesting and even educational reading, they are not a part of the inspired Word of God.

It is truly remarkable how the Bible, written over a span of nearly 2000 years, took shape without any of the writers cognizant of the fact that their writing would be a part of a grand set, without any of the writers knowing each book would fit into the grand scheme, without any writer ever knowing how each writing would further God's grand plan of salvation, and without any of the readers realizing that God was painting a grand picture.

## **DISCUSS:**

1. Why is it so important to realize that these 66 books are the sum and substance of the entire Word of God?
2. What is it that makes the Bible such an amazing book?
3. What was it like for the early Christians to get copies of Paul's epistles, or the Gospels?
4. Will this history have any effect on your thoughts when reading the words, "It is written..." or "The Laws of Moses . . ." and "The Scriptures . . ."?
5. Why was the Apocrypha rejected? Your thoughts.