

Theme: Canonization refers to the process whereby the universal Church recognized the writings which God had inspired and given to His people to guide their life and faith.

I. Intro – What is the Canon of Scripture?

A. What do we mean by the term 'canon'?

1. Definition – The canon of Scripture is the list of books that have been recognized as being inspired by God and which therefore belong in the Bible.
2. From Greek - *kanon* – 'rule or standard'
3. Came to mean the books which met the standard of being inspired, and therefore were included as Scripture.

B. The importance of this concept

1. Deuteronomy 4:2 – do not add or take away from
2. Proverbs 30:5-6 – do not add to God's word
3. What belongs in our Bible?

C. Key questions in this study

1. Which books belong in the Old Testament?
2. Which books belong in the New Testament?
3. Who decided these things?
4. What were the criteria?

II. The Old Testament Canon

A. The beginning of an OT canon - Moses

1. God's written & binding covenant (Exodus 24:7)
2. The Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 10:4-5)
3. The Torah – book of the Law (Deut. 31:24-26)

B. The growth of OT canon – prophets and writings

1. Joshua's writings – Joshua 24:25-26
2. Prophets – Jeremiah 30:1-2; Habakkuk 2:2-3
3. Writings – 2 Samuel 23:1-2; Proverbs 2:1-6

C. Threefold OT canon – law, prophets, writings (Tanak)

1. Jesus – Luke 24:44; Matthew 23:35
2. *Prologue of Ecclesiasticus* (2nd century BC) –
“Whereas many and great things have been delivered unto us by the law and the prophets, and by others that have followed their steps, for the which things Israel ought to be commended for learning and wisdom... my grandfather Jesus, when he had much given himself to the reading of the law, and the prophets, and other books of our fathers, and had gotten therein good judgment, was drawn on also himself to write something pertaining to learning and wisdom.... and not only these things, but the law itself, and the prophets, and the rest of the books, have no small difference, when they are spoken in their own language.”
3. Josephus – “For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, [as the Greeks have,] but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years; but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life.” Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:8 (note that certain books are counted as one by the Jews – 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, etc.)

4. Other writings have 3 fold division as well
 5. Books of Jewish OT canon
 - a. Law – Genesis – Deuteronomy
 - b. Prophets –
 - i. Former - Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings
 - ii. Latter – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve
 - c. Writings – Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, The Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles
 6. Books which were almost not included
 - a. Some argued against Esther - no mention of God
 - b. Some argued against Song of Songs – erotic love poem or allegory of God’s love for Israel?
 - c. Some argued against Ecclesiastes – seemed unorthodox at points
 - d. Some argued against Proverbs – contradicts itself (Prov 26:4-5)
 - e. Ezekiel – Temple specifications seemed to conflict with Torah specifications for Temple
 7. By the time of Christ, the Jews had essentially settled on these books as the Old Testament canon, and had probably generally accepted the three sections and the order shown above.
- D. Writings of the Apocrypha – addressed later in session

III. The New Testament Canon

A. A New Testament?

1. The OT had to be recognized – Jesus did!
2. The apostles had authority from Christ
3. Were their writings inspired and authoritative?

B. The recognition of new inspired writings

1. The apostles claimed their teachings were from God (1 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Thessalonians 4:2; 2 Peter 3:1-2)
2. The apostles claimed their writings were from God (1 Corinthians 14:37)
3. The apostles considered other NT writings Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16; 1 Timothy 5:17-18 – quotes Luke 10:7)

C. The use of apostolic writings in the new churches and by leaders

1. Verses just mentioned show this was happening
2. Justin Martyr - And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. *First Apology*, 67.3
3. Used by leaders such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Tertullian, and Irenaeus

D. The rise of heretics – the need for a canon

1. By the mid 2nd century heretics were producing their own list of which books they said belonged in the NT. Two key heretics/groups were Marcion and Valentinus and the Gnostics.

2. Marcion – a truncated canon

- a. Born around 100 AD; raised in the church
- b. Extreme antinomian – rejected law in any sense as incompatible with grace & justification by faith.
- c. “god” of the OT & the God of the NT were different
- d. Only Paul kept the pure Gospel of Christ; the other apostles corrupted it.
- e. Marcion’s ‘canon’
 - i. No Old Testament
 - ii. A highly edited Gospel of Luke – removed anything he thought was a “corruption” – including birth narrative of John the Baptist and Christ, ministry of John the Baptist; genealogy, etc.
 - iii. Edited versions of 10 of Paul’s letters – not the Pastoral epistles. He removed anything that viewed the Old Testament in a favorable light

3. Valentinus and the Gnostics – a reinterpreted canon with additional books

- a. Around the same time as Marcion – mid 100’s
- b. He or his circle of followers produced *The Gospel of Truth* which laid out their understanding of the Gospel and the New Testament writings
- c. The Gnostic “canon” and interpretation –
 - i. Refers to a number of New Testament books and treats them as authoritative – Matthew, Luke-Acts, John, 1 John, Paul’s letters (except the Pastoral epistles), Hebrews, and Revelation.
 - ii. The Gnostics taught all matter was evil, and therefore Jesus was not really human. Thus, they had to radically reinterpret the New Testament.
 - iii. The Gnostics also created their own Gospels and writings – many have been recovered in the *Nag Hammadi* tests. These include the now famous *Gospel of Thomas*, and a number of other Gospels, Acts, and epistles which were rejected by the early church as inauthentic.

E. The growth of a New Testament Canon

1. A couple of important lists

a. Muratorian fragment – probably 2nd century list from Rome; has most of NT books – missing Hebrews, 1 Peter, James; some did not want 2nd Peter

b. Eusebius – circa 300 AD - 3 categories of books

i. Recognized – Four Gospels, Acts, 13 Pauline epistles; Hebrews (ascribed as Pauline); 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation

ii. Disputed –

Generally accepted – James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John

Not genuine – *Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache.*

iii. Rejected – *Gospel of Peter; Gospel of Thomas, the Acts of Andrew; the Acts of John, etc.*

2. Some important trends

a. The Gospels, Acts, and Paul's writings were accepted very early and almost universally

b. 1 Peter and 1 John were accepted early and universally

c. The remaining general epistles (Hebrews-Jude) and Revelation were slower to be accepted.

d. There were some differences between the East and the West in when books were accepted. For example, Hebrews and James were almost always accepted in the East, but did not find acceptance in the West until late, while Revelation was accepted in the West fairly early but not until late in the East.

3. Athanasius' Paschal letter of 367
 - a. First list to contain all 27 books of NT with no extra books
 - b. By this point the NT canon was settled and was never really in dispute again
4. Luther and the reconsideration of the NT canon
 - a. Luther strongly questioned whether Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation belonged in the canon. These were listed separately in the 1522 version of his Bible.
 - b. Luther later accepted these books and restored them to their normal place, though he did remain critical of James.
 - c. All Protestants, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox churches have an identical NT canon.

F. Criteria for NT canonicity

1. Apostolicity - Authentic authorship by one of the apostolic circle – included Peter, John, Matthew, Paul, James, but also those closely associated with them – Mark, Luke, Jude
 - a. Note – Hebrews was initially accepted because many thought it had been written by Paul. Most later recognized that this was unlikely, but Hebrews was still accepted into the canon.
 - b. Because of this, some would also include antiquity, since the document had to be old enough to have been written by one of the apostolic circle.
2. Orthodoxy – the writing must adhere to the rule of faith, the common set of beliefs and practices adhered to all the universal church
3. Universality – the writing should have been used widely from early days, and if used by larger, more influential churches this carried extra weight

IV. What About the Apocrypha (Deutero-Canonical) Books?

A. What are the Apocrypha?

1. Apocrypha – also called Deutero-Canonical (second canon)
2. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have these
3. Judith, Tobit, Maccabees, etc.
4. Where are they from? Are they canonical?

B. Where are they from?

1. Part of the Septuagint (LXX) – a Greek translation of the Scriptures and other Hebrew writings
 - a. After Alexander many Jews spoke Greek – not Hebrew, so they translated the OT into Greek
 - b. Other books were added as well
 - c. Some of the Apocrypha were probably originally written in Greek
2. As part of the LXX the Apocrypha became widely circulated and read

C. How did the Jews view the Apocrypha?

1. Many Jews thought of them as useful, but not as Scripture
 - a. Josephus – “It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time...”
Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1:8.

- b. Babylonian Talmud – “After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel, but they still availed themselves of the bath qol” (Babylonian Talmud, Yomah 9b, quoted in Grudem, 56).
 - c. They were ultimately deemed as useful but non-canonical writings
2. This position continues to the present day among Jews

D. The use of the Apocrypha in the early church

- 1. The Apocrypha were widely used and quoted
 - a. The main Bible of the early church was the LXX, since most Christians could not read Hebrew, but did read Greek
 - b. Animosity between the Church and Judaism caused some to want to oppose whatever position Jewish leaders espoused
- 2. Some leaders did not consider them equal to Scripture
 - a. Melito of Sardis – listed OT books as Jewish OT minus Esther
 - b. Origen – OT same as Hebrew canon plus *Letter of Jeremiah*
 - c. Athanasius – OT was same as Hebrew OT plus Baruch, *Letter of Jeremiah*, but minus Esther. “There are other books outside of these which are indeed not included in the canon, but have been appointed from the time of the fathers to be read to those who are recent converts to our company and wish to be instructed in the word of true religion. These are the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith and Tobit...” Athanasius Paschal Letter, 367 AD

- d. Jerome – Hebrew OT is canon; others are Apocrypha – “Whatever falls outside these must be set apart among the Apocrypha. Therefore Wisdom, which is commonly entitled Solomon’s, with the book of Jesus the son of Sirach, Judith, Tobias and the Shepherd are not in the canon...” Jerome, quoted in Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 90.
 - e. Jerome – read Apocrypha for edification, but not for doctrine – “Therefore as the church indeed reads Judith, Tobit and the books of Maccabees, but does not receive them among the canonical books, so let it also read these two volumes for the edification of the people but not for establishing the authority of ecclesiastical dogmas. Jerome, Quoted in Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 91-92
3. Some leaders seem to consider at least some of them as Scripture
- a. Tertullian – accepted much of Apocrypha; possibly even other writings as well
 - b. Augustine – OT has 44 books; includes much of Apocrypha
 - c. Many churches used Apocryphal books (and other non-canonical books from the NT era as well), and many Latin and Greek translations contained them

E. The Apocrypha from Reformation to present

- 1. Reformers – edification, not doctrine – same as Athanasius and Jerome
- 2. Roman Catholic Church - Declared to be part of canon by the Council of Trent in 1546
- 3. Declared to be canonical in Eastern Orthodox churches at Councils of Jassy (1642) and Jerusalem (1672)

4. Not really used much in Eastern Orthodox churches – “In the west these books are often called the ‘Apocrypha’. These were declared by the Councils of Jassy (1642) and Jerusalem (1672) to be ‘genuine parts of Scripture;’ most Orthodox scholars at the present day, however, following the opinion of Athanasius and Jerome, consider that the Deutero-Canonical Books, although part of the Bible, stand on a lower footing than the rest of the Old Testament.” – Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*
- E. A hint from Christ on the limits of the OT canon – “There is evidence that Chronicles was the last book in the Hebrew Bible as Jesus knew it. When he said that the generation he addressed would be answerable for ‘the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world’, he added, ‘from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary’ (Luke 11:50f.). Abel is the first martyr in the Bible (Gen. 4:8); Zechariah is most probably the son of Jehoiada, who was stoned to death ‘in the court of Yahweh’s house’ because, speaking by the Spirit of God he rebuked the king and people of Judah for transgressing the divine commandments (2 Chron. 24:20-22). Zechariah (c 800 BC) was not *chronologically* the last faithful prophet to die as a martyr; some two centuries later a prophet named Uriah was put to death in Jerusalem because his witness was unacceptable to King Jehoiakim (Jer. 26:20-23). But Zechariah is *canonically* the last faithful prophet to die as a martyr, because his death is recorded in Chronicles, the last book in the Hebrew Bible.” FF Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 31.

V. Conclusion & Summary

A. The canon is established and can be trusted

1. God guided the flawed men and flawed process so that the books which He had truly inspired we recognized and given their rightful place in the canon.
2. "The New Testament books became canonical because no one could stop them from doing so." William Barclay, quoted in Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 282
3. "The books which were included to form the future canon *forced themselves on the Church by their intrinsic apostolic authority*, as they do still, because *Kyrios Christ speaks in them.*" Oscar Cullman, quoted in Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 282

B. The canon provides the rule or standard for our faith

1. Other books are helpful and should be read, but only these provide the unalterable rule of faith for the church.
2. Church history and the councils are important and should be carefully studied and given great weight, but only these books provide the unalterable rule of faith by which the church lives and makes her decisions.