

# The Canon of Scripture

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## Introduction

In a world of postmodernism, community-defined relativism, and various debates concerning the nature and meaning of truth, Christians perhaps more than ever are challenged concerning the conception and constitution of what has historically remained the definitive Christian “rule of faith,” namely the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The conservative evangelical often appeals to relativistic, postmodern, and even skeptical thinking by referring to the Bible as God’s word, special revelation of divine truth—a truth that is absolute and personally binding. There are a number of challenges that could be posed against this position, many of which are represented by the various discussions in the area of *bibliology*. Though there are many valid and important subjects to consider within this section of theology, each of these topics fundamentally assume one great premise, namely that the Bible contains sacred Scripture, only sacred Scripture, and all of sacred Scripture. It is a moot point to debate the *biblical concept of truth* if the concept of *biblical* is not first understood. Likewise, the inspiration of, inerrancy of, doctrine of, authority of, sufficiency of, etc., are all predicated upon what the Bible *is*, at least in concept.

The endeavor to describe the concept and constitution of the Bible, as presented here, is primarily the subject of the *canon* of Scripture. For instance, “all Scripture is inspired” and “the Bible is inspired” are two different statements. Even if the two are considered precisely equal in content, the

latter suggests the concept of a definitive collection of the former. If this distinction is accurate, the implication leads to the question: Is both the content *and* the collection of its constituent parts inspired? In other words, is the *collection*—the fixed list of books to be included in the Bible—itsself inspired, and if not is it authoritative? This concept prompts a number of questions, like: What books belong in the Bible? Are there any inspired books that are not included? Are any of the books included not inspired? Who determined what books should be included in the official Christian canon of Scripture and how? Is the Christian canon, of 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books, the only true collection of inspired Scripture? Upon what authority was the canon established? Is the canon closed?

The questions and thoughts that have been presented thus far are intended to demonstrate that “the precise determination of the extent of the canon of Scripture is . . . of the utmost importance.”<sup>2</sup> Sanders asserts, “The Bible’s own integrity lies in its very nature as canon.”<sup>3</sup> Even if space allowed, it would simply be impractical to attempt compiling a comprehensive list of questions that exhaustively address all of the various issues related to canonicity. However, because this subject is so foundational and the theological implications far reaching and profound, a careful yet brief consideration of the major issues associated with biblical canonicity follows. The scope of this discourse will be specifically limited to the topic of the canon of Scripture as

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Bible” is used here in a manner that deliberately draws attention to the original meaning of the word as “a collection of books.” See also, Brooke Foss Wescott, *The Bible in the Church: A Popular Account of the Collection and Reception of the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Churches*, (1864; repr., New York: The Macmillan Company, 1896), 5-6.

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 54.

<sup>3</sup> James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 19.

represented in the Holy Bible, understood as the definitive collection of 66 books professed by Christians to be the true and inspired word of God.<sup>4</sup>

### **What is Canon?**

As Bruce Metzger points out, the Greek word *κανών*, from which we get the English term ‘canon’, was used in a variety of senses.<sup>5</sup> For the scope of this article, it is sufficient to acknowledge that the term was most originally and broadly used to describe a standard rule of measure. Witness of this type is found as early as the second century in patristic writings in the context of exhorting fellow Christians to live “in accord with ‘the *rule* of the faith.’”<sup>6</sup> The term also developed the meaning of a fixed and established list. It is in this sense that Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, used the term in a circulated letter in A.D. 367 “in reference to the books of the Bible, in the sense in which these books constitute the ‘list’ of writings which the Church reckons as the authoritative documents of divine revelation.”<sup>7</sup> This is the meaning of the term ‘canon’ when it is used in the context of the Bible as being the canon of Scripture. Therefore, “the canon of Scripture is the list of all the books that belong in the Bible.”<sup>8</sup>

### **The Old Testament as Canon**

A detailed discussion concerning the concept, development, methodology, historicity, and New Testament attestation of the Old Testament canon is beyond the scope this article. This section is simply intended to assert what is accepted in this

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<sup>4</sup> I acknowledge that there is debate regarding other purported “Christian canons” of Scripture, such as the Alexandrian canon; however, discussion of these questionable arguments are outside of the scope of this article.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (1987; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 289.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>7</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Grudem, 54.

discourse and identify its relevance to the overall thesis. In brief, there are numerous instances where the New Testament attests to a standard set of sacred Hebrew writings called Scripture.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, F. F. Bruce aptly notes, “Our Lord and his apostles might differ from the religious leaders of Israel about the meaning of the scriptures; there is no suggestion that they differed about the limits of the scriptures.”<sup>10</sup> Thus by implication, the common understanding of ‘the Scriptures’ used by Jesus and his contemporaries suggests the notion of a defined group, a demarcation between ‘scripture’ and other ‘writings’.

Given the national, traditional, and ceremonial homogeneity of the Hebrew people, study of the recognition and canonization of the Old Testament canon is categorically different as compared to that of the New Testament canon. Therefore, it is relevant to understand that “there are several lines of evidence in the New Testament that at least suggest that [the New Testament writers] recognized a closed canon”<sup>11</sup> and that “the thirty-nine books which make up the Old Testament according to our common reckoning are the books which, from the beginning of the Christian era at any rate, have been accepted as the books of the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it is also important to note that “there is adequate evidence to support the view that there was a (closed) canon of Old Testament Scripture to serve as a model in the formation of the New Testament canon.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The New Testament as Canon**

The Apostle Paul clearly writes in 1 Cor 14:37, “the things I write to you are the Lord’s commandment.” The apostles were sent out as

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<sup>9</sup> Matt 5:18; 24:35; Luke 16:29; John 5:39; 1 Cor 10:11; 2 Tim 3:16-17; etc.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce, 28.

<sup>11</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 731.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Carson, 732.

direct messengers of the risen Lord, commissioned for the task of bearing witness to the testimony of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. Matt 28:19-20; Rom 1:1-5). They were uniquely equipped as authoritative representatives of the teachings of Christ (cf. Acts 2:42; 2 Cor 12:12). Once the apostles' earthly lives were taken, the church had no authoritative witness, living on earth, to consult for teaching; a concern that the apostles expressed (cf. 1 Cor 11:2; 2 Thess 2:15). This situation elevated the church's dependence upon the teachings of the apostles to an unprecedentedly crucial level.

This critical dependency upon the authoritative teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles, now accessible only by written form, gave substantial rise to the necessity of a canon of apostolic writings. The challenge to this necessity was ultimately a matter of officiating what was already received, recognized, and regularly used by the true followers of Christ and the apostles.

The following sections will discuss various views of criticism of the canon of Scripture as commonly known in the Bible. The focus of these sections will deal with the concept of canon and canonization process as it relates primarily to the New Testament.

### Canonical Criticism

Is there a contemporary problem with the traditional canon? What are the 'problems' causing debate? In the following sections, I will attempt to concisely describe, in basic terms, the most visible issues currently in debate.

"What complicates any discussion of canonicity in the various Judaism's of the first century of the common era and in early Christianity is the paucity of any clearly stated and universally accepted definitions of what constitutes scripture and canon."<sup>14</sup> This is a criticism historical in nature.

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<sup>14</sup> Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002), 4.

"Canonical criticism is much more than observations about the final shaping of the Bible, but one can see how it has evolved out of earlier interest and work of historical-critical nature."<sup>15</sup> In this category of criticism, the current canon of the Bible is said to *likely* contain uninspired books or simply contain only a set of the originally inspired books because the canon is seen as a product of history and tradition determined by man and prone to error.<sup>16</sup>

U.S. News reports: "'The Christian movement hasn't seriously examined the question of canon since the 15th century,' says Robert Funk, head of the seminar's Westar Institute in Sonoma, Calif. 'It's time for academic scholars to raise the issue.'" It goes on to say that the Jesus Seminar "will likely recommend that at least some of the 27 books be jettisoned and that other ancient texts be added."<sup>17</sup> This type of criticism is largely based upon modern discoveries of other 'spiritual' writings that are not included in the canon. Some suggest that the reasons these books were not included in the canon range from strong biased leadership, power struggles, persecution, suppression, and historic factors in general. One might question whether or not the reasons for suggesting a different canon—by people two thousand years removed—are not motivated by the very same factors that they indict. Excitement concerning modern discovery often accompanies historical-critical thinking that has a tendency to see modern thinking and discovery as more trustworthy, accurate, and laudable:

We found that they [the secret 'gospels' and 'apocrypha' written during the first centuries] revealed diversity within the Christian movement that later, 'official' versions of Christian history had suppressed so effectively

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<sup>15</sup> Sanders, 9

<sup>16</sup> This does not necessarily suggest that the writings themselves are subject to this error rather it is a matter of canon.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffery L. Sheler, "Cutting Loose the Holy Canon: A controversial re-examination of the Bible," *U.S. News & World Report* (November 8, 1993), [http://www.usnews.com/usnews/culture/articles/931108/archive\\_016074\\_print.htm](http://www.usnews.com/usnews/culture/articles/931108/archive_016074_print.htm) (accessed October 16, 2008).

that only now, in the Harvard graduate school, did we hear about them.<sup>18</sup>

As for criticism, the historical-critical view argues against the current canon on the basis of pseudonymity, anonymity, textual alteration, apocryphal writings and discoveries, etc.<sup>19</sup> The historical-critical view is based upon modern assumptions that are biased against historical record. At its very core it denies the providence of God and presumes a higher degree of personal integrity and intellectual power over and against those involved in the process historically.

Another form of canonical criticism argues that the primary force responsible for the formation of the canon was theological in nature. Unlike the historical-critical argument, this view suggests that the formation was not so much concerned with authenticity as it was the promotion and defense of presupposed doctrine, as noted by Meade, "Once again, then, it is doctrine, not authenticity, that is of paramount concern."<sup>20</sup> Some have argued that "the canon was created as a critical weapon in a religious and cultural revolution."<sup>21</sup> Because this view is theologically critical, it asks the questions: are there canons within the canon? However, one must ask, *is the canon ruled by theology or does the canon rule theology?* Like the historical-critical view, this view cannot justify itself by simply promulgating a disparate presupposition.

A third view appears to advocate the contemporary community of postmodern thinking that says, that canon is fine *for that community of people*, but we need a different canon because we live in a different context and community. This

argument completely misses the issue at hand and is clearly motivated by personal and selective suitability.

Each of these views fundamentally describe the canon as the product of human determination.

### The Bible as the Canon of Scripture

What is the motivation to defend the Bible as the plenary canon of Scripture? Is it out of logical necessity? Is it out of fear that our faith may be built upon the thoughts and choices of man as much or more than those of God? Is it out of wishful thinking? Is it a matter of mere tradition? Given the said criticisms, should we abandon *sola scriptura*? If not, why? Can the canon be trusted with our lives as though it were determined directly by God? Can we trust that the "all" in 2 Timothy 3:16 is available to us in the canon, and if not then is the Bible sufficient for "life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3)?

Ultimately this is an issue of recognizing source and authority; it is not merely a matter of tradition (*sola traditio*), consensus, history, or community. The core issue and solution to criticism is found in the understanding that the canon was *established* by God and was *received, recognized, and regularly used* by God's people. Scripture was recognized by God's people: "When a book was received, collected, read, and used by the people of God as the Word of God, it was regarded as canonical."<sup>22</sup> Carson aptly notes the aspect of recognition:

It is important to observe that, although there was no ecclesiastical machinery like the medieval papacy to enforce decisions, nevertheless the world-wide church almost universally came to accept the same twenty-seven books. It was not so much that the church selected the canon as that the canon selected itself.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Elaine H. Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 52.

<sup>19</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 13ff.; McDonald, 418-423.

<sup>20</sup> David Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon: An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 205.

<sup>21</sup> Childs, 15.

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<sup>22</sup> Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 22.

<sup>23</sup> Carson, 735.

Foundational to the understanding of "the canon" is that all of the inspired writings of God were *recognized* as such. The vast majority of the books found in the NT were universally accepted and revered as Holy Scripture, even before the death of the apostles (cf. 2 Peter 3:16; 1 Tim 5:18). Just as inspiration is not directed by man, so the authoritative collection of inspired writings is not directed by man. The canon of Scripture was not shaped by the church of the second, third, or fourth centuries, it shaped them. Since God's word is inspired and thereby *self-attesting*, so each self-attested manuscript was received, recognized, and regularly used by the church, making the canon *self-establishing*.

Bruce rightly states, "Divine authority comes first: canonicity follows authority and is dependent upon it."<sup>24</sup> Clearly the Scripture throughout the ages has been recognized by the people of God as their Lord's words; the canon was simply the codification of what the people of God recognized as coming from Him. Thus the source is not man, nor man's determination, rather the source is God. Van De Beek couches this understanding into the context of faith:

People did not say at a particular moment, 'Come, let us choose a number of texts as a standard for our faith'. It is rather that their encounter with these texts shaped their faith, and that these texts therefore were authoritative for them. The texts thus precede the belief, which subsequently acknowledges that these are canonical texts. 'So faith comes from what is heard' (Rom 10:17), wrote Paul long ago.<sup>25</sup>

This is not merely an intellectual exercise, it does involve faith in the self-authenticating, self-disclosing, self-sufficient and only true God, who is sovereign over the events of history. By faith one

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<sup>24</sup> Bruce, 19.

<sup>25</sup> A. Van De Beek, "Being Convinced: On the Foundations of the Christian Canon," in *Canonization and Decanonization: Papers presented to the International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions, Held at Leiden 9–10 January 1997*, Studies in the History of Religions, ed. A. Van Der Kooij and K. Van Der Toorn (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1998), 336.

believes and trusts that God is able and has providentially preserved and orchestrated the inclusion of exactly what He had predetermined to clearly communicate to His people—that is exactly what He wants them to have. As Metzger notes, "Despite the very human factors (the *confusio hominum*) in the production, preservation, and collection of the books of the NT, the whole process can also be rightly characterized as the result of divine overruling in the *providential Dei*."<sup>26</sup> It is necessary then to appropriate faith and providence when evaluating the issue. This is echoed again by Robert Reymond:

the Christian must accept by faith that the church, under the providential guidance of God's Spirit, got the number and the 'list' right since God did not provide the church with a specific list of New Testament books. ... God's Spirit providentially led his church—imperceptively yet inexorably ... to adopt the twenty-seven documents that the Godhead had determined would serve as the foundation of the church's doctrinal teaching and thus bear infallible witness throughout the Christian era to the great objective central events of redemptive history, and that this 'apostolic tradition' *authenticated and established itself*...<sup>27</sup>

God is the source of the Scriptures, and therefore faith in God and trust in His care for His church leads us to the understanding that the authority of the Bible rests not in the minds of men, but rather in the very power of God. F.F. Bruce nicely summarizes:

Certainly, as one looks back on the process of canonization in early Christian centuries . . . it is easy to conclude that in reaching a conclusion on the limits of the canon they were directed by a wisdom higher than their own. . . . in the exaggerated language of Oscar Cullmann, that 'the books which were to form the future canon forced themselves on the Church by their intrinsic

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<sup>26</sup> Metzger, 285.

<sup>27</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 67.

*apostolic authority*, as they do still, because the *Kyrios* Christ speaks in them'.<sup>28</sup>

This is the ultimate test, the *recognition* of the Savior's voice (cf. John 10:27). We can trust in the Bible as God's providential means of authoritatively communicating Himself and His work in history to those who have ears to hear. In the end, God is capable of moving man to write His word and God is capable of moving His church to recognize it.

***Praise be to God!***

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce, 282. (Emphasis mine.)