

Digging for Gold – a Bible Study Course
The Canon of Scripture: how the text was formed

Introduction:

We believe that the Bible *as a whole* is the inspired Word of God - that there is a 'canon' (measuring rod) that determines what is, and is not, Scripture. But who decided that this particular collection of writings, and no others, should have unique and special authority? The basic premise is that the canon is not an authoritative list of books but a list of authoritative books.

The manuscripts

None of the original 'autographs' are extant. About 35 different people were involved in the writing, over a period of about 1,400 years. The OT was written in Hebrew (a few passages in Aramaic), and the NT in Greek. The oldest manuscripts of the OT date from 600 years after the originals. The oldest entire NT manuscript (Codex Sinaiticus) dates from around 340 AD. Chapter and verse divisions are not part of the original script, nor is the order of the books inspired (though it seems especially significant that the Bible begins with Genesis and ends with Revelation).

The formation of the OT canon

The Hebrew Bible is usually considered to have three divisions – Law, Prophets (includes historical books) and Writings. The canon was probably complete by 400 BC, and was finally recognised at the Council of Jamnia (90-100 AD) – which also rejected the apocryphal books. Jesus clearly regarded 'the Scriptures' as a definitive collection of writings (see also Acts 17:11), and the NT quotes extensively from this 'closed' canon. The early church would have used the Septuagint (LXX) version of the OT, which was a Greek translation dating from the 2nd or 3rd century BC. The Masoretes were Jewish scribes (500-1000 AD) whose task was to copy and preserve a pure text.

The formation of the NT canon

During the lifetime of the apostles, their teaching and the words of Jesus were passed on orally and were accepted as authoritative. But as the church spread there was an increasing need for written records. Most of the NT documents were written between 60-80 AD. There was a 'Pauline corpus' by 88 AD; Peter accepted Paul's writings as Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16); Paul quotes a saying in Luke's Gospel as Scripture (1 Tim. 5:18 cf Luke 10:7). The Gospels were unified early in the 2nd century. However, there was also a proliferation of false gospels and epistles, as well as other teaching and devotional literature. The heretic Marcion (mid 2nd c) produced his own canon of 11 books, which demonstrated the need for a universally accepted canon. The 27 NT books in our Bible were finally recognised as canonical by Athanasius (367 AD) and the Council of Carthage (397 AD).

Criteria

Canonicity is *determined* by God, who inspired the writings. Canonicity is *discovered* by humans. The factors that lead to a recognition of canonicity are:

1. **Authority.** There is a self-vindicating authority in the books that commands recognition that these are the words of God. The claims of the writers that ‘Thus says the Lord’ ring true. Some books were at first classed as doubtful but were later accepted (e.g. Esther, 2 Peter).

2. **Prophetic writers.** A key question was whether the books had been written by a man of God (prophet or apostle) acting as God’s mouthpiece (see 2 Peter 1:20-21). The fact that the author’s identity cannot be always be established (e.g. Ecclesiastes, Hebrews) does not negate the internal evidence of the book’s genuine prophetic nature. The NT books could all be attributed to apostles, or their disciples (e.g. Peter’s connection with Mark. The non-apostolic books are Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, Jude).

3. **Authenticity.** This deals with the subject matter of revelation. Does the book tell the truth about God, humanity, life? This is an implicit criteria (not sufficient on its own), but any writing that is contrary to other revealed truth could not be canonical. Thus John uses belief in the incarnation as a method for judging the authenticity of those claiming to be prophets (1 John 4:1-6).

4. **Power.** Basically, the ‘proof of the pudding is in the eating’. The Bible writers had confidence in God’s Word to transform, edify and guide – and, crucially, to ‘make you wise for salvation’ (2 Tim. 3:16. See also Heb. 4:12). The Word of God is dynamic in a way that other books – however inspirational – are not.

5. **Acceptance.** Although the canonical books were recognised by Jewish (OT) and church (NT) councils, the long and careful process by which the final list was determined can reassure us about the integrity and uniqueness of the Scriptures. There is also the (subjective) evidence of generations of believers who have found the Bible to be the key to life.

It is difficult to provide objective *proofs* for canonicity, but there is sufficient evidence to give us confidence that the Bible alone is the inspired Word of God; and as in every area of Christianity there is a need for faith and a dependence on the witness of the Holy Spirit. ‘Ultimately, then, we base our confidence in the correctness of our present canon on the faithfulness of God.’ (Wayne Grudem)

Conclusion

The relevance of this for biblical theology is that the Bible as we have it must be our final and only authoritative source of knowledge about God and His ways. It also means that it is *all* inspired and significant, and that we should guard against forming a ‘canon within a canon’ or, more seriously, an ‘extra-canon’ (Rev. 22:18-19). It should encourage us to compare Scripture with Scripture so that we learn and declare ‘the whole counsel of God.’ (Acts 20:27, RSV); in so doing we should expect to discover a remarkable unity and consistency.

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