

"THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE. WHAT BELONGS IN THE BIBLE AND WHAT DOES NOT BELONG?"

Chapter 3 from Systematic Theology. An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

The canon of Scripture is the list of all the books that belong in the Bible.

The words of Scripture are the words by which we nourish our spiritual lives.

“For it is no trifle for you, but it is your life and thereby you shall live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess” ([Deut. 32:47](#)).

“You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you” ([Deut. 4:2](#)).

How would it be dangerous to add to the Word of God?

How would it be dangerous to take away from it?

If we are to trust and obey God absolutely we must have a collection of words that we are certain are God’s own words to us. If there are any sections of Scripture about which we have doubts whether they are God’s words or not, we will not consider them to have absolute divine authority and we will not trust them as much as we would trust God himself.

A. The Old Testament Canon

Where did the idea of a canon begin — the idea that the people of Israel should preserve a collection of written words from God? Scripture itself bears witness to the historical development of the canon.

The earliest collection of written words of God was the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments thus form the beginning of the biblical canon.

God himself wrote on two tablets of stone the words which he commanded his people: “And he gave to Moses, when he had made an end of speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, the two tables of the testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God” ([Ex. 31:18](#)).

The tablets were deposited in the ark of the covenant ([Deut. 10:5](#)) and constituted the terms of the covenant between God and his people.[3:1](#)

This collection of absolutely authoritative words from God grew in size throughout the time of Israel’s history. Moses himself wrote additional words to be deposited beside the ark of the covenant ([Deut. 31:24-26](#)). The immediate reference is apparently to the book of Deuteronomy,

but other references to writing by Moses indicate that the first four books of the Old Testament were written by him as well (see [Ex. 17.14](#); [24.4](#); [34.27](#); [Num. 33.2](#); [Deut. 31.22](#)).

Later, others in Israel, usually those who fulfilled the office of prophet, wrote additional words

The content of the Old Testament canon continued to grow until the time of the end of the writing process. If we date Haggai to 520 b.c., Zechariah to 520-518 b.c. (with perhaps more material added after 480 b.c.), and Malachi around 435 b.c., we have an idea of the approximate dates of the last Old Testament prophets. Roughly coinciding with this period are the last books of Old Testament history — Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Ezra went to Jerusalem in 458 b.c., and Nehemiah was in Jerusalem from 445-433 b.c.[3:3](#). Esther was written sometime after the death of Xerxes I (= Ahasuerus) in 465 b.c., and a date during the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-423 b.c.) is probable. Thus, after approximately 435 b.c. there were no further additions to the Old Testament canon. The subsequent history of the Jewish people was recorded in other writings, such as the books of the Maccabees, but these writings were not thought worthy to be included with the collections of God's words from earlier years.

What then shall be said about the Apocrypha, the collection of books included in the canon by the Roman Catholic Church but excluded from the canon by Protestantism?[3:7](#)

The Greek word apocrypha means “things that are hidden.”

These books were never accepted by the Jews as Scripture, but throughout the early history of the church there was a divided opinion on whether they should be part of Scripture or not. In fact, the earliest Christian evidence is decidedly against viewing the Apocrypha as Scripture, but the use of the Apocrypha gradually increased in some parts of the church until the time of the Reformation.[3:8](#)

The fact that these books were included by Jerome in his Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible (completed in a.d. 404) gave support to their inclusion, even though Jerome himself said they were not “books of the canon” but merely “books of the church” that were helpful and useful for believers. The wide use of the Latin Vulgate in subsequent centuries guaranteed their continued accessibility, but the fact that they had no Hebrew original behind them, and their exclusion from the Jewish canon, as well as the lack of their citation in the New Testament, led many to view them with suspicion or to reject their authority.

It was not until 1546, at the Council of Trent, that the Roman Catholic Church officially declared the Apocrypha to be part of the canon. It is significant that the Council of Trent was the response of the Roman Catholic Church to the teachings of Martin Luther and the rapidly spreading Protestant Reformation, and the books of the Apocrypha contain support for the Catholic teaching of prayers for the dead and justification by faith plus works, not by faith alone. In affirming the Apocrypha as within the canon, Roman Catholics would hold that the church has the authority to constitute a literary work as “Scripture,” while Protestants have held that the

church cannot make something to be Scripture, but can only recognize what God has already caused to be written as his own words.[3:18](#)

Thus the writings of the Apocrypha should not be regarded as part of Scripture: (1) they do not claim for themselves the same kind of authority as the Old Testament writings; (2) they were not regarded as God's words by the Jewish people from whom they originated; (3) they were not considered to be Scripture by Jesus or the New Testament authors; and (4) they contain teachings inconsistent with the rest of the Bible. We must conclude that they are merely human words, not God-breathed words like the words of Scripture. They do have value for historical and linguistic research, and they contain a number of helpful stories about the courage and faith of many Jews during the period after the Old Testament ends, but they have never been part of the Old Testament canon, and they should not be thought of as part of the Bible. Therefore, they have no binding authority for the thought or life of Christians today.

In conclusion, with regard to the canon of the Old Testament, Christians today should have no worry that anything needed has been left out or that anything that is not God's words has been included.

B. The New Testament Canon

The development of the New Testament canon begins with the writings of the apostles. It should be remembered that the writing of Scripture primarily occurs in connection with God's great acts in redemptive history. The next stage in redemptive history is the coming of the Messiah, and it is not surprising that no further Scripture would be written until this next and greatest event in the history of redemption occurred.

This is why the New Testament consists of the writings of the apostles.[3:19](#) It is primarily the apostles who are given the ability from the Holy Spirit to recall accurately the words and deeds of Jesus and to interpret them rightly for subsequent generations.

Jesus promised this empowering to his disciples (who were called apostles after the resurrection) in [John 14.26](#). "But the Counselor, 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." Similarly, Jesus promised further revelation of truth from the Holy Spirit when he told his disciples, "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" ([John 16:13-14](#)). In these verses the disciples are promised amazing gifts to enable them to write Scripture: the Holy Spirit would teach them "all things," would cause them to remember "all" that Jesus had said, and would guide them into "all the truth."

Furthermore, those who have the office of apostle in the early church are seen to claim an authority equal to that of the Old Testament prophets, an authority to speak and write words that are God's very words. Peter encourages his readers to remember "the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles" ([2 Peter 3.2](#)). To lie to the apostles ([Acts 5.2](#)) is equivalent to lying to the Holy Spirit ([Acts 5.3](#)) and lying to God ([Acts 5.4](#)).

The apostles, then, have authority to write words that are God's own words, equal in truth status and authority to the words of the Old Testament Scriptures. They do this to record, interpret, and apply to the lives of believers the great truths about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

This brings us to the heart of the question of canonicity. For a book to belong in the canon, it is absolutely necessary that the book have divine authorship. If the words of the book are God's words (through human authors), and if the early church, under the direction of the apostles, preserved the book as part of Scripture, then the book belongs in the canon. But if the words of the book are not God's words, it does not belong in the canon. The question of authorship by an apostle is important because it was primarily the apostles to whom Christ gave the ability to write words with absolute divine authority. If a writing can be shown to be by an apostle, then its absolute divine authority is automatically established.[3:27](#)

Thus, the early church automatically accepted as part of the canon the written teachings of the apostles which the apostles wanted preserved as Scripture.

But the existence of some New Testament writings that were not authored directly by apostles shows that there were others in the early church to whom Christ also gave the ability, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to write words that were God's own words and also therefore intended to be part of the canon. In these cases, the early church had the task of recognizing which writings had the characteristic of being God's own words (through human authors).

For some books (at least Mark, Luke, and Acts, and perhaps Hebrews and Jude as well), the church had, at least in some areas, the personal testimony of some living apostles to affirm the absolute divine authority of these books. For example, Paul would have affirmed the authenticity of Luke and Acts, and Peter would have affirmed the authenticity of Mark as containing the gospel which he himself preached. In other cases, and in some geographical areas, the church simply had to decide whether it heard the voice of God himself speaking in the words of these writings. In these cases, the words of these books would have been self-attesting; that is, the words would have borne witness to their own divine authorship as Christians read them. This seems to have been the case with Hebrews.

In a.d. 367 the Thirty-ninth Paschal Letter of Athanasius contained an exact list of the twenty-seven New Testament books we have today. This was the list of books accepted by the churches in the eastern part of the Mediterranean world. Thirty years later, in a.d. 397, the Council of Carthage, representing the churches in the western part of the Mediterranean world, agreed with the eastern churches on the same list. These are the earliest final lists of our present-day canon.

Should we expect any more writings to be added to the canon? "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" ([Heb. 1:1-2](#)).

There is a finality to the revelation of God in Christ and that once this revelation has been completed, no more is to be expected.

Thus, now that the writings of the New Testament apostles and their authorized companions are completed, we have in written form the final record of everything that God wants us to know about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and its meaning for the lives of believers for all time. Since this is God's greatest revelation for mankind, no more is to be expected once this is complete. In this way, then, [Hebrews 1:1-2](#) shows us why no more writings can be added to the Bible after the time of the New Testament. The canon is now closed.

A similar kind of consideration may be drawn from [Revelation 22:18-19](#):

I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one 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.

It is not accidental that this statement comes at the end of the last chapter of Revelation, and that Revelation is the last book in the New Testament. In fact, Revelation has to be placed last in the canon. For many books, their placement in the assembling of the canon is of little consequence. But just as Genesis must be placed first (for it tells us of creation), so Revelation must be placed last (for its focus is to tell us of the future and God's new creation).

Placed here, where it must be placed, the warning forms an appropriate conclusion to the entire canon of Scripture. Along with [Hebrews 1.1-2](#) and the history-of-redemption perspective implicit in those verses, this broader application of [Revelation 22:18-19](#) also suggests to us that we should expect no more Scripture to be added beyond what we already have.

How do we know, then, that we have the right books in the canon of Scripture we now possess? The question can be answered in two different ways. First, if we are asking upon what we should base our confidence, the answer must ultimately be that our confidence is based on the faithfulness of God. We know that God loves his people, and it is supremely important that God's people have his own words, for they are our life ([Deut. 32.47](#); [Matt. 4:4](#)). They are more precious, more important to us than anything else in this world. We also know that God our Father is in control of all history, and he is not the kind of Father who will trick us or fail to be faithful to us or keep from us something we absolutely need.

The severity of the punishments in [Revelation 22.18-19](#) that come to those who add to or take from God's words also confirms the importance for God's people of having a correct canon. There could be no greater punishments than these, for they are the punishments of eternal judgment. This shows that God himself places supreme value on our having a correct collection of God-breathed writings, no more and no less. In the light of this fact, could it be right for us to believe that God our Father, who controls all history, would allow all of his church for almost two thousand years to be deprived of something he himself values so highly and is so necessary for our spiritual lives? [3:29](#)

The preservation and correct assembling of the canon of Scripture should ultimately be seen by believers, then, not as part of church history, but as an integral part of the history of redemption itself. Just as God was at work in creation, in the calling of his people Israel, in the life, death,

and resurrection of Christ, and in the early work and writings of the apostles, so God was at work in the preservation and assembling together of the books of Scripture for the benefit of his people for the entire church age. Ultimately, then, we base our confidence in the correctness of our present canon on the faithfulness of God.

The question of how we know that we have the right books can, secondly, be answered in a somewhat different way. We might wish to focus on the process by which we become persuaded that the books we have now in the canon are the right ones. In this process two factors are at work: the activity of the Holy Spirit convincing us as we read Scripture for ourselves, and the historical data that we have available for our consideration.

As we read Scripture the Holy Spirit works to convince us that the books we have in Scripture are all from God and are his words to us. It has been the testimony of Christians throughout the ages that as they read the books of the Bible, the words of Scripture speak to their hearts as no other books do. Day after day, year after year, Christians find that the words of the Bible are indeed the words of God speaking to them with an authority, a power, and a persuasiveness that no other writings possess. Truly the Word of God is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” ([Heb. 4:12](#)).

Yet the process by which we become persuaded that the present canon is right is also helped by historical data. Of course, if the assembling of the canon was one part of God’s central acts in the history of redemption (as was stated above), then Christians today should not presume to take it upon themselves to attempt to add to or subtract from the books of the canon: the process was completed long ago. Nevertheless, a thorough investigation of the historical circumstances surrounding the assembling of the canon is helpful in confirming our conviction that the decisions made by the early church were correct decisions. Some of this historical data has been mentioned in the preceding pages. Other, more detailed data is available for those who wish to pursue more specialized investigations. [3:30](#)

Yet one further historical fact should be mentioned. Today there exist no strong candidates for addition to the canon and no strong objections to any book presently in the canon. Of those writings that some in the early church wanted to include in the canon, it is safe to say that there are none that present-day evangelicals would want to include.

The ultimate criterion of canonicity is divine authorship, not human or ecclesiastical approval.

In conclusion, are there any books in our present canon that should not be there? No. We can rest our confidence in this fact in the faithfulness of God our Father, who would not lead all his people for nearly two thousand years to trust as his Word something that is not. And we find our confidence repeatedly confirmed both by historical investigation and by the work of the Holy

Spirit in enabling us to hear God's voice in a unique way as we read from every one of the sixty-six books in our present canon of Scripture.

But are there any missing books, books that should have been included in Scripture but were not? The answer must be no. In all known literature there are no candidates that even come close to Scripture when consideration is given both to their doctrinal consistency with the rest of Scripture and to the type of authority they claim for themselves (as well as the way those claims of authority have been received by other believers). Once again, God's faithfulness to his people convinces us that there is nothing missing from Scripture that God thinks we need to know for obeying him and trusting him fully. The canon of Scripture today is exactly what God wanted it to be, and it will stay that way until Christ returns.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Why is it important to your Christian life to know which writings are God's words and which are not? How would your relationship with God be different if you had to look for his words that were scattered among all the writings of Christians throughout church history? How would your Christian life be different if God's words were contained not only in the Bible but also in the official declarations of the church throughout history?
2. Have you had doubts or questions about the canonicity of any of the books of the Bible? What caused those questions? What should one do to resolve them?
3. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of other cults have claimed present-day revelations from God that they count equal to the Bible in authority. What reasons can you give to indicate the falsity of those claims? In practice, do these people treat the Bible as an authority equal to these other "revelations"?

SPECIAL TERMS

covenant

God-breathed

history of redemption

self-attesting