

The Authority and Reliability of the Bible

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (I Thess. 2:13, ESV)

I. The Formation of the “Canon” of Holy Scripture

The English word “canon” comes from the Greek word κανών (kanōn), meaning “measuring rod” or “rule.” And the canon of holy Scripture is the list of books that measure up to standards implemented by the early church fathers: evident inspiration by the Spirit, most importantly--discerned by testing truthfulness, consistency with the rest of the books in the Bible, and sanctifying power--and a certified apostolic pedigree.

Consensus on the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures was achieved shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem (late first century), though the Eastern lists of Hebrew books have minor variations and the canon of the Greek Old Testament was contested for centuries to come (and never quite resolved, except for Catholics at the Council of Trent in 1546).¹

The New Testament canon came together much later, and largely in response to environmental pressure. Some of its material was believed to be inspired and authoritative for Christians shortly after it was written (see Colossians 4:16; 1 Timothy 5:18; and 2 Peter 3:16). Most of it was firm by the late second century. But the canon as a whole did not congeal in final form until the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

The first powerful incentive to decide upon an orthodox canon of Christian Scripture came from one who would later suffer censure as a heretic. Marcion of Sinope, a bishop’s son on the Black Sea in the Greek region of Pontus, made a canon of his own as a guide to his philosophy (c. 130-40). Convinced that the Old Testament god differed starkly from the god and father of Jesus in the gospels—the former was cold, distant, militant, partial to the Jews, and concerned with physical needs, while the latter was full of love, accessible to all, and concerned with heavenly things—he taught his followers to reject the Jewish god and his materialism, said that Jesus came to teach a way of life that freed the soul from its bondage to the flesh, and excluded from his canon any apostolic documents that contravened his message, leaving only a revised version of the gospel of Luke and some of Paul’s letters.

¹ The Greek Old Testament, also known as the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament writings), includes a number of items not found in Hebrew Scripture (some of which are not in all the oldest extant copies of the Greek Bible either--these copies vary quite a bit and some include material that is not in any canon). Called deuterocanonical (“of the second canon,” or canonical but secondary) and *anagignoskomena* (“readable, worthy to be read”) by Catholics and Orthodox, apocryphal by Protestants (“obscure,” or non-canonical), they were published in the Vulgate (the ancient Latin Bible of Jerome and his associates), despite Jerome’s view that they should not be in the canon, and many subsequent editions of the Christian Bible as well. Most Protestant reformers either excluded them completely or set them apart visibly from the main canon of Scripture, usually in between the testaments. On April 4, 1546, at the Council of Trent, Catholic leaders made a decree, *De Canonicis Scripturis* (“Concerning the Canonical Scriptures”), in which they defined their Old Testament canon dogmatically.

Soon orthodox Christians placed Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and most of Paul's epistles on a level of authority with Old Testament writings. And an anonymous, more orthodox canon was composed (c. 170). Called the Muratorian Canon, or the Muratorian Fragment, it includes all our New Testament books except Hebrews, James, I and II Peter. It also includes the Apocalypse of Peter, however (a fragment of which survives, but is not in any Bible), and the Wisdom of Solomon (also called the Book of Wisdom, which is published in most editions of the Apocrypha).²

By the early fourth century, discussions about the canonization of New Testament books had become more sophisticated, though not yet unanimous. Eusebius of Caesarea, a bishop and historian, created a taxonomy in *History of the Church* (c. 313) that reflects the state of learned conversation at the time. He distinguished what he called widely "recognized books" (*homologoumenoi*) from "disputed books" (*antilogoumenoi*) and those deemed specious or heretical. The recognized books were Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, the Pauline epistles, Hebrews, I Peter, I John, and Revelation (though Eusebius remarked that the status of the book of Revelation was contested). The disputed books were organized in two different groups: those widely yet not quite universally sanctioned, namely James, II Peter, II and III John, and Jude; and others deemed spurious by most at the time, The Acts of Paul, The Shepherd of Hermas, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Epistle of Barnabas, The Didache, and, by some, Revelation. The heretical list featured an array of bogus texts, such as the Gospels of Matthias, Thomas, and Peter.

By the late fourth century, unanimity was near. Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria circulated an Easter letter in 367 in which he authorized our 27 New Testament books. Several major church councils then adjudicated the canon, sanctioning the 27 books of Athanasius. The clergy in the East received the canon more slowly and the New Testament canons of the Orthodox in Syria, Armenia, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Georgia had minor variations. By the late fifth century, though, an overwhelming majority of believers, East and West, embraced the same New Testament. At the Quinisext Council of Constantinople (692), Eastern bishops stamped the canon with approval.

II. The History of Christian Teaching about the Truthfulness of Scripture

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 180): "The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit" (*Against Heresies* 2.28.2)

Tertullian of Carthage (c. 220): "The statements, however, of holy Scripture will never be discordant with truth" (*Treatise on the Soul* 22)

Hippolytus of Rome (c. 235): "The Scripture deals falsely with us in nothing" (*Fragments on Susannah* 52)

² The Muratorian Fragment is a seventh-century Latin translation of a late second-century Greek text, named for L. A. Muratori, who discovered it in Milan in the early eighteenth century.

Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 380): “We, however, who extend the accuracy of the Spirit to the merest stroke and tittle, will never admit the impious assertion that even the smallest matters were dealt with haphazard by those who have recorded them” (*Orations* 2.105)

Augustine of Hippo (c. 420): “I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it” (*Letter [to Jerome]* 82.3)

Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1077): “I am sure that, if I say anything which plainly opposes the Holy Scriptures, it is false; and if I am aware of it, I will no longer hold it” (*Cur Deus Homo* 1.18)

John Calvin (1560): “We treat Scripture with the same reverence we do God, because it is from God alone, and unmixed with anything human” (*Commentary on II Timothy* 3:16-17, in *Calvin: Commentaries*, 85)

Jacob Arminius (c. 1605): “If some things in those sacred books seem to be contradictions, they are easily reconciled by means of a right interpretation” (“Oration III: The Certainty of Sacred Theology,” in *The Works of James Arminius*, 1:322)

John Bunyan (1688): “Suffer thyself, by the authority of the word, to be persuaded that the scripture indeed is the word of god; the scriptures of truth, the words of the holy one; and that they therefore must be every one true, pure, and forever settled in heaven” (“Of the Trinity and a Christian,” in *The Entire Works of John Bunyan*, 2:534)

Jonathan Edwards (c. 1728-29): “Make much use of the Word of God. That is God’s own teachings and instructions . . . ‘Tis there only that we have an infallible guide, a sure rule, which, if we follow, we cannot err” (“Profitable Hearers of the Word,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 14:265)

John Wesley (1776): “If there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth” (*Wesley’s Journal*, August 24, 1776)

A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield (1881): “It must be remembered that it is not claimed that the Scriptures, any more than their authors, are omniscient. The information they convey is in the form of human thought, and limited on all sides. They were not designed to teach philosophy, science, or human history as such. They were not designed to furnish an infallible system of speculative theology. They are written in human languages, whose words, inflection, constructions, and idioms bear everywhere indelible traces of human error. The record itself furnishes evidence that the writers were in large measure dependent for their knowledge upon sources and methods in themselves fallible, and that their personal knowledge and judgments were in many matters hesitating and defective, or even wrong. Nevertheless, the historical faith

of the Church has always been that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of physical or historical fact, or of psychological or philosophical principle, are without any error when the *ipsissima verba* [very words] of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural and intended sense. There is a vast difference between exactness of statement, which includes an exhaustive rendering of details, an absolute literalness, which the Scriptures never profess, and accuracy, on the other hand, which secures a correct statement of facts or principles intended to be affirmed. It is this accuracy, and this alone, as distinct from exactness, which the Church doctrine maintains of every affirmation in the original text of Scripture without exception. Every statement accurately corresponds to truth just as far forth as affirmed” (“Inspiration,” *Presbyterian Review*)

Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978): “Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms, obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises. . . . Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives” (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-inerrancy/>)

Article 13 of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy reminds us of common misunderstandings that create unnecessary problems: “WE DENY that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.”

III. Recommended bibliography:

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