

The Canon of Scripture

© Dr. Ian A. Fair, 2012/2025

Bibliography

- Aland, Kurt. *The Problem of the New Testament Canon*. London: A. R. Mowbray, 1962.
- Barton, John. *Oracles of God: Perception of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile*. London: DLT, 1986.
- Beckwith, Roger. *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.
- Bruce, F. F. *The Canon of Scripture*, Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1988.
- Campanhausen, Hans Von. *The Formation of the Christian Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972.
- Childs, Brevard S. *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.
- Farmer, William R. & Dennis M. Farkasfalvy. *The Formation of the New Testament Canon: an Ecumenical Approach*. New York: Paulist, 1983.
- Everett Ferguson, ed., "Canons", Lee M. McDonald, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Second Edition, New York: Garland Publishing, 1997.
- Gamble, Harry Y. *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.
- Gamble, Harry Y. "Canon", *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Freedman, David Noel, ed., New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Grant, Robert McQueen. *The Formation of the New Testament*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.
- Kalin, Everett Roy. "Argument from Inspiration in the Canonization of the New Testament Microform." Th.D. dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 1967.
- MacDonald, Dennis Ronald. *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983.
- Metzger, Bruce Manning. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Ridderbos, Herman N. *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*. Translated by H. De Jongste. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988.
- Roberts, C. H. and T. C. Skeat. *The Birth of the Codex*. London, 1983

What does Canon refer to?

Canon is a technical term which in the context of biblical studies refers to *a list of Scriptural books that are considered authoritative and normative for a religious community*.

The concept of canon arises out of concern for an authoritative or normative *standard for faith and doctrine* in religious communities.

Canon may refer to a *catalogue of writings*, or any other catalogue as a list of approved religious books and teachers and rules relating to *doctrine and faith*.

In the context in which we are working it refers to *a catalogue of religious writings that relate to an authority or normative teaching and belief.*

We refer to an *Old Testament Canon* and a *New Testament Canon*.

We sometimes refer to *a canon within a canon*, implying that there are some Scriptures or portions of Scripture that are *more normative or definitive* than other Scriptures. For example, Martin Luther did not consider James as having the same value as Romans. We use Martin Luther as an example without agreeing with his view of James.

A canon within a canon can also refer to a group of writings that were early received as normative and later incorporated into a larger canon. This would refer to the *Fourfold Gospel*, and the *Pauline Epistles* which were progressively included in a larger Christian canon.

We also refer to different forms or expressions of the Canon such as *Protestant Canon*, a *Roman Catholic Canon*, or sometimes to specific Canons such as that of the *Latter Day Saints*, the Mormon Church.

In the standard *Protestant Canon* there are *normally 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New Testament.*

The Roman Catholic Canon includes the same 66 books. However, the Catholic Bible includes a number of *Apocryphal books*, but these are not placed on the same level of canonicity as the 66 books.

The Latter Day Saints' Canon includes the standard 66 books of the Bible but adds the *Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price* on an equal footing to the 66 books of the Bible.

In the 2nd century CE a group following Marcion, a heretical Christian bishop in Rome, who compiled up his own canon and was excommunicated by the church in Rome. A number of his churches were likewise withdrawn from fellowship with a group faithful to the church of Rome. Marcion rejected the 39 books of the Old Testament, and those books of the New Testament that were significantly Jewish. He favored Luke and the Pauline Epistles.

The Development of the Jewish and Christian Canon

The development of a canon of New Testament writings was a process that spread over more than a century, and that covered a region ranging from the Eastern churches (Syria and Palestine) to Africa (Alexandria and Carthage in Egypt) and the West (primarily Rome).

Harry Gamble in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* indicates that the development of the canon is shrouded in obscurity. To reconstruct its history one must rely on the actual use of early Christian documents by Christian writers of the 2nd through the 5th centuries, noting the frequency and manner of citation of certain books of the Bible in their correspondence. Another source of canonical information is the explicit discussions and judgments by individual writers or ecclesiastical councils about the authority of various documents.

Hans Von Campenhausen ca. CE 1950 sharpened our understanding of the history of canon by pointing out that the use of a document alone does not indicate its canonical authority.

Most scholars point out that our canon as we know it today is a collection of sub canons, or smaller collections such as the Fourfold Gospel, the Pauline Epistles, and other

writings, each of which was at first collected separately.

William Farmer, Bible Professor at Perkins School of Theology, SMU, writes that “*the task of explaining the development of the New Testament canon is the task of offering a credible account of how certain books emerged from a much larger field of early Christian literature into an ecclesiastical canon.*”

In the Western Church, the Roman Catholic churches, the “closing” of the Roman canon is attributed to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, in the East the process continued for almost another 250 years until the Council of Trullo in 692 AD.

The point we make here is that the formation of a canon of New Testament writings that was “universally” accepted by the church was *a process over considerable time*. It apparently began in the mid-2nd century, after the passing of the apostolic age, and proceeded for many years.

In spite of this lengthy period of development, a concept of books accepted by the church, the canon, was fairly well formed by the beginning of the 3rd century (c.a. 200 – 220 CE).

When we mention “the church” we need to recognize that in these early years there was no formal universal governing church body, but churches in geographic regions (East and West) were “somewhat agreed” on issues of doctrine.

The Syrian Churches recognized what was in the Syriac version of the New Testament, which *was 22 books*. The Syrian Church did not recognize Revelation, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude.

The majority of Western churches accepted the 27 book canon, but Revelation, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude continued to be disputed in some churches right up to the time of Constantine, ca. 310 CE.

The History of the word *κανών*, *kanón*, canon

Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, pp. 289 ff. observes, “The word canon, whether in Greek, Latin, or English, is used in a kaleidoscopic variety of senses.”

The Oxford Dictionary lists 11 meanings or uses.

The Greek *κανών*, *kanón*, derives from the word for *a reed*, in Hebrew, *a rod*, and the Latin *regula*, *a ruler*.

The words came to be used as *a straight rod*, *a level*, or *a plumbline*, ***something incapable of bending***.

A *κανών* provided one with *a certain criteria or standard by which to determine the legitimate practice of opinion*.

The Greeks, Euripides and Aristotle, used this *of exemplary persons*, or to describe a good person. Stating that a person was canonical implied that they were morally a good person!

In early Christian literature, the New Testament, the word is used rarely, 4 times, Gal 4:16, “*Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule...*”, 2 Cor 10:13-16 “*we will not boast beyond limit...*”, and twice in regard to the *field* or *limit* of the *field* that God has allotted Paul.

In Patristic writers *κανών* is used by Clement of Rome and Clement of Alexandria as *a rule* of faith or *norm* of behavior.

Later, 300 CE plus, the term was used to designate *religious or monastic rules*, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory Naziansus.

In the Council of Nicea it was used to *catalogue the clergy* who were enrolled as clergy of the church.

In Athanasius, *Decrees of the Synod of Nicea* (350 CE) the *Shepherd of Hermas* was mentioned as not belonging to the canon.

At the Council of Laodicea (363 CE) it was decided that only the books listed in the canon ought to be read in Church.

In 367 CE Athanasius identified the books that were canonical in opposition to the apocryphal books. This is the earliest listing of the 27 books of the New Testament. From the time of the mid-4th cent CE it became common to refer to the books of the Old and New Testaments as canonical, or within the *list of books approved by the church* as the *norm* of faith.

As we noticed above, in the Western Church the “closing” of the canon is attributed to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, in the East the process continued for almost another 250 years until the Council of Trullo in 692 CE.”

Scripture as the Norm

The Bible uses the term "*Scripture*" to refer to *those writings* that were considered religiously authoritative and normative, without regard any concept of accepted canon.

The apostolic church knew that it was *under the authority of Scripture*, γραφή, *graphḗ*, *he graphe* – *the writing or scripture*.

Compare the *frequent references* in the Bible to *the Scriptures* which leave the understander in that *this is the norm*:

"Have you not read in the **Scriptures**?" (Mt 21:42).

"You do not know the **Scriptures**" (Mk 12:10, 24).

"Today this **Scripture** has been fulfilled." (Lk 4:21).

"What does **Scripture** say?" (Rom 4:3; Gal 4:30).

Note also the expression *gegraptai*, "*thus it is written...*" This expression is used of the content of Old Testament Scriptures and *implies that what is written is final*, authoritative, and normative. The expression appears *64 times in the New Testament referring to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Matt 2:5; 4:7; 26:31; Mk 14:21; Lk 7:27; 24:46; Jn 8:17; Rom 3:4; Heb 10:17; 1 Pet 1:16).

This use was obviously intended to imply that what *was written*, that is, *Scripture*, *was a norm and therefore authoritative, not to be debated!* It was intended to establish that what was commonly accepted was *that which is written is final!*

The Early Church and Canon

The 2nd century church did not speak of canon, but inherited its understanding of *Scripture as normative* from the Old Testament and 2nd Temple Judaism.

The concept of Canon in the New Testament, or 2nd Temple period, was understood as follows. The Samaritans *recognized and limited* the Scriptures to the Pentateuch. 2nd Temple Judaism recognized the *Tanakh*, *which was the law, the prophets, and the writings*.

The canonical list of *writings* was not closed in the Hellenistic Age, or the period of 2nd Temple Judaism. Cf. The *Qumran cache* of Old Testament fragments which include over 151 psalms.

All of our OT is cited as Scripture, but the *writings* do not seem to be a closed canon to which others could be added or referenced.

Much of the *apocalyptic*, *apocryphal*, and *pseudepigraphic* literature, *etc.*, are quoted, referenced, or cited by the early church. Cf. Lk. 24:44. The Greek *Septuagint*, ca. 230 plus BCE, in which the *order* and *content* of Old Testament books varies somewhat in the different LXX manuscripts, but are included. The LXX recognized the *apocrypha*.

It was not until the 2nd century that the church took an interest in defining the limits of the Hebrew Scriptures, cf. Melito in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.26.13-14.

The early church continued the Jewish tradition of recognizing the authority of Scripture. Cf. Paul in 1 Cor. 14:34, the *law*, 2 Tim 3:15, 16, *sacred writings* – *scripture*.

The early church also recognized the authority of "the Lord."

Whenever the word *Scripture* was cited, the New Testament writers meant the Old Testament. This concept persisted well into the 2nd cent.