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The Biblical Canon

I. Introduction

How do we know the books in our Bible are the books God wants us to have? How do we know there are not other books that are inspired by Him? The Catholic Bible, for example, lists other writings, how do we know these should not be included in our Bible? This study is on how the books in our Bible came to be accepted as the inspired writings of God and why the sixty-six books listed in our Bible are the only sixty-six accepted.

II. Canon Defined

Our English word “canon” comes from the Greek word *kanon* which means “reed.” The Greeks used reeds as measuring instruments. So, the meaning of the word gradually grew into “rule” or “measure.” To refer then, to the Biblical canon, is to refer to the books that are accepted as being divinely inspired and preserved through the ages as our Bible.

III. The Old Testament Canon

There are thirty-nine books in the Old Testament in the majority of Protestant Bibles (our Bible). (Personal note: I believe the Bible we use is the one true collective group of writings inspired and preserved by God. It is for the sake of being able to distinguish groups of writings containing the same books that I refer to it as “our Bible”.) The thirty-nine books are grouped as; five books of Law (also called the Pentateuch or Torah; Genesis through Deuteronomy); twelve books of History (Joshua through Esther); five books of Poetry (Job through the Song of Solomon); five Major Prophets (Isaiah through Daniel); and twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea through Malachi). Our Old Testament canon comes from the canon of the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible did include some Apocryphal writings, but they were not considered as part of the canon by the Jews.

The Hebrews divided their Scripture into three sections of twenty-four books total. The three sections are the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (also called *Hagiographa* meaning Holy Writings). The order and numbering of the Hebrew Bible is different from our Old Testament, and so they list twenty-four books. The Law consisted of the five books of the Torah, just like our Bible. The Prophets contained Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Twelve Prophets, in that order. They considered these eight books; we divide Samuel and Kings into two parts, and the Twelve Prophets into their respective parts—yielding a new number of twenty-one books out of the same set of the Prophets. (Stephen, in [Acts 7:42-43](#), quotes from [Amos 5:25-27](#) and cites it as the Book of the Prophets, showing how they grouped the Minor Prophets as a single work.) The Writings consist of Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra, and Chronicles. Our Bibles divide Ezra into two books (Ezra and Nehemiah) and Chronicles into two books.

The order of the Hebrew Bible follows a rough chronological order of when they were written, based on Jewish tradition. However, the question remains. Where did the canon of these books come from?

We find evidence in the New Testament, that the Jews had a canon, or group of accepted scriptures, that included the Law and the Prophets, [Mt. 5:17-18](#); [7:12](#); [11:13](#); [22:40](#); [Lk 16:16-17](#); [Jn 1:45](#); [Acts 13:15](#); [24:14](#); [28:23](#); [Rom. 3:21](#). In [Lk. 24:44](#). Jesus mentions the Law, the Prophets, and Psalms (part of the Writings). This shows that at some point before the time of Christ, the Jews had arranged groups of writings into Scripture. Historical writings also supports this. Josephus wrote, around A.D. 90, of twenty-two books “believed to be divine”. The twenty-two were the five books of the Torah, thirteen books of the prophets and four books of Poetry (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon)].

Historical evidences for the Old Testament canon:

- 1) Josephus does account for the 24 books (our 39) of Hebrew canon. He added Ruth to Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah, making his total twenty-two books. (Josephus considered everything written after the time of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, to be non-canonical)
- 2) Around A.D. 90, a group of Jewish rabbis gathered at Jamnia in western Judea to discuss the established canon. Their conclusion was that the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible (again, our 39) were the inspired, canon.
- 3) The Jewish Talmud and Tractate Baba Bathra (Babylonia Talmud) includes the 24 books of the Hebrew Canon. Another interesting note: the tractate Sanhedrin states: “The rabbis taught: Since the death of the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Holy Spirit has left Israel”. Meaning, that the Jewish oral tradition is that Malachi was the last inspired book of the Old Testament.

It is understood that the Old Testament canon came into being by the writers of the Old Testament adding to the canon as they wrote their books. Moses wrote his books, Joshua added his, etc. It is evident that the Law was something written down in a book, [Deut. 17:18](#); [28:58](#); [28:61](#); [29:21](#); [30:10](#). Moses wrote down the Law in a book and gave it to the priests and the elders, commanding them to read it before all the people every seven years, [Deut. 31:9-13](#); [31:24-29](#). Immediately after the death of Moses, God Himself spoke to Joshua and referred to a Book of the Law that Moses had given to the people, [Joshua 1:7-8](#). We understand then, at the time of Joshua, the Torah, (first five books of the Bible), were canonized as God’s Law to Moses, [Joshua 8:30-35](#); [23:6](#); [24:26](#), [2 Kings 14:6](#); [22:3-20](#).

The remaining books of the Old Testament do not have as clear point of canonization. Some have speculated that Ezra, with the assistance of Nehemiah, Zechariah, Malachi, and others, established the current canon before 400 B.C. The most likely theory is that the authors themselves were inspired to add their writings to the canon. At least part of Jeremiah appears to have been written by Jeremiah using Baruch as a scribe, [Jeremiah 36:32](#); [45:1](#), and then wrote the rest on his own, [Jer. 51:60](#). Sections of the Psalms contain the names of their authors, and tradition names the authors of the other books.

The following traditional transgression shows the possible development of the Old Testament canon: According to tractate Sanhedrin, Moses wrote Job in addition to the Torah. Samuel, writing 1 & 2 Samuel, as well as Judges and Ruth. [1 Samuel 25:1](#) records the death of Samuel. Jewish tradition is that Gad the seer and Nathan the prophet finished writing 1 Samuel and wrote all of 2 Samuel. Jeremiah wrote his book of prophecy, and Kings and Lamentations. According to the Talmud, King Hezekiah and “his company” wrote down Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes. The men of the Great Assembly (a group of post-exilic Jewish religious leaders that was founded by Ezra) wrote down Ezekiel, the Twelve Prophets, Daniel, and Esther. Ezra wrote Ezra and Chronicles, [2 Chronicles 36:22-23](#), [Ezra 1:1-4](#). Nehemiah appended Ezra’s book with his writings.

The New Testament supports some claims of the traditional authorship. If Ezra was the last author of Old Testament (1 and 2 Chronicles being the last books written, according to the Talmud), then it would explain the order of martyrs that Jesus uses in **Matthew 23:35**. Jesus mentioned two martyrs: Abel and Zechariah. Abel is the first martyr, **Gen. 4:1-9**. Zechariah the priest killed by King Joash, **2 Chronicles 24:17-22**, and the last martyr mentioned in the historical books of the Old Testament. It appears that Jesus was giving an account of those martyred from the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures to the end. This would also imply the Jesus denied any other books as part of the Old Testament canon (i.e. 1 and 2 Maccabees, would be excluded because they were written after Ezra's writings).

It can be established that Genesis through Joshua is the first part of the Hebrew Canon. We trust, through faith that inspired men of God added to the canon. The Jews consider God's inspiration of man to have ended with Malachi giving them a canon of twenty-four books, the same as our thirty-nine books. The New Testament writers, and other historic writers supports that the thirty-nine books of our Bible is the Old Testament canon, inspired and preserved by God.

IV. The New Testament Canon

Our New Testament contains twenty-seven books that can be divided into five groups. They are: the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The book of Christian History: Acts. Paul's epistles: fourteen letters, Romans through Hebrews; counting Hebrews as being written by Paul. The General epistles: seven letters, James through Jude, and one apocalyptic epistle: Revelation.

Whether written to a congregation or an individual, it is obvious that the letters were shared or distributed to others, **Colossians 4:16, Lk 1:3, Acts 1:1**. Men started to gathered these writings and make an account of those they considered inspired. As early as the second and third centuries, there was a known canon of Pauline letters that usually included Romans through Philemon, Hebrews sometimes included with them. There is evidenced of early Christian writers referring to Paul's letters and the Gospels, showing that these were accepted groups of writings. The other epistles then also became an accepted group and part of the New Testament canon.

New Testament Writers Affirm each other:

The New Testament writers accepted the Hebrew Canon as the inspired word of God. So to affirm each others writings on the same level as the Hebrew scripture would also mean they accepted each others writings as inspired by God.

- 1) **2 Peter 3:15-16**, Peter writes concerning Paul "things hard to understand which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do the rest of the Scriptures" Placing the writings of Paul on the same level as the Old Testament Scriptures.
- 2) **Ephesians 2:19-20**, mentions the church being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets putting the apostles on the same level as the prophets. Putting the writings of Matthew, John, and Peter on the same level as the writings of the prophets.
- 3) **1 Timothy 5:18**, Paul affirms Luke by quoting from **Deuteronomy 25:4** and **Luke 10:7**, calling it Scripture. Luke also wrote Acts so we would conclude it was also accepted.

This leaves only Mark, James, Jude and possibly Hebrews without any internal affirmation. Mark was virtually undisputed in early Christian history.

Hebrews, James, and Jude gained acceptance over time (opposed to other writings: the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas). There were disputes, by some, over certain books but by the fourth century the twenty seven book canon was well established.

Historical evidences for the New Testament canon:

- 1) In the second century heretic Marcion was a radical who only accepted Paul as an apostle. So he only accepted the Pauline epistles. He put together what he considered the Pauline canon: Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Laodiceans (Ephesians), Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon.
- 2) The Muratorian Fragment, from the late second century, contained Luke and John (the other two were mentioned but missing from the Fragment) and attributed the writing of Acts to Luke. Paul's letters were listed in the order of: Corinthians (1 and 2), Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Galatians, Thessalonians (1 and 2), Philemon, Titus, and Timothy (1 and 2). It also mentioned Jude, two epistles of John (probably 1 and 2 John), and Revelation.
- 3) Justin Martyr wrote circa 110-165 A.D., referring to the gospels as containing the account of the Last Supper, although he did not list the titles or authors. He also mentioned that the writings of the apostles were read along with those of the prophets in the Sunday assembly.
- 4) Origen, one of the most prolific early Christian writers, wrote circa 185-254 A.D. mentioning Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as genuine, as well as Paul's writings (although he didn't list or number them), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. He listed 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John as disputed by some. Origen also mentioned the raising of Eutychus, [Acts 20:7-12](#), as a fact. Which means he must have regarded Acts as a genuine writing. In his Homilies on Joshua, Origen listed the twenty-seven canonical books of the New Testament, showing that as early as the mid-third century, these were the accepted writings.
- 5) In circa 270-339 A.D., Eusebius, the famed historian of the early church, wrote concerning accepted, disputed, and rejected books of the New Testament canon. He began the list of universally accepted works with the four gospels. To them he added Acts and the Pauline epistles (but did not list them), 1 John and 1 Peter. The disputed books he listed as Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.
- 6) Athanasius, in circa 296-373 A.D., listed the canon of the New Testament as the same twenty-seven books that are our current New Testament.
- 7) The Old Syriac, a second century collection of our New Testament, translation from Greek into the Syriac (Aramean). The language of Syria and northern part of Mesopotamia. It contained all the New Testament books with the exception of 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.
- 8) The Old Latin version was the African translation of the Bible into Latin, also during the second century, included all the books except Hebrews, James, and 2 Peter.
- 9) The Coptic (Egyptian) version of the New Testament, also from the second century, existed in two dialects: Sahidic, used in Upper Egypt, and Bohairic, used in Lower Egypt. Both of these Coptic versions included all twenty-seven books of the New Testament (Revelation was sometimes placed in a separate volume).

Council's that accepted the twenty seven book canon:

- The Catholic Church's Council of Hippo (A.D. 393)
- The Third Council of Carthage (A.D. 397)
- The Sixth Council of Carthage (A.D. 419)
- The Fourth Session of the Council of Trent (A.D. 1546)

While 2 Peter, was not found in either the Old Latin nor the Old Syriac versions, it was found in both the Coptic Sahidic and Coptic Bohairic versions of the New Testament—showing that it was accepted by the early Egyptian Christians. Meaning the New Testament canon (our New Testament) had been collected and accepted as being inspired writings from God as early as the second century.

V. Extra Canonical Writings

Every writing outside of the Bible is extra-canonical. These writings would include books of prophecy, gospels, histories, acts, etc written by men and women sometimes claiming to be someone we know from the Bible. Interestingly, writings have been attributed to Adam, Enoch, Barnabas, Thomas, Paul, Peter, and even Pontius Pilate, just to name a few. The topics cover a wide variety of things, including a yearly horoscope, found in the Treatise of Shem, to an account of the childhood of Jesus, found in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.

VI. The Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

When most people hear about the extra-canonical (also called deuterocanonical) writings, they think of the Apocrypha. The term "Apocrypha" may have been coined by a fifth-century bible scholar named St. Jerome. It comes from the Greek word meaning "away from; hide; secret; hidden away" and refers to 15 books, Jewish in origin, found in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament). The time of these writings is from the fourth century B.C. to New Testament times. The list includes: Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit, Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, First and Second Maccabees, the two Books of Esdras, various additions to the Book of Esther (10:4-10), the Book of Daniel (3:24-90; 13; 14), and the Prayer of Manasseh. Not only does the Catholic Church believe these books to be part of the Hebrew Canon, but the Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox churches do as well. Although, the canons of each differ from each other.

The original canon of the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament), did not include the Apocrypha. The Protestant Bible began to separate the section or not include it at all. Protestant versions of the Bible generally exclude the Apocrypha. Although, the King James Version of 1611 did include it.

The Apocrypha is probably most familiar to us as the books in the Catholic Bible, which are not in ours. At the Council of Trent (1546) the Roman Catholic Church pronounced 12 of the 15 Apocryphal books sacred and include them in their Bible. The twelve they believe to be part of the Hebrew Canon are: Tobit, Judith, an additional 107 verses scattered throughout the book of Esther, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, the Letter of Jeremiah, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. The books not included are First and Second Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh; these are sometimes added as an appendix.

The Greek Orthodox Church accepts all that the Catholic's do, as well as 1 Esdras, Psalm 151, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 3 Maccabees. There is a 4 Maccabees which they place as an appendix. The Russian Orthodox Church accepts all that the Catholic's do and they add 1 and 2 Esdras (which they call 2 and 3 Esdras), Psalm 151, and 3 Maccabees

It is the Septuagint that began having the Apocrypha added to the twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon. One very probable explanation for this is because of Hellenistic Jews. Hellenistic means Greek in language, outlook, and way of life but not Greek in ancestry. These are Jews who began leaving their Jewish traditions and began following Greek philosophies. Around 250 B.C. the Old Testament began being translated into Greek as the Jewish people (particularly those outside of Palestine) began a transition from traditional Jewish thought and practice to a more Greek way of life. A consequence of this was the combining of Grecian philosophies, with Old Testament theology. As this transgression occurred, a new group of writings developed (Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha) that merged Greek and Jewish understandings. It seems that because that because of this, the Apocrypha began being included with the Greek version of the Old Testament canon.

The same councils that accepted the twenty-seven books of the Old Testament (listed above) also accepted the Apocrypha. So it continued to gain acceptance in the Catholic and Orthodox churches

Why These Are Not Canonical

The Apocrypha was written after Old Testament inspiration had ceased (after the time of Malachi), and before the time the New Testament revelations had begun. While the books contain accurate historical records, like 1 and 2 Maccabees, they are books of history, the same as the writings of Tacitus or Herodotus. Many of the Apocryphal additions to the Old Testament contain errors and contradictions. But the main reason not to include them is that the Hebrew Bible did not include them. The vast majority of Jews did not consider them to be inspired. The writings the Jews considered to be inspired is their Hebrew canon, the same thirty-nine books that make up our Old Testament.

The Old Testament pseudepigrapha books are writings that are not credited as being part of the Old Testament Canon. They are falsely credited to men of the Old Testament era. That is how they go their name pseudepigrapha. The Greek words pseudos meaning “false” and epigrapha meaning “inscription; writing” or “false inscriptions.” They include apocalyptic books, testaments, legends, writings of wisdom and philosophies, Old Testament expansions, prayers, and psalms.

Why are these books not believed to be part of the canon? The first, and most obvious, reason is that they lie about their authors. If a book lies about who wrote it, then how can you trust its contents? Another reason is that these books were written much later than the Old Testament writings. While the writings claim to be from Old Testament time’s scholars have dated them anywhere between about 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. None of the New Testament writers or the apostolic fathers have considered these writings canonical. It is evident that they contain biblical records, but remember they are a mixture of Greek philosophy with the Old Testament. This leads to contradictions with the Bible. It is for such reasons that the pseudepigrapha writings are rejected as being part of the Old Testament Canon.

VII. The New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

The New Testament pseudepigrapha are books written like a New Testament book but are not accepted as being part of the New Testament canon. They often have the names of apostles, prominent disciples, early Christian writers (Clement, Matthew, Barnabas), or famous figures from the New Testament (Pilate and Gamaliel). Some writings are named for groups of people, like the Egyptians or Ebionites. The writings are commonly rejected because they are found to have false authors and teachings, errors, and discrepancies. They are dated later than the inspired writings of the New Testament and the early church rejected them as being part of the New Testament Canon.

While they are not part of our New Testament they do provide a useful look at traditions, myths, and superstitions of some of the early Christians, as well as oppositions of the early Church (i.e., Doceticism, Gnosticism, Asceticism). In the ninth century, there were around 280 pseudepigraphal and Apocryphal writings of the New Testament, and more have been discovered since. While most of these works are accepted as good historical documents, but uninspired, some have come to believe a specific group of these writings to be inspired. This group is known as the New Testament Apocrypha. The New Testament Apocrypha is: the Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas, 1 and 2 Corinthians from Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the Gospel According to the Hebrews, the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians, and the Seven Epistles of Ignatius. Many of these books were listed or included in some of the best Greek manuscripts.

Why These Are Not Canonical

First, simply listing or including them in a Greek manuscript does not make it part of the canon of Scripture. Most of the books that were included in the manuscripts were placed after Revelation, as an appendix to the canon. The writings were included in manuscripts dated from the fourth and fifth centuries as additions, but uninspired writings. Some of the writings (1 and 2 Corinthians from Clement, the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians, and the Seven Epistles of Ignatius), don't lay any claim to be Scripture, but simply letters from one Christian to another. Some of these Apocryphal works have been found to contain errors and false teachings. It is also evident, that these writings are dated after the time of the writings of our New Testament. It has been found that Gnostics and other heretics (Greek philosophies and religious sects) wrote several of the pseudepigrapha. Eventually these writings were no longer regarded as being part of the New Testament Canon.

VIII. Summary

We believe the sixty-six books of our Biblical canon are God breathed, [2 Timothy 3:16](#). That the events recorded were written down by eyewitnesses, so that we may believe, [Luke 1:1-4](#); [John. 20:30](#), [Acts 1:1-3](#), [Galatians 1:11-12](#), [1 Peter 1:12](#); [2 Peter 1:15-16](#), [1 Jn. 1:1-4](#).

While man has carefully scrutinized writings to evaluate those truly from God, ultimately it is an issue of faith. We believe that men, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote down God's message to us. That is the same foundation on which we believe that God has moved through the ages to assure His word has been properly collected and compiled for us. We trust that the sixty-six books of our Bible have been preserved by God as the sixty-six books He wants us to use.