
CANON AND TEXTUAL TRANSMISSION

Introduction to the Bible
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CANON (HOW DO WE KNOW WE HAVE THE RIGHT BOOKS?)

- We recognize sixty-six books as Holy Scripture: thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament.
- “Canon” comes from Greek and Hebrew words that refer to a measuring rod.
- The development of canon is a process of God providentially guiding his people to recognize his authoritative voice in Scripture.
- The canon is closed. Having laid a foundation with the prophets and apostles (Eph 2:20), God no longer inspires new books to be included in the Bible.

HISTORY OF THE CANON

- Old Testament
 - Christ refers to Old Testament books as “scripture” (Matthew 21:42, etc.).
 - Josephus, the Jewish historian (A.D. 95), indicated that the 39 books were recognized as authoritative.
- New Testament
 - The apostles claimed authority for their writings (Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27; 2 Thessalonians 3:14).
 - The apostle’s writings were equated with OT scriptures (2 Pet 3:1, 2, 15, 16).
 - The Council of Athanasius (A.D. 367) and the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) recognized the 27 books in our New Testament today as inspired.

TESTS OF CANONICITY

The early church councils applied several basic standards in recognizing whether a book was inspired.¹

- Is it authoritative (“Thus saith the Lord”)?
- Is it prophetic (“a man of God” 2 Peter 1:20)?
 - A book in the Bible must have the authority of a spiritual leader of Israel (O.T. – prophet, king, judge, scribe) or an apostle of the church (N.T. – It must be based on the testimony of an original apostle.).
 - Is it authentic (consistent with other revelation of truth)?
 - Is it dynamic—demonstrating God’s life-changing power (Hebrew 4:12)?
 - Is it received (accepted and used by believers – 1 Thessalonians 2:13)?

¹ Norman L. Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*. pp. 137–144.

APOCRYPHA

The Apocrypha are the fifteen books written in the period between the Old and Testaments—the 400 years between Malachi and the birth of Christ. Some Catholic doctrines, such as purgatory and prayer for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:39–46) find their basis in the Apocrypha. The Catholic Church officially recognized these books in 1546 when they reconfirmed the canon of Augustine at the Council of Trent.

Westminster Confession of Faith 1.3: “The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.”

Reasons for rejecting the Apocrypha as inspired:²

1. The Jews never accepted the Apocrypha as scripture.
2. The Apocrypha never claims to be inspired (“Thus saith the Lord” etc.). 1 Maccabees 9:27 also acknowledges that prophets ceased to appear prior to the events it records.
3. The Apocrypha is never quoted as authoritative in scriptures. (Although Hebrews 11:35–38 alludes to historical events recorded in 2 Maccabees 6:18–7:42).
4. In Matthew 23:35, Jesus seems to imply that the close of Old Testament scripture was the death of Zechariah (400 B.C.). This excludes any books written after Malachi and before the New Testament.

TEXTUAL TRANSMISSION & CRITICISM (HOW DO WE KNOW WE HAVE THE RIGHT TEXTS?)

The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. These ancient texts were written on a variety of materials, but they were copied by hand. As copies were made, they were passed down through the generations and other copies were made. This is how the text was transmitted. Textual criticism refers to the process of determining the content of the original copies (the autographs).

OLD TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS

- The Masoretic scribes (A.D. 500–1000) in charge of the Old Testament manuscript copying used a very meticulous system of transcription and had a deep reverence for the text.
 - They had specific rules on the type of ink and the quality and size of parchment sheets. They were so meticulous that they counted all the paragraphs, words and even letters, so they could know by counting, if they had done it perfectly. They knew the middle letter of each book so they could count back and see if they had missed anything.

² Sid Litke, Bible.org <https://bible.org/seriespage/canonicity>

- Four or five Masoretic manuscripts are the basis of the best Hebrew Bible available today. These copies were made between about A.D. 900 and A.D. 1000 by the Masoretes.
- The Septuagint (LXX) is a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek language which was made in the 2nd or 3rd century B.C.
 - Although written in Greek, scholars can generally determine what Hebrew words were being translated in the Septuagint.
 - It provides evidence that the Hebrew Bibles were copied extremely well for all the years between the Septuagint translation (2nd/3rd century B.C.) and our best existing Hebrew copies (A.D. 900–1000).
- The Dead Sea Scrolls are well-preserved Hebrew text fragments date back to 100 B.C.
 - They include many Bible portions, including some complete books.
 - There is virtual agreement between these Hebrew texts and the ones dated 1,100 years later.

NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS³

- New Testament manuscripts can be classified according to certain major families or types. A family type is the name given to a group of texts with a common ancestor.
 - These texts are discerned through the deviations common to a group of manuscripts.
 - For example, some scribal errors made in copying the text in Alexandria were perpetuated in later reproductions of that text type. Classification according to “text type” is the basic point of departure in the actual work of textual reconstruction.
- Four family “types” of texts have been sufficiently defined in biblical scholarship.
 - The Alexandrian Text—This text arose in Egypt and is generally conceded to be the most important one. Westcott and Hort, who named this the Neutral Text, thought that *Codex Sinaiticus* (4th century) and *Codex Vaticanus* (4th century) had preserved a pure form of the Alexandrian type of text.
 - The Byzantine Text—This family is often called Byzantine because it was adopted in Constantinople and used as the common text in the Byzantine world. Both Erasmus, who created the first printed Greek text, and the translators of the King James Version of the Bible used this type of text. A great majority of late uncials and minuscules belong to this group.
 - The Western Text—This family of texts was closely related to the church in the west, particularly in North Africa. It was used by the early church fathers. Its age would seem to suggest great importance, but there are clear indications that it was not carefully preserved

³ This section is adapted from R. C. Briggs, *Interpreting the New Testament Today: An Introduction to Methods and Issues in the Study of the New Testament*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 45–47.

- The Caesarean Text—This family of texts was widely used in Caesarea. It seems to have arisen out of the Alexandrian text but was also mixed with the Western text.

KINDS OF VARIANTS

- Unintentional changes
 - Homoeoteleuton (Greek for similar endings) the scribe jumps from one line to a line which begins with the similar letters, yet is not the correct line.
 - Haplography—similar to *homoeoteleuton*, but occurs when you have two words that are identical and are next to one another, and one of them is left out. This was easy to do in *scriptio continua*. Scripture written without word or other breaks.
 - Dittography—doubling a letter or word that was not there.
 - Metathesis—change of place—involves changing the order of words or of letters.
 - Incorrect division of words
 - Itacism—error of hearing, could only occur in a scriptorium, a room where the script was copied, or where the words were written from the hearing.
- Intentional changes
 - Grammatical improvements
 - Liturgical reasons
 - To eliminate problems in the text.
 - To eliminate an apparent contradiction.
 - Harmonize parallel passages – this only occurs in the synoptic gospels, where efforts were made to make them sound the same.
 - Conflation – in Luke 24:53 – early manuscripts have either praising or blessing, but not both. Later manuscripts have both.
 - Doctrinal changes