

HUMAN FORMATION: THE HISTORY OF CANONIZATION



All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.
— 2 Timothy 3.16

Now there are also many other things that Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. — John 21.25

Launching Truths

1. God is the source of all Scripture
2. The Bible does not claim to be exhaustive in its record of truth (Psalm 119.160)
3. “All Scripture is God-breathed” – but what qualifies as “Scripture”?

Defining Terms

Bible – from the Greek word *biblia* (“books”)

Canon – from the Greek word *kanon* (“a reed or measuring rod”). It indicated “that which measures,” that is, a standard, norm or rule. Also, “that which has measured up” to the standard or rule.

Canonization – the process whereby the books that make up the Christian Scriptures were measured and judged to be “God-breathed.” These then became the standard and rule against which all other teaching was judged.

Apocrypha – books that were included in the Septuagint (Greek) and Vulgate (Latin) but excluded from the Hebrew and Protestant canons of the Old Testament.

I. The Old Testament

- Written c. 1450-400 BC
- Early compilation resulting from the work of scribes such as Ezra, c. 600-300 BC (Matthew 23.35; Luke 24.44)
- The Septuagint (Latin “seventy,” hence LXX), a Greek version of the OT, dates from the 3rd century BC and contains our 39 OT books as well as 11 apocryphal books. The Greek Septuagint was translated in Alexandria, Egypt by order of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (reigned 281-246 BC) of the Ptolemaic Dynasty.
- The Hebrew Bible was canonized c. AD 100, perhaps as a result of the work of the Jewish academy at Jabneh (Jamnia)[†] in Palestine. At this time, the Greek Septuagint was rejected by the Jewish orthodoxy and its apocryphal books were omitted from the Hebrew Bible. Why canonization at this time? Two motivations were an attempt to preserve the Hebrew language and culture after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (AD 70, cf. Matthew 24.1-2), and a desire to clearly delineate between Orthodox Judaism and Jewish Christianity. Hebrew canonization achieved both goals.

[†] See Wikipedia article, [Council of Jamnia](#)

II. The New Testament

To first century Christians, the Greek Septuagint represented *Scripture*. However, considered equally authoritative and even preeminent was the teaching of the apostles and the oral traditions handed down by them of Christ and his words (see 2 Peter 3.1-2). This oral tradition passed into written form in the second-half of the first century as several early church leaders penned the four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, various letters to churches, and the apocalyptic book of Revelation.

Between the second and fourth century (AD 100-400) these early Christian writings were copied and circulated among churches scattered all over the Roman Empire. Many other books by highly respected Christian authors were also produced during these years. With the passing of time, the impetus to delimit which books qualified as NT Scripture and which did not increased.

In AD 312, the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. This event changed the course of history in many ways. In AD 313 the Edict of Milan was issued by him, officially recognizing Christianity as a religion. Previously, Christianity had not been considered a legal religion by Rome. Though the edict did not make Christianity the official state religion, Constantine's support changed the dynamics that ruled the early church by involving the attention and power of the state into matters of faith.

The new means of settling disputes over Christian orthodoxy was for the emperor to convene a council of leading bishops. The bishops would dispute the issue, come to a decision, and the state would then ratify it. In AD 393, the church leaders at the Council of Carthage endorsed what is now our current list of 27 NT books. There were four criteria by which these books were judged:

- *Apostolic Origin* — the book must be attributed to and based on the preaching/teaching of the first-generation apostles (or their close companions, i.e., Luke, Mark).
- *Universal Acceptance* — acknowledged by all major Christian communities in the ancient world (by the end of the fourth century).
- *Liturgical Use* — read publicly when early Christian communities gathered for the Lord's Supper (their weekly worship services).
- *Consistent Message* — containing a theological outlook similar or complementary to other accepted Christian writings

However, the basic factor underlying recognition of a book's canonicity for the New Testament was *divine inspiration*.

Thus, by the end of the fourth century, the NT canon was defined. In brief, Protestants accept the Hebrew OT canon (i.e., *sans* apocrypha) and the Catholic NT canon. Christians believe not only that God divinely inspired men to record the Scriptures, but also that he providentially worked through men to assimilate the Scriptures into one sacred book – the Bible!

III. Additional Resources

Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Handbook*, First Edition, pp. 882-890

Professor Luke Timothy Johnson, *The History of Christianity: From the Disciples to the Dawn of the Reformation*, (The Great Courses)

Wikipedia article, [Biblical Canon](#)