

THE CANON AND TRANSLATIONS

THE BIBLICAL CANON

The word “canon” comes from the Greek *kanōn*, meaning “list,” “rule,” or “standard.” The canon of Scripture refers to the collection of biblical books that Christians accept as uniquely authoritative. We accept it, but how do we know we have the right collection of books? Why do these sixty-six writings command our (i.e., Protestant) attention but not others? Did any other books ever compete for inclusion in the canon, and if so, why were they excluded? The question of which books belong in the Bible becomes crucial for a study of hermeneutics that asserts that certain documents, and only those documents, remain normative for all believers. Our discussion becomes all the more urgent because Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians have never agreed on the extent of the OT. What is more, many Christians from mainline denominations today suggest that, although all branches of Christianity traditionally have agreed on the contents of the NT (since at least the fourth c.), the criteria for that agreement may no longer be acceptable. Some would argue that other ancient Christian and even gnostic writings are as valuable as parts of the canonical NT.¹ In the first half of this chapter we will sketch, in turn, the rise of the OT canon, the development of the NT canon, the criteria of canonicity, and the implications for hermeneutics of the methodology known as canon criticism.

The Biblical Canon: The Central Questions
What is the “standard” for determining what God has revealed?
What constitutes Scripture? ²

1. The most notable recent development along these lines is the publication of *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. H. Taussig (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013). Nineteen self-appointed “spiritual leaders” (scholars, pastors, and rabbis) created a “New Orleans Council” to discuss non-canonical works they believed were written by AD 175 and voted to add ten of them, nine of which were largely gnostic, to the 27 traditional books to create an enlarged canon.

2. B. D. Sommer argues that what constitutes “Scripture” is largely a question within Christianity (especially Protestant Christianity), for in Judaism it is a more fluid category, including not only the *Tanakh* (what Christians call the OT) but also rabbinic literature. See B. D. Sommer, ed., *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2012), 2–14.

THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Development of the Canon

Since the Reformation, Protestants have accepted the thirty-nine books, from Genesis to Malachi, that appear in the standard editions of the Bible in print today. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians, however, preserve various so-called apocryphal (from the Greek word for “hidden”) or deuterocanonical (a “second canon”) books that were influential throughout the first 1500 years of church history.³ These books include such works as 1 and 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (also called the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira[ch], and not to be confused with Ecclesiastes), Baruch, the Letter of Jeremiah, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. Some of these works are historical in nature: 1 and 2 Maccabees describe the history of key portions of second-century BC Israel, while 1 Esdras largely reduplicates material found in Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Second Esdras is an apocalypse of secret revelations purportedly given to Ezra. The two books of Wisdom somewhat resemble the canonical book of Proverbs. Baruch resembles parts of the prophecy of Jeremiah, and the Letter of Jeremiah could be characterized as an impassioned sermon based on the canonical text of Jeremiah 11:10. The two Prayers represent devotional literature. The remaining books are (at least partially) legendary novels illustrating virtue and vice by means of their main characters. The three works known as Susanna, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, and Bel and the Dragon all appear as subsections within a longer form of the book of Daniel. Apocryphal additions to Esther also exist.⁴

Protestants have defended the shorter OT canon, asserting that these thirty-nine books were the only books that the Jews of the time of Christ and the apostles accepted as their canon of Scripture. The other books, presumably though not demonstrably all of Jewish origin (some exist now only in Greek or Latin and not Hebrew), date from the intertestamental period after the time of Malachi. The Jews never believed they were inspired in the same way as the earlier biblical books. In fact, widespread testimony in later rabbinic literature (primarily from the second through fifth centuries after Christ), as well as in Josephus (a first-century Jewish historian), outlines the Jewish belief that prophecy (or at least divinely inspired writings) ceased after the time of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the latest of the Minor Prophets: Haggai, Zechariah,

3. For a complete list of the OT canons of the Roman Catholic Church and each of the various Eastern Orthodox churches, see H. P. Rüger, “The Extent of the Old Testament Canon,” *BT* 40 (1989): 301–8.

4. A standard edition of the Apocrypha can be found in the *The New Oxford Annotated NRSV Apocrypha*, 4th ed., ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Three excellent introductions and surveys of these books are D. J. Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); D. A. de Silva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); and O. Kaiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament Apocrypha* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004). Two major commentary series, *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday) and *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress) are somewhat unique in including volumes on the Apocrypha as well as the OT and NT. The smaller *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon) does also.

and Malachi (see esp. Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.40–41; b. Sanh. 22a).⁵ This means that no book dated later than about 450–400 BC could be considered part of the Hebrew Scriptures, and, therefore, part of the Christian OT. Such claims should not unduly denigrate the apocryphal books, for they provide valuable information about historical and theological developments between the testaments and often prove inspiring, even if not inspired, reading (for the evidence for the actual contents of the OT canon, see below). One should remember that Roman and Orthodox belief in some of these works as authoritative stems from a later period, removed by at least a century from the NT era, when Christianity had largely lost sight of its Jewish roots.⁶

Since the pioneering work of A. C. Sundberg, however, it is often argued that, because the NT reflects widespread use of the Septuagint (the Greek OT, abbreviated LXX), which included much of the Apocrypha, first-century Christians must therefore have believed in the canonical status of apocryphal works.⁷ However, the NT authors never quote these works directly as they do the rest of the OT. With LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, “it is probably safe to assume that the Old Testament they used [in terms of the books it contained] was identical with that known today.”⁸ The evidence of Philo and Josephus points in the same direction. Lee McDonald disputes these claims, citing numerous possible allusions to the Apocrypha in the NT,⁹ but none appears as unequivocally as the numerous direct quotations of undisputed OT literature. What is more, not even the fairly obvious allusions to apocryphal books (e.g., Wis 15:7 in Rom 9:21 or Sir 51:23–27 in Matt 11:28–30) convincingly prove that early Christians viewed these works as canonical. Paul, for example, alluded to Greek poets and prophets (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12), and Jude quoted the pseudepigrapha (other Jewish intertestamental literature) on two different occasions (vv. 9, 14), even though Christians never claimed canonicity for any of these sources.¹⁰

The LXX, which contains the Apocrypha, originated among Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt. It probably became popular among early Christians because they could read Greek but not Hebrew. So they naturally became familiar with the Apocryphal books.

5. Josephus also suggests that the Scriptures did not contain insuperable contradictions, that they were inspired by God, and that they therefore functioned authoritatively. See P. D. Wegner, T. L. Wilder, and D. L. Bock, “Do We Have the Right Canon?” in *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*, ed. S. B. Cowan and T. L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 402.

6. The fullest exposition of the traditional Protestant defense within the past generation is R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), to which this paragraph is largely indebted.

7. A. C. Sundberg, Jr., *The Old Testament of the Early Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

8. W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 21. Curiously, the 1996 edition so revises the treatment of canon that this sentence never appears.

9. L. M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 2nd ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 45, 259–67 (this list also contains possible allusions to the Pseudepigrapha—other intertestamental Jewish literature never canonized by anyone). A more modest and convincing list and discussion of possible allusions appears in B. M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford, 1957), 158–70.

10. For a response to the view that the earliest church fathers viewed the Apocrypha as canonical, see Beckwith, *Canon*, 386–95.

The Jewish canon, however, seems to have been decided by rabbis in Palestine, so Jews there never even got to know these works. But Christians often came to value the Apocrypha for hermeneutically illegitimate reasons. Even as early Christian interpreters often read into OT texts allegorical and Christological meaning that the original authors could not have intended (see ch. 2), so also the apocryphal books were often preserved and cherished because of “Christian readings” of them, which in retrospect we can see were not valid. For example, the Wisdom of Solomon contains the verse, “Blessed is the wood through which righteousness comes” (14:7). In context, it refers to Noah’s ark, but early Christians prized it as an apparent prediction of the cross of Christ. Baruch 3:36–37 speaks of God who “found the whole way to knowledge,” which “afterward appeared on earth and lived among people.” In context, the author personifies God’s knowledge as a woman, much as wisdom appears in Proverbs 9, but many church fathers interpreted the passage as a reference to Christ’s incarnation. From the second century onward, a majority of them increasingly accepted the Apocrypha as canonical, although a minority (including esp. Jerome) argued for following the Jewish canon. But the sixteenth-century Reformation returned resoundingly to the Jewish Bible of Jesus and the apostles (and of Jerome).

The patristic misreadings of the Apocrypha already noted seem harmless enough, but in other instances the question of whether or not the Apocrypha should be viewed as canonical takes on greater significance. Probably the most famous example comes from 2 Maccabees 12:44–45, which extols the virtue of praying for the dead to help make atonement for them. From this text, more than from any other, developed the Roman Catholic practice of praying for those who died in hopes of speeding their way through purgatory and on to heaven. No NT text, however, clearly speaks of the existence of purgatory, so Protestants typically reject its existence.¹¹ Both Paul (Phil 1:23) and one of the men next to Jesus on the cross (Luke 23:43) expected to be with Christ immediately after death.

Modern scholars, Protestant and Catholic alike, often admit that some ancient Christian uses of the Apocrypha were inappropriate.¹² Nevertheless, many still challenge the inviolability of the Protestant canon.¹³ Again, particularly since Sundberg, many claim that the Jews of Jesus’ day did not have a fixed collection of authoritative Scriptures.¹⁴ All agree that the five books of the Law (Genesis to Deuteronomy) became canonical at least by the time of Ezra’s reading of the Law or the time of the Samaritan schism with Israel (because Samaritans accepted only the Law as canonical) ca. 500–400 BC. The writings of the Prophets, which included Joshua, Judges,

11. An important exception is evangelical J. L. Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking the Things that Matter Most* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015).

12. See esp. the introductions and annotations to the apocryphal books and the above-cited texts in Coogan, ed., *Apocrypha*. This edition is accepted by Protestants and Catholics alike.

13. See, e.g., most of the contributors to the section on OT canon in L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002).

14. Sundberg, *Old Testament*, 107–69.

Samuel, and Kings, as well as Isaiah through Malachi (minus Daniel), were probably all recognized as uniquely authoritative at least by 200 BC. All appear, for example, among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, which date from that time onward. They were translated into Greek (the Septuagint or LXX) as part of the Hebrew Scriptures by this same time, and the prologue to Ecclesiasticus, probably written no later than the mid-100s BC, refers to both Law and Prophets as Scripture.¹⁵ Certainly, conservatives and liberals differ widely as to the authorship and therefore dating of many of the OT books.¹⁶ But even if the dates of the acceptance of the Law and Prophets are as late as the critical consensus outlined here claims, they still well predate Jesus and the apostles, and the traditional Protestant argument remains persuasive.¹⁷

More intense controversy attends the third traditional division of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Writings. This catchall category includes all of the books not classified as Law or Prophecy: Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, and Daniel. Many argue that the Writings may have included at different times any or all of the Apocrypha, and that the canon of the OT was not limited to the books Protestants now accept until after the proceedings of a Jewish council at Jamnia (also spelled Jabneh or Javneh) in approximately AD 90 (and perhaps considerably later than that).¹⁸ In other words, some assert that the OT canon was not decisively determined within Judaism until the end of the writing of the NT books. This view may agree that it is logical to follow Jesus' lead in treating as Scripture what he, with Jews of his day, accepted as Scripture. However, they insist that we simply cannot know which books he would have had embraced.

Though this view of the OT canon often prevails in many scholarly circles today, it is improbable. A closer examination of what occurred at Jamnia shows that, more likely, discussions there dealt with challenges to and questions about books that were already widely established as canonical.¹⁹ A variety of quotations from writers no later than the mid-first century AD strongly suggests that the Writings as well as the Law and Prophets were already fixed in number at an earlier time. Josephus speaks of "only 22" books "containing the record of all time and justly accredited" (*Ag. Ap.* 1.38–41). He goes on to specify the five books of Moses (the Law) and thirteen books of prophecy and history, which from later Jewish lists we can reconstruct as Joshua, Judges and Ruth (as one book), 1 and 2 Samuel (as one), 1 and 2 Kings

15. See esp. E. E. Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

16. E.g., contrast the evangelical text by R. B. Dillard and T. Longman, III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) with the liberal counterpart by J. J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

17. The fullest survey of proposals appears in S. B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation*, FAT 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000). Chapman also argues that a core of the Law and Prophets began to emerge together as canonical Scripture already in the mid-sixth century BC.

18. See, e.g., A. C. Sundberg, Jr., "The Septuagint: The Bible of Hellenistic Judaism," in *Canon Debate*, 68–90.

19. See esp. J. P. Lewis, "Jamnia after Forty Years," *HUCA* 70–71 (1999–2000): 233–59.

(as one), 1 and 2 Chronicles (as one), Ezra and Nehemiah (as one), Esther, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Lamentations (as one), Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets (as one). "The remaining four books," Josephus concludes, "contain hymns to God and principles of life for human beings." These would be Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.

Luke 24:44 recognizes a similar threefold division of the Hebrew canon ("the Law of Moses and the Prophets and Psalms"), as does the earlier first-century Jewish writer Philo ("the Laws, and Oracles given by inspiration through the Prophets, and the Psalms and the other books whereby knowledge and piety are increased and completed"; *On the Contemplative Life*, 25). The Greek prologue to the important apocryphal book of Jewish Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, already in the mid-second century BC specified "the Law and the Prophets and the other books of the fathers." At Qumran copies of all of the undisputed OT books (except Esther) have been found, but only three of the Apocrypha—Tobit, small fragments of Ecclesiasticus and a few lines of the Letter of Jeremiah—though of course the existence of a book within the Dead Sea sect's library does not by itself prove (or disprove) its canonicity. And one of the most recently translated Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q397) refers to the need to understand "the books of Moses [and] the book[s of the pr]ophets and Davi[d . . .]." Of course, we cannot be sure of the exact contents of those sections summed up as "David" (or in Luke or Philo as "the Psalms").

The interpretation of this and other evidence remains disputed, but Sid Leiman, from a Jewish perspective, followed by Roger Beckwith from a Christian perspective, sets out all the texts in great detail, including many later rabbinic discussions.²⁰ Leiman and Beckwith plausibly conclude that the entire twenty-two book canon (following Josephus's enumeration) was already well established before the writing of Ecclesiasticus in the mid-second century BC. Even more common are references to twenty-four books, but ancient lists make it clear that this number results simply from dividing Judges and Ruth, and Jeremiah and Lamentations, into two parts. Attempts to deny the significance of widespread belief in the cessation of prophecy (again found as early as the second century BC in, e.g., 1 Macc 9:27) point out that not every Jew shared this belief.²¹ But such attempts do not successfully dislodge the convincing Protestant claim that most first-century Jews recognized no inspired and canonical writers after the fifth-century BC.²² Less certain, but still plausible, is the additional proposal of Leiman and Beckwith that the final collection of these books and the separation of the Prophets and Writings into distinct categories occurred at the time of and under the influence of the great Jewish revolutionary hero, Judas

20. S. Z. Leiman (*The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence*, 2nd ed. [New Haven, CT: Connecticut Academy of Arts, 1991], 51–124) lays out all the rabbinic texts. Beckwith (*Canon*, 16–104) discusses the nature of the witnesses and their sources.

21. See esp. F. E. Greenspahn, "Why Prophecy Ceased," *JBL* 108 (1989): 37–49.

22. See esp. B. D. Sommer, "Did Prophecy Cease? Evaluating a Reevaluation," *JBL* 115 (1996): 31–47.

Maccabeus, in the 160s BC (cf. 2 Macc 2:13–15).²³ Second Maccabees 2:14–15 refers to Judas collecting the books that had been lost because of the war against Antiochus Epiphanes; the most natural interpretation is that these would have been the Jews' Scriptures, many copies of which had been destroyed.²⁴

On this view, later rabbinic debates focus more on matters of interpretation than of canonization. The five books that appear in those discussions are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ezekiel, Song of Songs, and Esther. Rabbis raised questions about these books because of the apparent contradiction in Proverbs 26:4–5, the tension between Ezekiel's picture of the new temple (Ezek 40–48) and early biblical commands about God's sanctuary, the seeming "secularity" of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, and the lack of reference to God in Esther coupled with its institution of a new, non-Mosaic festival (Purim). The only apocryphal book discussed was Ecclesiasticus, which the Rabbis deemed too late to be canonical.²⁵ To be sure, in later centuries, after the writing down and codification of the Oral Law (first in the Mishnah about AD 200 and then in the greatly expanded Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds of the fourth and sixth centuries), there was a sense in which these works too were treated as canonical. But all this substantially postdates NT times, and even then most rabbis apparently still accorded a privileged place to the original written Torah (our OT).²⁶

The Order of the Canon

It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that the Jews agreed upon the boundaries of the Hebrew canon in NT times. The order of its books, however, is less clear, largely because at that time individual documents were still written on separate scrolls. One ancient Jewish tradition, possibly the oldest, puts the order as: the Law (Genesis-Deuteronomy), the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Twelve Minor Prophets), and the Writings (Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles) (see the Talmud tractate: b. B. Bat. 14b). This arrangement sometimes proceeds chronologically (Joshua–Kings; Daniel–Nehemiah), and sometimes thematically (Ruth ends with David's genealogy, a fitting introduction for the Psalms of David; Chronicles sums up almost all of OT history).

Modern Hebrew Bibles preserve the order, Law, Prophets, and Writings, but

23. Leiman, *Canonization*, 29; Beckwith, *Canon*, 152. S. Dempster ("An Extraordinary Fact: Torah and Temple and the Contours of the Hebrew Canon," *TynBul* 48 [1997]: 23–56, 191–218) has pointed to phenomena particularly at the beginning and end of each of the three parts of the Hebrew canon that suggest one discrete stage of conscious, thematic editing of a final, canonical form of the Hebrew Bible at the end of the biblical period itself. Even allowing for a late date for Daniel, this, too, would place us no later than the mid-second century BC. Cf. also his "Canons on the Right and Canons on the Left: Finding Resolution in the Canon Debate," *JETS* 52 (2009): 47–77.

24. A. van der Kooij, "Canonization of Ancient Hebrew Books and Hasmonaean Politics," in *The Biblical Canons*, ed. J.-M. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 27–38.

25. Beckwith, *Canon*, 283–91, 318–23.

26. D. Kraemer, "The Formation of Rabbinic Canon: Authority and Boundaries," *JBL* 110 (1991): 613–30.

change the sequence of some of the books within the last two categories.²⁷ English Bibles are based on the arrangement of the Greek translation of the OT (LXX), in which the Prophets and Writings are interspersed within each other in order to create a past-present-future sequence: Genesis through Esther describes the history first of the human race and then of Israel from creation to the fifth century BC; Job through Song of Songs includes psalms and wisdom for present living; and Isaiah through the Twelve preserves that form of prophecy that is mostly proclamation (foretelling and forthtelling) rather than historical narrative.²⁸ The order of these books of prophecy sometimes follows chronological considerations and sometimes decreasing length of the documents.

THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Development of the Canon

Clearly one may not appeal to the teaching of Jesus to determine which books belong in the NT even if he did hint of future Spirit-inspired Scripture (a possible inference from John 14:26; 15:26). One might expect, therefore, less agreement among Christians as to the boundaries of the NT than to the limits of the OT, but in fact, historically, there has been much more unanimity. Still, agreement did not appear instantly in the formation of the NT canon.²⁹

Since the first Christians inherited a "complete" Bible from the Jews, it might seem surprising that they were willing to add *any* books to what they termed Scripture. But in viewing Jesus as the fulfillment and authoritative interpreter of the Hebrew Scriptures (based on Jesus' own claims in Matt 5:17–20), they already had relativized somewhat the value of those writings. Increasingly, the story of Jesus and the preaching of the gospel took on greater significance. So it was natural for them to write down the story and message about Jesus and, within a generation or two, to view them at least as authoritatively, if not more so, than the previous writings that they believed had prepared the way for that gospel. OT history provided a precedent with Deuteronomy and the Prophets as commentators or "applicators" of the earlier Laws of Moses.³⁰ The concept of covenants proved instructive, too. Jeremiah had prophesied about a coming new covenant (Jer 31:31–34), which Jesus and the NT

27. For details, see F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Leicester and Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 29.

28. The reason Jews could include historical books as part of "prophecy" stems from their understanding of a prophet more broadly, as an accredited teacher of moral law. See esp. J. Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel After the Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). For one plausible explanation of the sequence of the Twelve Minor Prophets, see P. R. House, *The Unity of the Twelve* (Sheffield: Almond, 1990), 63–109. House sees a progression from the themes of covenant and cosmic sin in Hosea through Micah to covenant and cosmic punishment in Nahum to Zephaniah climaxing in hope for restoration in Haggai to Malachi.

29. The best overviews are Bruce, *Canon*; D. G. Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 315–42; and B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

30. The independence of the OT writing prophets from the Law has often been asserted, but see B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 174–75.

writers claimed that his death established (Luke 22:20; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8–13). If the older covenant with Moses led to a collection of written Scriptures, it would be natural to expect God to guide Christian writers to inscribe a newer collection of Scriptures. This kind of reasoning seems to be implied by the discussions near the end of the second century in Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 4:1) and Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies* 1:9; 3:11; 4:21; 5:13).

1 Timothy 5:18 cites Luke 10:7 as authoritative (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:14):

“The worker deserves his wages.”

2 Peter 3:16 considers some of Paul’s writings as Scripture:

“He [Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the *other Scriptures*, to their own destruction.”

Yet belief in the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation as Scripture began to emerge much earlier than the second century. Two of the later NT writings refer to earlier Christian works as Scripture (1 Tim 5:18, quoting Luke 10:7;³¹ 2 Pet 3:16, referring to an unknown number of Paul’s Epistles). Although some critics date 1 Timothy and 2 Peter well into the second century, a fair number of scholars recognize that late first-century dates are more probable, and in our view the traditional views that put them in the sixties still commend themselves.³²

The earliest noncanonical Christian literature dates from about AD 90 through the mid-second century and is referred to as the Apostolic Fathers.³³ (This title is somewhat misleading because it refers to the generations immediately *following* the apostolic era.) These works include numerous epistles from early church leaders to various Christian individuals or communities.³⁴ Like the NT Epistles, these letters give instruction concerning various aspects of Christian living. For the most part they follow the teaching of the NT writers, though newer developments emerge, for example, a growing preoccupation with the virtue of martyrdom or an increasing

31. Some would argue that “Scripture” applies only to the quotation of Deut 25:4 in the first half of 1 Tim 5:18, but this is not a natural reading of the verse. I. H. Marshall (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, with P. H. Towner, ICC rev. [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999], 615) comments, “for the author the second citation had equal authority with the OT.”

32. For the Pastorals, see esp. L. T. Johnson, *Letters to Paul’s Delegates* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996); expanded in L. T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, AB (New York; London: Doubleday, 2001). For 2 Peter, see J. D. Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice: The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter 1*, JSNTSup 150 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 11–37; G. L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 139–50.

33. The best introduction and translation is that of M. W. Holmes, trans. and ed., *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006). For the Greek text see, M. W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

34. E.g., from Clement of Rome to Corinth; from Ignatius to Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, Smyrna, and to St. Polycarp; from Polycarp to the Philippians; from an unknown author to one Diognetus; and from an unknown author taking the pseudonym of Barnabas to a general Christian audience.

emphasis on an episcopal church hierarchy. Additional works include a more or less historical narrative of the Martyrdom of Polycarp; a manual called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (or the *Didache*) on church order, especially regarding baptism, the Eucharist, and false prophets; and a series of commands, parables, and visions allegedly given by God to a Christian writer known as *Hermas the Shepherd*, replete with instruction on the themes of purity and repentance.

In various parts of the Roman Empire, the writings of Barnabas, Hermas, and perhaps Clement and the *Didache* seem to have gained a brief following among some Christians who prized them as highly as other books that eventually became part of our NT. Yet this status never included a majority of Christians and was relatively short-lived. A study of many of the Apostolic Fathers in fact reveals that their authors were conscious that they lacked the authority of the apostolic writings.³⁵ In addition, they liberally quoted and alluded to those earlier books in ways that acknowledged their greater authority and, at times, their scriptural status. For example, Ignatius, bishop of Smyrna, wrote to the Trallians in the early second century, "I did not think myself qualified for this, that I . . . should give you orders as though I were an apostle" (3:3). A generation or two later 2 Clem. 2:4 quoted Mark 2:17 verbatim, after a citation of Isaiah, with the introduction "another Scripture says." Not surprisingly, the Apostolic Fathers most often cited the words of Jesus in ways that suggested they viewed them as of the highest authority.³⁶

In the middle of the second century, the first major impetus to the explicit discussion of a Christian canon came from the heretic Marcion.³⁷ Marcion believed that Jesus and the God of the OT were opposites, and that anything in Christian writings that smacked of Judaism ought to be expunged. He therefore promoted a "canon" of edited versions of the Gospel of Luke and various Epistles of Paul, but nothing else. The rise of gnostic writings, also beginning about the mid-second century, provided a further stimulus. Many of these purported to contain secret revelations from Jesus, following his resurrection, to one or more of his followers (most notably James, Peter, John, Thomas, Philip, and Mary).³⁸ In addition, as persecution against Christians intensified, especially toward the close of the second century and periodically in the third, it became more crucial for Christians to agree on what books they were willing to die for (when they defied orders to burn all their holy books). Thus, beginning about AD 150, and continuing without complete agreement for another 200 years, they produced a series of lists of Christian books to be treated as Scripture. But the

35. The evidence for the last three sentences is scattered throughout each of the works cited in n. 29. See esp. Dunbar, "Canon," 323–28. More generally, cf. Metzger, *Canon*, 39–73.

36. The significance of the evidence of the Apostolic Fathers has regularly been exaggerated by conservatives and unduly denigrated by liberals. Particularly balanced, though somewhat limited in scope, is D. A. Hagner, "The Sayings of Jesus in the Apostolic Fathers and Justin Martyr," in *Gospel Perspectives V: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels*, ed. D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 233–68.

37. See Bruce, *Canon*, 134–44.

38. The standard collection and translation is M. W. Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

testimony of Irenaeus, during this period in which the false teachers were “perverting the Scriptures” (see esp. *Against Heresies* 3.12.12), suggests an already existing canon even before the publication of the various lists.

Probably the earliest of these lists is the so-called Muratorian fragment from the late second century.³⁹ It includes the four Gospels, Acts, all thirteen letters attributed to Paul, two letters of John, the letter of Jude, and Revelation. It also curiously refers to the Wisdom of Solomon, and it notes that in Rome the Apocalypse of Peter was read, though some questioned it, as in fact some did the Apocalypse of John (Revelation). Around this time Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, recognized a similar collection with the addition of 1 Peter.⁴⁰ At the turn of the third century, Tertullian first used the Latin *testamentum* in referring to a NT. He was translating the concept of a Greek *diathēkē* (“covenant”) and should not be interpreted, as we often understand “testament” in English, as referring to a will. Tertullian recognized twenty-three of our NT books as authoritative, omitting James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John, about which he mentions nothing.⁴¹ Early in the third century, Origen refers to all twenty-seven, but notes that six are disputed: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude (as quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6:25.8–14).⁴² This situation seems to have persisted until the fourth century.

Like the rabbinic discussions about certain OT books, however, questions about these six writings focus more on internal evidence (issues arising from the texts themselves) than on external evidence (doubts about their inspiration or the conditions under which they were written). The one exception is Hebrews. Some believed it came from Paul; others proposed different authors or pled ignorance. In the case of James, then as later, questions focused on harmonizing his view of faith and works with that of Paul. Doubts about 2 Peter focused on the differences from 1 Peter in style and contents. Arguably, some deemed 2 and 3 John too personal to be universally relevant. Jude’s quotation of the intertestamental Jewish apocalypse known as 1 Enoch and his apparent allusion to an apocryphal work known as the Assumption of Moses puzzled some. These internal problems, thus, led some to doubt the inspiration and canonicity of these last six books mentioned. A seventh book also came under some fire, as the millennial theology of Revelation troubled many who were becoming increasingly amillennial in outlook.

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in his Easter-time festal letter of AD 367, is

39. For its contents and significance, see Bruce, *Canon*, 158–69. G. M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and The Development of the Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), has defended a fourth-century date for this fragment. But see the rebuttal by C. E. Hill, “The Debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon,” *WTJ* 57 (1995): 431–52.

40. Irenaeus nowhere gives one definitive list of these works, but one may be pieced together from a variety of references presented and discussed in Bruce, *Canon*, 170–77.

41. Again, Tertullian’s views reflect a mosaic of sources. See Bruce, *Canon*, 180–83. Around the same time, Clement of Alexandria may have begun to use the Greek *diathēkē* in the same way.

42. At the same time, Eusebius himself accepted Hebrews but not Revelation. Origen doubted the Pauline authorship of Hebrews, but not its inspiration.

the earliest-known Christian writer to endorse without hesitation the twenty-seven books that now comprise our NT. The subsequent Councils of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397) ratified his views. Only minor debates persisted after that time. Due to these debates, some writers argue that the NT canon was not closed until the time of the Protestant Reformation and the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in the mid-1500s, if even then.⁴³ Such a position leaves the door open for certain groups, most notably Mormons, to add their own formative documents to the canon.⁴⁴ But while it is true that one cannot prove either Christian or Jewish canons ever to have been so conclusively closed as to preclude all further discussion, it is abundantly clear that no later sectarian literature could ever pass the early church's criteria for canonicity (see below). Most obviously, such writings could not meet the criterion of widespread use from the earliest days of the faith to the present.

Even though the NT canon has remained well established since the fourth century, numerous voices today clamor for a reconsideration of its boundaries. Particularly noteworthy are those students of ancient Gnosticism who argue that texts like those found at Nag Hammadi (esp. the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Truth, the Apocryphon of James, the Gospel of Philip, and the Treatise on the Resurrection) preserve traditions of Jesus' teaching at least as valuable as those found in our canonical Gospels and that they date from at least as early a first-century time period.⁴⁵ Almost certainly, these scholars date every one of these non-canonical sources (except Q) at least seventy-five years too early! No clear evidence for the existence of those documents predates the mid-second century, and a careful comparison of their teachings with those of the Gospels shows them to be mostly later than and, where they run parallel, dependent on the canonical four. It is possible, to be sure, that otherwise unparalleled but authentic sayings of Jesus may have occasionally been preserved in these texts, but a substantial percentage of them reads more like later gnostic revisions and corruptions (if not outright fabrications) of earlier traditions of Jesus' words and deeds.⁴⁶

Even more specious are the claims that the NT was simply the result of a power

43. It is of course important to recall the Reformers' emphasis on the witness of the Holy Spirit and the self-attestation of the Scriptures. Protestants do not ultimately rely on the decision of any ancient church council or more recent Reformation emphasis. See esp. M. J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012). But the degree of subjectivity involved at this point requires that additional criteria for canonicity be applied as well.

44. See esp. S. E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 45–56.

45. In addition to Taussig, *A New New Testament*, see R. W. Funk, R. W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York; Oxford: Macmillan, 1993); R. W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

46. See C. Tuckett, *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986); J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, AYBRL, 5 vols. to date (New York: Doubleday, 1991–), 1:112–66. J. H. Charlesworth and C. A. Evans, "Jesus in the Agrapha and Apocryphal Gospels," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, NT Tools and Studies, ed. B. Chilton and C. A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 479–533; and C. E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

play on the part of the “orthodox,” who ousted the hapless Gnostics from what had been a credible place in the development of Christianity and then rewrote the history of the movement to make it look like they had dominated all along.⁴⁷ This scenario might just be credible if the major developments in the establishment of the canon began only in the fourth century when Constantine became the first Christian emperor and gave the religion its first power base, as Bart Ehrman and others have claimed. But most of the developments in the establishment of the canon had already occurred by this time, and the encyclopedic-sized body of Christian literature known as the ante-Nicene fathers from which we learn about the various movements within the first three centuries of Christianity had already been written by then.⁴⁸ The NT books’ unbroken existence throughout the history of the church, along with a fair amount of the sectarian literature that was rejected, shows that no widespread suppression of dissident voices ever occurred in these days. The oldest of the patristic writers do not even show any awareness of the heterodox literature, either by way of support or by way of protest.

The Order of the Canon

As with the OT, the final arrangement of NT books combined chronological and topical concerns with issues of length of documents.⁴⁹ The Gospels were naturally placed first, as they described the origins of Christianity in the life of Jesus. Matthew assumed first place because, as the most Jewish of the Gospels, it provided the clearest link with the OT.⁵⁰ Then Mark, Luke, and John most commonly followed in the order in which presumably they were composed.⁵¹ Even though Acts was Luke’s second volume, it was separated from his Gospel by John’s work when the four Gospels were all grouped together. But it naturally came next as the historical sequel to the events of Jesus’ life.

After Acts came the Epistles. As Paul was the premier apostle to the Gentile world and the most prolific epistle writer, his letters were naturally placed first. As the order of the books became increasingly standardized, Paul’s Epistles were then divided into letters to churches (Romans–2 Thessalonians) and letters to individuals (1 Timothy–Philemon). Within these two sections the Epistles were arranged in order of decreasing length, except that books written to the same church or person were

47. E.g., B. D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2; D. L. Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 120–21.

48. Alexander Roberts, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994).

49. As in the OT, early groupings of NT books took a variety of orders, though as far as we know the Gospels, Epistles of Paul, and General Epistles were always discrete groupings, despite variations in sequence within each section. Interestingly, at first Acts was often put at the head of the General Epistles. For key lists, see Metzger, *Canon*, 295–300.

50. Some would also argue that it was written first, though that discussion is beyond our scope. See the NT introductions in the bibliography at the end plus the standard commentaries on the Synoptic Gospels.

51. Cf. M. Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 38–47.

kept together even when this pattern was broken (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy).⁵² Even though it is just slightly shorter, Galatians may have been placed before Ephesians as a frontispiece to the collection of Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians) because of its use of the term *kanōn* or “rule” (Gal 6:16).⁵³ Hebrews was placed immediately after the avowedly Pauline Epistles because many thought it came from Paul, but it was not placed within the collection since it was anonymous, and many others disavowed Pauline authorship. The writings of James, Peter, John, and Jude were then added in that order, also in generally decreasing length but probably also in descending order of the prominence of their authors in the earliest church. James the brother of Jesus also was originally the head of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15). Eventually, after Peter arrived in Rome, he supplanted James in empire-wide significance, but in the earliest years he seems to have been subordinate to James.⁵⁴ John the son of Zebedee was another one of Jesus’ inner three apostles (with Peter and James his brother). Jude, another brother of Jesus, clearly figures least prominently in early Christian writings. Finally, Revelation, with its focus on the end of history, formed a fitting conclusion to the canon.⁵⁵

CRITERIA OF CANONICITY

The reasons the Jews came to accept the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Scriptures as arranged in modern enumeration are largely lost in antiquity. The main reason given in the rabbinic discussions revolves around their inspiration. Yet this only throws the question back one stage—i.e., why were these books believed to be inspired or “God-breathed” (cf. 2 Tim 3:16)? Conservative scholars have often tried to link inspiration and canonicity to prophecy. God gave the Law to Moses, they argue, and he was also called a prophet and was largely responsible for the composition of the Pentateuch. Moses, they claim, anticipated a succession of divinely accredited prophets (Deut 18:17–19) who composed the books the Jews included among the Prophets. What is more, even many of the Writings come from prophetic authors (e.g., David [cf. Acts 2:30] and, for some of the Psalms, Asaph the seer).⁵⁶ Yet this view fails to account for all of the biblical books and probably pushes the evidence for prophetic authorship (even of the books it does account for) further than is defensible. Why assume that God can inspire only prophets and not also sages and priests?

52. Metzger, *Canon*, 297.

53. This last point is by far the most dubious but is a plausible suggestion of W. R. Farmer in *The Formation of the New Testament Canon*, with D. M. Farkasfalvy (New York: Paulist, 1983), 79–81.

54. Numerous studies have rehabilitated the historical James to the place of prominence he once held. Many of these are conveniently summarized in H. Shanks and B. Witherington, III, *The Brother of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 89–223.

55. See esp., R. W. Wall, *Revelation*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 25–32, who takes an explicitly canon-critical approach (on which see below).

56. See esp. R. L. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

A second view links canonicity to the concept of covenant. The Law established God's covenant; the historical narratives described Israel's obedience and disobedience to the covenant; the prophets called people back to a proper relationship to the covenant; and the Wisdom Literature expanded the theme of obedience to it.⁵⁷ This theory has fewer holes in it than the previous one, but it also remains rather broad in nature and without much ancient testimony to corroborate it. While plausible, it must remain a theory. Christians will probably have to rest content with the traditional Protestant argument outlined above. To state it rather colloquially, "What was good enough for Jesus (as a representative Jew of his day) is good enough for us."

Criteria for New Testament Canonicity		
• Apostolicity	• Orthodoxy	• Catholicity

More evidence survives that suggests criteria for the canonicity of the NT. Again, inspiration is more a corollary of canonicity than a criterion of it.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, other criteria may helpfully be classified under three headings: apostolicity, orthodoxy, and catholicity. All of the NT writings were believed to have apostolic connections. Though not necessarily written by one of the original twelve apostles (this would apply only to Matthew, John, and Peter), they came from the apostolic age (first c.) and could be closely associated with those who were considered apostles (including Paul), or closely associated with Jesus (such as the Epistles of his brothers, James and Jude). Thus, Mark was traditionally associated with Peter, Luke with Paul, and Hebrews, if not from Paul himself, then with one of his intimate companions.⁵⁹ Although many of these traditional authorship claims are widely disputed today, a cogent case can still be made for each of them.⁶⁰

Second, Christians believed that the theology and ethics promoted by the NT books as a whole cohered in shared orthodoxy—beliefs not held by most of the gnostic challengers. To call all the NT writings orthodox does not preclude a wide measure of diversity among them, but it does imply that none of the texts actually contradicts another one. Although this claim is widely rejected today,⁶¹ it remains thoroughly

57. See esp. M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997).

58. Bruce, *Canon*, 268.

59. Suggestions from the first centuries of the church's history include Paul, Barnabas, Luke, and Clement of Rome; at the time of the Reformation, Luther suggested Apollos; A. Harnack in the nineteenth century suggested Priscilla and Aquila. Modern scholars have added several other proposals.

60. See esp. D. A. Carson and D. J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); and A. J. Köstenberger, L. S. Kellum, and C. L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), both ad loc. Some would argue today that the other criteria for canonicity are adequate so that not as much depends on authorship for the modern church as for the ancient church. For the issues that are pressing today, their supporters, and an excellent response, see M. J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013).

61. Just about every nonevangelical NT theology is predicated on the assumption of irreconcilable diversity. Of recent works, cf. esp. U. Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); and F. J. Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

defensible.⁶² The canon came *after* the preaching of the gospel and the instruction of the faithful and accepted only what cohered with that inaugural tradition.

Third, books were preserved that had proved useful for a large number of churches from the earliest generations of Christianity. Closely related was the widespread recognition of a book's authority. One can only speculate as to why the first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians, before our 1 Corinthians (see 1 Cor 5:9), was not preserved. It obviously was apostolic and presumably orthodox, but quite plausibly was not as relevant for other groups of believers outside of Corinth. Christians often ask the tantalizing question, "What would happen if such a letter were discovered and proved highly relevant?" This question is in fact just a specific form of the broader question: "Is the Christian canon open or closed?" Now since we believe that no church tradition is on a par with Scripture, so that authoritative church pronouncements of the fourth and fifth centuries cannot ultimately determine the canon, we must say that the canon *theoretically* remains open—if some additional document could meet all the criteria for canonicity. However, *practically*, the canon is closed, since a work that had not been used for nearly twenty centuries could not meet the criterion of catholicity and would almost certainly not command the acclaim of more than a minority of Christians today.⁶³

A Crucial Distinction:	The process of canonization did not grant biblical books their authority.
	Rather, books that were recognized as authoritative were admitted to the canon.

CANON CRITICISM

In response to the often-atomistic approaches of traditional historical criticism, a new form of biblical analysis developed, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, known as canon or canonical criticism (recall our discussion in ch. 2). Initially due to the extensive writings of Yale professor Brevard Childs, canon criticism seeks to move beyond standard source, form, and redaction criticism, and to interpret the biblical texts in their "canonical shape" (i.e., their final form).⁶⁴ Canon criticism does not reject the reconstructions of modern historical criticism as to how the various documents developed, but it finds little value in these methods for preaching or ministry in the

62. For detailed demonstration of this defensibility, see I. H. Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005); and F. Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). For methodological discussion, see P. Balla, *Challenges to New Testament Theology*, WUNT 2.95 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1997).

63. See esp. Metzger, *Canon*, 271–75.

64. See esp. B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); B. S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). For additional background, see ch. 2 above.