

How did We Get the Canon of Scripture?  
ABF Foundations Lesson by Rusty Russell  
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### PERTINENT SCRIPTURES

- (Mat 28:20) [Jesus told his disciples to go into all the world... .  
Baptizing... ] “and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
- (2 Tim 3:16) All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,
- (2 Pet. 3:15-16) Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He 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.
- (2 Pet 1:16) We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.
- SEE LUKE 1:1-4
- (Col 4:16) After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. (where is this book? Why has it not been preserved?)
- **(Luke 21:33) Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (God has preserved for us those books he wanted us to keep.)**
- (John 21:25) Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.
- (Rev 22:18) I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. [This literally only applies to Revelation, but the early church believed that there was an end to the revealed Word of God at the end of the apostolic era, and that therefore it had at least figurative application to the entire New Testament.]

### WHY THIS IS DIFFICULT

Roman Catholic v. Protestant

- Roman Catholic: Church gave us Bible
- Protestant: Church only recognized what is obviously God's Word.

(note: “Catholic” = “Universal.” Catholic is a good term, was used in early church, means “one universal church.” We equate it with Roman Catholic church but that causes confusion when studying early church history)

Man's perspective v. God's perspective

- If you have gift of faith, you're not sure why we need this lesson! God gave us Bible, what's the big deal?
- We're trying to look at these things from a man's perspective, from historical perspective.

### **AN ILLUSTRATION: WHAT DID YOGI BERRA SAY?**

A in t over till it s over

So crowded nobody goes there anymore

I never said most of the things I said

[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/y/yogi\\_berra.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/y/yogi_berra.html)

Two Key Issues:

- 1) "External Evidence": How much evidence is there externally that he really said this? Regardless of what the content of the quote is, do we have evidence that he said this? Eyewitnesses agree? Written documentation? How reliable is the documentation/ eyewitness testimony?
- 2) "Internal Evidence": Is this quote consistent with what we know of this person?

NOTE: the 27 books of the New Testament pass these two tests with remarkably flying colors – well beyond any other book of that period of history or of just about any period of history.

### **A HISTORY OF THE FORMATION OF THE CANON**

Apostles still around – Go ask the apostles

Apostles die off - Which books are authoritative / Scripture?

- Over the next 150 years, books are circulated, read in churches as Scripture
- "Scriptures" = Jewish Scriptures (OT) plus others
  - o SIDE NOTE: DEBATE ABOUT JEWISH SCRIPTURES, APOCRYPHA
    - Word apocrypha means literally "hidden things." But that literal meaning isn't helpful. It was used in context to refer to those books written during biblical times that may have been considered by some to be Scriptural but didn't make the final cut. **THESE ARE NOT „HERETICAL BOOKS BUT JUST NOT BOOKS THAT AT THE END OF THE DAY WERE DEEMED TO BE INSPIRED BY GOD.**
    - FIRST PERSON TO USE TERM: JEROME – WHO TRANSLATED BIBLE INTO LATIN. (about 400 a.d.)
      - Included an Old Testament, New Testament (same 27 as ours), and 3 books he placed in a section called "apocrypha," which he meant were of questionable authority. These books were pre-Christ books that the Jews eventually determined were not Scripture.

- Traditionally people speak of the „apocryphal” books as those that the Catholic Bible includes but are not included in the protestant Bible. They are all before Christ.
- In Catholic Bible, in the Old Testament, there are seven books not included in the Jewish Scriptures or the Protestant Bible. Jews and Protestants would consider them apocryphal.

Tobit  
Judith  
1 & 2 Maccabes  
Wisdom  
Sirach  
Baruch

- Different versions of Bible have had slightly different books that were listed in a separate “apocryphal” section. For example, early versions of the KJV list all of the questionable books that are included in the Catholic OT but not in Jewish Scriptures in a section called “apocrypha.” (1611)

- HOWEVER, TO MAKE MATTERS MORE CONFUSING: Some today refer to books that almost made it into the NT as “apocryphal NT books.” There are also books that were written during the first couple of centuries of the church that sometimes were considered Scripture by some Christians. They are books like

- Didache
- Shepherd of Hermes
- Apocalypse of Peter
- SEVERAL others (about 19 altogether) that a significant Christian leader or group treated like Scripture.

THESE BOOKS ARE SOMETIMES TODAY CALLED

„APOCRYPHAL NT BOOKS” or some such. But they were never in an official section of any Bible as canonical or apocryphal.

<http://www.ntcanon.org/table.shtml>

BACK TO NEW TESTAMENT TIMES AND THE USE OF THE TERM „SCRIPTURES”. Besides the Jewish Scriptures, which “others”?

- 27 that we have plus about 19 more that some in early church times considered to be Scriptural...
  - Some of the 27 were disputed (2 Peter, Jude, Revelation)
  - Some of the 19 almost made it into the canon (didache, shepherd of Hermas). Most of these were written a generation or more later than the other NT books. At the end of the day they didn’t make the canon mostly for one of these two reasons:

- The authenticity of their authorship was greatly questioned (Thomas didn't really write the Gospel of Thomas),
- or they were good books but not written by the apostles or someone closely associated with an apostle who was attempting to record what he heard the apostle teach. So books like Didache and I Clement that almost made it are not in our canon because they were written by someone one (spiritual) generation away from the apostles, not by the apostles themselves.
- There were also what we call today Gnostic gospels (Gospel of Judas, Gospel of Philip) because they were written by Gnostic Christians to try to prove their particular doctrine. ***They were considered spurious and heretical from the beginning.*** They wouldn't even be considered among the 19 or so "apocryphal NT books" because the main body of the church considered them heretical from the beginning. Many of them were not written before 150 A.D., some of them well into the 200s A.D.

Key Moments in the history of the formation of the canon:

## 1. MARCION

- RESPONDING TO MARCION. First official lists were as early as 144 A.D. in response to Marcion's heresies (he was a Gnostic, of sorts)
  - Marcion believed Jewish Scriptures should be thrown out altogether
  - Included only one Gospel: Luke but "omitted the 1<sup>st</sup> two chapters which dealt with the human birth of Jesus" (see James North, 57)
  - Included ten of Paul's letters
  - SAID THESE WERE THE ONLY TRUE SCRIPTURES.
  - James North, p. 57: "This development [Marcion's list] led to the creation of numerous lists, as Christians in various places began the serious task of coming to a consensus as to which books were to be considered scriptural.

## 2. MURATORIAN FRAGMENT

- Muratorian Fragment – name given to fragment that dates to 170 A.D. Named after the man who found it just a couple hundred years ago. The beginning is gone, thus „fragment.
  - Lists all the books of NT except Hebrews, James, and the two letters from Peter. Includes the "revelation of Peter" but notes that it is not read in all the churches.
  - Outstanding, fascinating research on this fragment: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/muratorian.html>

### 3. SUMMARY OF EARLY CHURCH FATHERS (100-300 A.D.)

- ORIGEN'S LISTS. (184-254 A.D.) JAMES NORTH writes (57):  
“Origen, an important church leader in Alexandria, compiled lists from various Christian centers around the Mediterranean, and he was the first person to begin a systematic and comparative check to arrive at a consensus in the listing. One of his lists was the *homologoumena* [lit. “to speak the same”], those books accepted by all churches. The list included the four Gospels, Acts, Paul's thirteen, 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation. That is, all churches around the Mediterranean basin accepted these twenty-one books as scripture. His other list was the *antilegomena* – books that were accepted by some churches, but not by all. This list included Hebrews, II Peter, II and III John, James, Jude, Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, and the Gospel of the Hebrews.
- Gonzalez summarizes: Next to the Gospels, the book of Acts and the Pauline epistles enjoyed early recognition. Thus BY THE END OF THE SECOND CENTURY, the core of the canon was established: the four Gospels, Acts, and the Pauline epistles. On the shorter books that appear towards the end of the present canon, there was no consensus until a much later date; but there also was little debate. The book of Revelation, widely accepted by the third century, was questioned after the conversion of Constantine, for its words about the prevailing culture and the Empire seemed too harsh. It was in the second half of the fourth century that a complete consensus was achieved as to exactly which books ought to be included in the New Testament, and which ought not to be included.” (Gonzalez volume 1, 63, emphasis mine)

### 4. THE ISSUE SETTLED (for the most part) (300-400 A.D.)

- ATHANASIUS (367 A.D.) – powerful bishop of Alexandria – wrote to the surrounding churches that only certain books (the 27 we now have in our NT) should be read as Scripture. (from Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code) Insisted that other heretical books not be read.
- Various Regional Councils. OUR 27 RECOGNIZED AT A COUNCIL: Carthage, 397. (Only a regional council) “The Council of Nicaea [325] did not discuss the canon, but a council at Carthage in 397 did, and it came up with a list of 27 books – the very same as are in our New Testament today. The significance of this list is that it is not just the list of one person, but the decision of an entire assembly, an assembly which included the great Augustine in its number.” (North, 58). Some other regional councils did as well.
  - There was no official church council that decided these would be the 27. why? Most importantly, there wasn't a debate. Councils were only called to satisfy debates.

- VULGATE: (vulgate = “the common version”) In 382 Damasus, the Bishop of Rome, “commissioned Jerome, the leading biblical scholar of his day, to produce an acceptable Latin translation of the Bible from the several divergent translations then in use. His revised Latin translation of the Gospels was delivered to Damasus in 384.” <http://www.ntcanon.org/> (great site for quickly understanding NT canon issues.) We don’t have that 384 version, but all indications are that even in that first version, Jerome had the same 27 books of NT that we have today.
- o NOTE: Many Catholic sites will call Damasus “Pope” here. There is no Pope yet in the way we think of it today. You can call him Pope but only because a lot of bishops were called Pope. The Roman Catholics will try to say, “If you accept all 27 books of the NT, then you accept the authority of the Roman Catholic church because nobody agreed until the church decided which books would be in.” Not accurate.
  - Roman Catholic Church was not yet in existence.
  - There was almost universal agreement from the earliest days, though some current NT books were debated and some that didn’t make it almost did. (the ones that almost did are very consistent, doctrinally, with the ones we have)
  - IMPORTANT DISTINCTION: “The church” of the fourth century did not give us the canon of Scripture. The church merely acknowledged, using logical criteria, which books were inspired by God. (SEE NORTH, P. 58)

## 5. REOPENING THE DEBATE (1400s and 1500s)

- It was not until the Council of Florence (1439-43) that the See of Rome delivered for the first time a categorical opinion on the Scriptural canon. In consequence of the efforts of this Council to bring about reunion with the Eastern Orthodox Church, which sought support from the West against the Turks, who were nearing Constantinople, Pope Eugenius IV published a bull setting forth the doctrines of the unity of the Old and New Testament, the inspiration of the Scriptures, and a statement of their extent. In the list of 27 books of the New Testament there are 14 Pauline Epistles, that to the Hebrews being last, with the book of Acts coming immediately before the Revelation of John. The Epistle to the Laodiceans is not even mentioned. <http://www.ntcanon.org/closing-west.shtml>
- Martin Luther reopened the issue by questioning some decisions of the canon. Wasn’t sure about Jude, James for example. (James = an epistle of straw); rejected the “apocrypha”.
  - o NOTE: Protestants reject OT “apocrypha” – why?

- Not accepted by Jews
- The church from the beginning has debated those books. (Even Roman Catholics have debated them from the beginning)
- Best evidence is that they would not have been included in the “Scriptures” that Jesus referred to and apostles referred to.
- A couple of hints to apocryphal books in NT (Jude, for example)
- Jesus did not authenticate them by quoting from them.

### **CONCLUSIONS:**

Why should we trust the „canon we have?

- Written by eyewitnesses (and not just eyewitnesses but those to whom Jesus gave authority), or those closely associated with eyewitnesses
  - o Claims to be such
  - o Claims have been authenticated through close scrutiny
  - o CHURCH: Followers of Christ from beginning and throughout ages have trusted these books
- Remarkably preserved by God
- Remarkably consistent with itself (doctrinally consistent)
- Proven to have power to feed souls and change lives
- Exalts Jesus Christ