

The Canon of Scripture

What is it and where did it come from?

Canon – we refer to the books included in our Bible as the Canon

- The word canon comes from the root word “reed” which was used as a measuring rod and came to mean “standard.”
- As applied to Scripture, canon means “an officially accepted list of books.”
- The question is *what made the books acceptable and others not acceptable?*

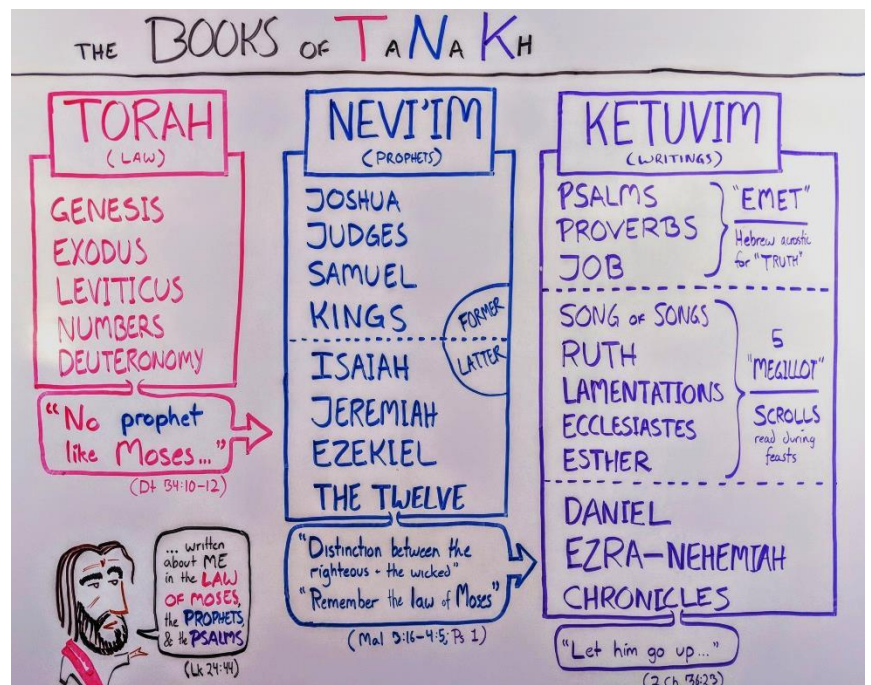
The Canon’s Guiding Principles

- **Was the book written by a prophet of God?**
If it was written by a spokesman of God, then it was the Word of God.
- **Was the book confirmed by acts of God?**
Often, miracles separated true prophets from false ones. Examples of true prophets: Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Miracles, by definition, are acts of God to confirm the Word of God given through a prophet of God to the people of God. They were signs that substantiated God’s message.
- **Did its message tell the truth about God?**
Church fathers maintained this policy: “If in doubt, throw it out.” This policy enhanced the validity of their discernment of the canonical books.
- **Does it come with the power of God?**
The early church leaders believed the Word of God was alive and active (as it remains today!), and thus would be a transforming force for edification and evangelism. In other words, if the message of a book did not have the power to change a person, then God was apparently not behind its message.
- **Was it accepted by the people of God?**
When a book was received, collected, read, and used by the people of God, it was regarded as canonical.

Old Testament Canon

- The Old Testament canon or the Hebrew Bible known as the “Tanakh” is the treaty document that God made with Israel.
- The Old Testament Canon is divided into 4 sections: **Law, History, Poetry and Prophets**

- *Note: these books are not arranged in chronological order, but rather by sections*
- *It is also interesting that the books in the Hebrew Bible do not exactly align with our English Old Testament. The OT has 39 books but the Hebrew Bible groups some of the books together and consists of 24 books grouped in 3 categories: Law (Torah), Prophets, and Writings.*



- There is evidence to suggest that the Hebrew canon was established well before the first century AD, possibly as early as the 4th century BC.
 - A major reason for this conclusion comes from the Jews themselves, who from the 4th century BC onward were convinced that “the voice of God had ceased to speak directly.”
 - In other words, the prophetic voice had been stilled. No word from God means no *new* Word of God. We know that Jesus often referred to the Old Testament; there is no evidence that He found fault with the canonicity of any Old Testament book.

- **THE CATHOLIC BIBLE (and the Old Testament)**
 - Includes 14 books considered non-canonical, known as the **Apocrypha** (*which means “secret”*).
 - Apocryphal books: *Tobit, Judith, Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Prayer of Azariah, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Manasseh, 1 & 2 Maccabees, 1 & 2 Esdras*
 - They are works of unknown authorship or doubtful origin.
 - Most were written between 250 BC and 50 AD.
 - The **Apocrypha** is included in the **Septuagint** (the Hebrew Bible that was translated into Greek around the 2nd century BC) and the Latin **Vulgate** (Jerome’s 4th century Bible translation that became the **Catholic Church’s official version in 1546**).
 - When Martin Luther translated the Bible into German in 1534, he moved the Apocryphal books to the end of the Old Testament, saying that though they were not equal to the Sacred Scriptures, they were still “useful and good for reading.”
 - Most Protestant Bibles later omitted the books entirely.
 - Jesus and the New Testament writers never quoted from the Apocrypha.
 - The Apocrypha is **rejected in the Christian Canon** for several reasons including some **unbiblical teachings** such as praying for the dead (II Maccabees 12:45-46), and God assisting Judith in a lie (Judith 9:10,13).
 - Some of what the Apocrypha says is true and correct, but at the same time, much of it is false and historically inaccurate. If you read these books, you have to treat them as interesting but fallible historical documents, not as the inspired, authoritative Word of God.

New Testament Canon

- The New Testament Canon consists of: **The Gospels, Church History, Letters and Prophecy.**
- Early Christians believed the apostles possessed the authority of Christ, and so their writings were received as the very words of Christ himself.
 - The apostles spoke with authority, but they always based their claims solely and directly upon their commission by Christ.
- Initially the NT books were collected because they were viewed as prophetic. The church accepted these books, and so collected and circulated them.
 - All the gospels and Acts were written down before the eye witnesses died.
 - Paul instructed the recipients of his letters to read them in the other churches (cf. Col 4:16).
- As heretical movements in the church arose (each with their own set of writings), the church needed to know which writings should and could be trusted and read in church services as authoritative.
 - These heretical movements and books were the source of the NT Apocrypha.
 - There are more than 30 NT Apocrypha books.
 - One thing to note about the NT Apocrypha is that these books are rejected as canonical by ALL believers.
 - Most of them were pseudonymously written, IE The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Mary, The Acts of Paul, The Acts of Peter, etc. in order to try and lend credence to their message.

- **The Muratorian Fragment** (the oldest known list of early-accepted books of the Bible) was written within 150 years of Jesus's death. It lists 22 of the 27 books that were eventually included.
- By the end of the 4th century, the Council of Carthage established the New Testament canon (397 AD).
 - The NT books that were finally included were recognized as canonical because they could be traced to an eyewitness (or near eyewitness) during the apostolic era.
 - This canon was later upheld in 1545 at the Council of Trent.
- **HOWEVER**, we should note that the simple answer for who decided which books should be placed in the New Testament canon is - *God did* (cf. John 14:26).
 - *The church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity, by his work of creation, and similarly he gave us the New Testament canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up* (J.I. Packer, *God Speaks To Man*, p. 81).

Why does all this matter?

- It's important to have faith in your Bible.
 - To KNOW where it came from and how, and that it's trustworthy.
- Why? Because people will ask you why you believe in an ancient, outdated book.
 - People will ask you why you believe the Bible, but do not believe in other books such as the writings of Joseph Smith (founder of Mormonism in the 1800s).
 - People will tell you that you're wasting your time reading the bible and going to church because it's all just based on made-up fairytales.
- Even though the bible consists of 66 books, written by over 40 different authors over a period of 1600 years, it is important to remember that it's basically a book about God and how to know Him. You can look at it as one continuous adventure and love story written by God to a people that He loves.
 - *The Bible is like a treasure map. The reader is the treasure hunter, and the treasure at the end...is Jesus.*

NOTES:

BlueLetterBible.org also has some excellent articles on the Canon and the Apocrypha.
 Josh McDowell has some good articles on the Canon and the Apocrypha at www.Josh.org.

HELPFUL RESOURCES:

Brake, Donald L. *A Visual History of the English Bible*; Baker Books, 2008.
 Bruce, F.F. *The Origin of the Bible*; Tyndale House Publishers, 1992.
 Ewert, David. *A General Introduction to the Bible: From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations*; Zondervan, 1990.
 Jones, Timothy Paul. *How We Got the Bible*, 6-Session DVD-Based Study, Hendrickson Publishers, 2015.