

A Light in the Darkness

THE DOCTRINE OF THE WORD OF GOD

Recap...

- **Canon** (ontological): the inspired Scriptures. This 'canon' existed as soon as Revelation was written.
- **Canon** (functional): the core apostolic writings that functioned as authoritative for the Christian community, even if the "edges" were fuzzy. This 'canon' existed by the mid-second century or before.
- **Canon** (epistemological): the writings that eventually gained consensus recognition and approval from the church. This 'canon' existed by the end of the fourth century.
- **Proposal: A Supplemented, Self-Authenticating Canon**
 - Apostolicity, Antiquity, Corporate Reception, Orthodoxy/Inerrancy

Which Books and When?

- The existence of diversity within the early church has caused some to conclude that there was no “real,” consensus and that our current canon is the result of the “winners” writing the history books, so to speak. But is recognizing inspired writing immune to disagreement? Should we have expected unanimous consensus. It seems not.
 - The Scriptures themselves warn of false teaching and teachers claiming authority in the church (2 Pet. 2:2; 1 Jn. 2:19).
 - We cannot deny the reality of spiritual forces opposing the church, increasing dissension.
 - Sin causes people to resist the Spirit and the words of Jesus
 - Not all groups or authors who claimed to be “the church” or even “Christians” were really part of it. Thus, it’s not entirely surprising what they considered to be Scripture might differ.
 - The Scriptures were written at various times and places and therefore were not circulated across the empire simultaneously; thus, some books would have been known and accepted in one part of the empire before others.

Which Books and When Cont...

- As early as the dawn of the second century, we have authors mentioning “the epistle of the blessed Apostle, Paul” (1 Clement), the “decrees” and “ordinances” of the apostles (Ignatius), calling certain New Testament verses “Scripture” (Polycarp, Eph. 4:26), validation of Mark’s Gospel as authoritative (Papias), the “memoirs of the Apostles (Justin Martyr) and copious quotations of the New Testament, particularly the Gospels and Epistles of Paul.
 - The apostolic fathers employed the New Testament writings more than the Old Testament writings, from five to fifty times more often! Additionally, “Citations of apocryphal gospels and of other books that were later excluded from the canon *do not begin to compete* with the frequency of citation of the basic core.”
- John Barton: “[It would be] mistaken to say that [by the early second century] ‘there was no Christian Scripture other than the Old Testament,’ for much of the core already had as high a status as it would ever have.

Which Books and When Cont...

- Irenaeus (c. 170-180)
 - Irenaeus’s influence on canonical recognition was quite significant. He quoted the New Testament more than the Old Testament (more than 1000x) and regarded it as Scripture. This included all four Gospels, all of Paul’s letter (minus Philemon), Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John and Revelation and *The Shepherd of Hermas*.
- The Muratorian Fragment (c. 180)
 - This is our earliest and first canonical “list.” It explicitly affirms 22 of our 27 NT books (all four Gospels, Acts, 13 of Paul’s epistles, 1 and 2 John, Jude, Revelation).
- Clement (c. 150-215)
 - Clement moved to Alexandria in the late second century to educate Christians and convert pagans. He knew and used 23 of the 27 books of the NT. The only books not mentioned in his writings are Philemon, James, 2 Peter and 3 John, and it isn’t clear he knew of them.

Which Books and When Cont...

– Origen (c. 185-254)

- Clearly distinguished between books that everyone viewed as Scripture vs. disputed books. Among the clearly accepted he mentions all four Gospels, 14 letters of Paul (including Hebrews given that he said only God knows its author), Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation. He listed as disputed books James, 2 and 3 John, Jude and 2 Peter, but Origen personally accepted each of them.

– Eusebius (c. 280-340)

- Eusebius was the greatest historian of the early church and wrote a history of the first few hundred years, in addition to attending the Council of Nicaea in 325. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, he indicates three categories into which the church classified the early Christian writings.
 - Accepted: the four Gospels, Acts, 14 of Paul's letters (including Hebrews), 1 Peter, 1 John and "if it is thought proper," Revelation.
 - Disputed: James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John.
 - Spurious: *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Acts of Paul*, *the Apocalypse of Peter*, *The Teachers of the Apostles*, *The Gospel of the Hebrews* and "if it is thought proper," Revelation.

Which Books and When Cont...

- Athanasius (c. 298-373)
 - The first list we find that includes *exactly* our NT canon is Athanasius's Festal Easter Letter in 367.
 - Athanasius: “These are the sources of salvation, for the thirsty may drink deeply of the words to be found here. In these alone is the doctrine of piety recorded. Let no one add to them or take anything away from them.”
- Synod of Hippo (393) and Synod of Carthage (397)
 - Deliberations from both these synods led to confirmation of the books contained within Athanasius's list. Augustine's argument for “no more and no less” than our 27-book NT carried the day. Jerome also held to the 27 book NT canon, translated it into Latin and along with the OT, and produced what came to be the “Bible” of the Western Church (i.e., the Latin Vulgate). Augustine and Jerome were both present at both synods.
- Council of Nicaea? (325)
 - Contrary to an incredible amount of popular belief, there is not a shred of historical evidence to suggest the canon was decided, agreed upon *or even discussed* at the Council of Nicaea, which was primarily concerned with the relationship between, and the nature of, the Father and the Son.

The Old Testament Canon

- The “Standard” Theory
 - The OT was formed in three stages, the first being the Pentateuch, which was “canonized” after the Book of the Law was found in the Temple during the reign of Josiah (2 Kgs. 22:11-13). This happened mid-5th century BC, and the key figure in canonizing these books was Ezra.
 - Two centuries later, the Prophets were added to the canon
 - Finally, the Writings (the Kethubim/Hagiographa) were then added/finalized at the Council of Jamnia in 90 AD.
 - While the standard theory was firmly entrenched among biblical scholars until the end of the 19th century, it has fallen on hard times, primarily because although many scholars still agree with the basic story about the formation of the first two sections, almost no one believes the Writings were closed at Jamnia in 90 AD.
 - From all available evidence, though there was discussion of some disputed books at Jamnia, there were no decisions made about which books were or weren’t part of the Writings/canon. Even more, multiple scholars have argued that there wasn’t a “Council” of Jamnia at all.

The Old Testament Canon

– An Evangelical Sketch

- The Ten Commandments are the first piece of canonical literature received (Ex. 20). To this, more information was added/revealed, which later came to be known as “The Book of the Covenant” (Ex. 24:3ff). These books were authoritative and binding for Israel.
- The Prophets were then composed and had recognized canonical status within the Jewish community no later than 200 BC.
- The Writings were composed last and considered canonical no later than 180-114 BC.
- It’s important to remember that the date estimates suggested for each section gaining canonical status in the Jewish community is different from when they were *written*.

Which Books?

- As early as Ex. 31:18, we have the written revelation of God (directly) and then written by Moses (e.g., Lev. 1:1; 4:1; 5:14; 6:1).
 - The King of Israel was specifically instructed to *write in a book* his own copy of the law by which to govern (Deut. 17:18).
 - The book of the law is clearly viewed as canonical prior to 2 Kgs. 22:11-13; it was kept in the temple *because* it was viewed as authoritative in a special way.
- The prophets, speaking the “word of the Lord” were considered authoritative as they spoke, and later after their prophecies were written down and collected, the “Prophets” were viewed canonically.
 - In addition to writing a letter to Babylonian captives, Jeremiah starts with “Thus says the Lord,” indicating what he was writing was directly from God. In Daniel 9:2, Daniel reads Jeremiah’s prophecy and considers it “the word of the Lord to Jeremiah.”
- The Writings are the section about which we have the least amount of clarity in terms of timing/canonization, but all evidence suggests the writings were considered canon prior to the ministry of Jesus.

Which Books?

- The New Testament *quotes* all but eight of the OT books (Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Ezra, Nehemiah, Obadiah, Nahum and Zephaniah) and considers them “the Scriptures” (John 7:38; Acts 8:32; Rom. 4:3,) the “Sacred Writings” (2 Tim 3:15), and the “Holy Scriptures (Matt 21:42; John 5:29; Acts 17:11).
 - Repeatedly, the NT references the Law and the Prophets as authoritative (Lk. 16:16; Matt. 22:40).
 - In Luke 24:44, Jesus clearly refers to the Old Testament canon, likely (but not certainly) conceived of as tri-partite (depending on how one understands Jesus’s use of “the psalms”).
 - Jesus hints at the shape and bookends of the OT in both Luke 11:51 and Matt. 23:35 while referring to OT martyrs:
 - Matt 23:35: “Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.”

Which Books?

- The early, extra-biblical testimony of Josephus *seems* to describe the Jewish canon as closed at 22 books. He also seems to affirm a tri-partite division: the “books of Moses,” “the prophets subsequent to Moses” and “four books contain[ing] hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.”
 - Josephus’s number of 22 was confirmed by Jerome and Origen and exactly matches our OT, keeping in mind that they “counted” books differently. Origen breaks it down accordingly:
 - (1-5) Five Books of Moses, (6) Joshua, (7) Judges-Ruth, (8) 1-2 Sam, (9) 1-2 Kings, (10) Chronicles, (11) Ezra-Nehemiah, (12) Psalms, (13) Proverbs, (14) Ecclesiastes, (15) Song of Solomon, (16) Isaiah, (17) Jeremiah-Lamentations, (18) Daniel, (19) Ezekiel, (20) Job, (21) Esther, and (22) (*the Book of the Twelve*).

What About the Apocrypha?

- The First Book of Esdras (also known as Third Esdras)
- The Second Book of Esdras (also known as Fourth Esdras)
- Tobit
- Judith
- Additions to the Book of Esther
- The Wisdom of Solomon
- Ecclesiasticus (or the Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach)
- Baruch
- The Letter of Jeremiah
- The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Women
- Susanna
- Bel and the Dragon
- The Prayer of Manasseh
- The First Book of Maccabees
- The Second Book of Maccabees

What About the Apocrypha Cont...

- The Catholic Church recognizes all but three of these OT apocryphal works as canonical (omitting 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Mannaseh). Both OT and NT apocryphal works not considered canonical are also commonly referred to as pseudepigraphal (“false attribution”).
 - Also referred to as the deuterocanonical (“second canon”) books (referring to them as the Apocrypha is usually reserved for Protestants), the Catholic Church does not (generally) maintain that these works were an original part of the OT Scriptures; instead, these writings authoritatively extend the 22-book Jewish canon to a “longer canon.”
 - Augustine’s role in the canonization of the Apocrypha cannot be overstated. Interestingly, the same Synods of Hippo and Carthage that both Jerome and the Augustine attended and which both affirmed the NT canon of Athanasius’s *Festal Easter Letter*, also affirmed the deuterocanonical books—primarily under the influence of Augustine.
 - Jerome, on the other hand, refused to accept them because they were not part of the Hebrew canon.

What About the Apocrypha Cont...

- At the end of the day, there are theological, historical and perhaps even ethical objections to the teaching of the deuterocanonical books, for which Catholic apologists, unsurprisingly, have responses.
 - The *chief* concern in terms of overall consistency with the Bible is apocryphal teaching on the role of works (alms) in atonement (Tobit 4:10-11; 12:9) and the possibility of post-mortem atonement (2 Maccabees 12:39-46). There is also the well-known Nebuchadnezzar error in Judith 1, but Catholic theologians and apologists have harmonization strategies ready.
 - Ultimately, we won't spend a great deal of time discussing why the Apocrypha are not canonical here, because ultimately, their canonical status is an issue of authority, which we'll address in a later module. Catholics believe the Apocryphal books are Scripture because the Church has infallibly and authoritatively decreed them to be so.