

THE CANON

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THE CONCEPT OF CANON

- At the heart of Christianity is the belief that God has a plan for human history that he is progressively working out.
- God works his plan out through covenants, which are often accompanied by written documents explaining it
- When God acts in significant ways to advance this plan, he also inspires certain people to write down authoritatively the meaning, significance, and implications of what God has done
- Canon: the collection of the inspired and authoritative documents regarded as Scripture by the early church

THE CONCEPT OF CANON

The term canon can be used in three different ways:

- **Exclusive:** the focus is on the final reception the canon, usually with an emphasis on an official declaration by the church; thus the church “creates/establishes” the canon
- **Functional:** focus is on when the books in the canon functioned as authoritative Scripture for the church; thus the church “recognizes” an already existing canon
- **Ontological:** focus is on the nature of the books themselves; thus the canon exists the moment these books came into existence

THE FORMATION OF THE OT CANON

- The Torah was considered authoritative from its origins, since it came from Moses and was the foundation of God’s covenant with Israel
- The composition and preservation of the Prophets is more complex and uncertain
- The composition and preservation of the Writings is also complex and uncertain
- Some scholars suggest Ezra was the individual who gave the Hebrew canon its final form and shape
- Many scholars point to the Council of Jamnia (late first/early second century AD) as the official closing/recognition of the OT canon, but this is problematic

THE SHAPE OF THE OT CANON

- By the time of the first century A.D. the Jews had divided the canon into three broad sections

THE SHAPE OF THE OT CANON

for what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have the same force when it is in fact rendered in another language. And not only in this case, but also in the case of the Law itself and the Prophets and the rest of the books the difference is not small when these are expressed in their own language.

Sirach Prologue 1:24-25

(second century BC)

THE SHAPE OF THE OT CANON

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

Luke 24:44

(first century AD)

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And in every house there is a sacred shrine which is called the holy place, and the monastery in which they retire by themselves and perform all the mysteries of a holy life, bringing in nothing, neither meat, nor drink, nor anything else which is indispensable towards supplying the necessities of the body, but studying in that place the laws and the sacred oracles of God enunciated by the holy prophets, and hymns, and psalms, and all kinds of other things by reason of which knowledge and piety are increased and brought to perfection.

Philo, On The Contemplative Life 1:25

(first century AD)

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In a scroll of the Law, the space of two finger-breadths must be left (between columns), but in scrolls of the Prophets and in scrolls of the Fifts the space of one thumb-breadth. In the lower margin of a scroll of the Law the space of hand-breadth is left, and in the upper margin two-thirds of a hand-breadth, but in the scrolls of the Prophets and the Fifts three finger-breadths in the lower margin and two finger-breadths in the upper.

Sepher Torah 2:4
(fourth century AD?)

THE SHAPE OF THE OT CANON

- By the time of the first century A.D. the Jews had divided the canon into three broad sections
- These three divisions came to be known as the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Neviim), and the Writings (Ketuvim). = TaNaK
- What is included in each of these divisions does not always line up with our expectations based on how our English Bible OT is organized
- Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
- Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, the Twelve
- Writings: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles

THE SHAPE OF THE OT CANON

- Jesus himself seems to indicate that the OT stretched from Genesis to Chronicles (Matt 23:35; see Gen 4:3-15 and 2 Chron 24:19-22)

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“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, 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”

Matthew 23:34-35

THE SHAPE OF THE OT CANON

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him

Genesis 4:8

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Now after the death of Jehoiada the princes of Judah came and paid homage to the king. Then the king listened to them. And they abandoned the house of the LORD, the God of their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols. And wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this guilt of theirs. Yet he sent prophets among them to bring them back to the LORD. These testified against them, but they would not pay attention. Then the Spirit of God clothed Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, and he stood above the people, and said to them, "Thus says God, 'Why do you break the commandments of the LORD, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, he has forsaken you.'" But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the LORD

2 Chronicles 24:17-21

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- Jesus himself seems to indicate that the OT stretched from Genesis to Chronicles (Matt 23:35; see Gen 4:3-15 and 2 Chr 24:19-22)
- The NT authors never quote from a non-canonical book and refer to it as Scripture
- Conclusion → by the time of Jesus the Hebrew canon of Scripture was essentially established

RESOURCES ON THE OT CANON

- Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon and the New Testament Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1985).
- Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 15; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003)

THE FORMATION OF THE NT CANON

- Although recognizing how the church came to recognize the books of the NT canon and the origins of those books, at the end of the day the canon is *self-authenticating*.
- Scripture itself provides grounds for considering external data such the apostolicity of the books and the testimony of the church.
- But the external evidence should not be treated as an “independent” or “neutral” test to decide the content and scope of the canon.

THE FORMATION OF THE NT CANON

“In essence, to say that the canon is self-authenticating is simply to recognize that one cannot authenticate the canon without appealing to the canon. It sets the terms for its own validation and investigation. A self-authenticating canon is not just a canon that claims to have authority, but one that guides and determines how that authority is to be established.”

Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 91.

THE FORMATION OF THE NT CANON

“The canon, as God’s Word, is not just true, but the criterion of truth. It is an *ultimate* authority. So how do we offer an account of how we know that an ultimate authority is in fact an ultimate authority? If we try to validate an ultimate authority by appealing to some other authority, then we have just shown that it is not really the ultimate authority. Thus, for ultimate authorities to be ultimate authorities, they have to be the standard for their own authentication. You cannot account for them without using them.”

Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 91.

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Attributes of Canonicity & the Holy Spirit

- **Divine Qualities:** the book bears the “imprint” of the Spirit, bearing the qualities and characteristics of a book from God (e.g., beauty, efficacy, harmony).
- **Apostolic Origins:** the book is linked to the apostles, bearing their authoritative message
- **Reception by the Corporate Church:** church as a whole recognizes the book as coming from God
- **Work of the Holy Spirit:** the Holy Spirit not only superintends the process but enables believers to recognize these books as canonical

THE FORMATION OF THE NT CANON

Historical Development of the NT Canon

- The NT itself reveals a “canonical consciousness”

THE FORMATION OF THE NT CANON

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures

2 Peter 3:15-16

THE FORMATION OF THE NT CANON

For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

1 Timothy 5:18

THE FORMATION OF THE NT CANON

This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles

2 Peter 3:1-2

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And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea

Colossians 4:16

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching

I Timothy 4:13

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Historical Development of the NT Canon

- The NT itself reveals a “canonical consciousness”
- Paul’s letters were collected at the time of his death and came to be circulated as a collection by the end of the first century
- The four canonical Gospels were collected and circulated together by the early second century
- By the middle of the second century the core of the NT canon (Gospels, Paul’s letters, Acts, I Peter, I John, maybe others) was recognized and received

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Historical Development of the NT Canon

- Muratorian Fragment (ca. 180 AD) lists 22 or 23 of 27 NT books (minus Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, maybe 3 John)
- Eusebius (early 4th century) distinguishes books into recognized (universally accepted), disputed (canonical but not w/o some debate), rejected (theologically orthodox but not canonical), and heretical
- Athanasius' Festal Letter (367 AD): first complete listing of exact 27 books in NT canon

THE SHAPE OF THE NT CANON

- Just as there was an intentional ordering of the OT canonical books, so too there is an intentional ordering to the NT canonical books
- **Gospels:** like the Torah in the OT, the four Gospels establish the narrative foundation of God's creation of a new people through Jesus Christ
- **Acts:** presents the historical development of the early church through the preaching of the apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit
- **Epistles:** snapshots into the life of the early churches providing a guide for doctrine and practice
- **Revelation:** the climactic end to human history with God's people living in a new heavens and new earth where all of God's promises have been completely fulfilled

RESOURCES ON THE NT CANON

- David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).
- Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013).
- Stanley E. Porter, *How We Got the New Testament: Text, Transmission, and Translation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).