

The Canonization of Scriptures / The What? (Part 2)

A. In answering the question is the Bible text reliable, we can turn our attentions to the canonization of the scriptures to help find the answer.

B. To begin we must understand what we mean when we speak of the canon.

1. The term *kanon* (canon) had a literal meaning of rod, ruler, staff, or a measuring rod. This literal concept provided the basis for a later extended use of the word meaning “standard,” “norm.”
2. From the literal “ruler,” the word was extended to mean a rule or standard for anything. In early Christian usage, it came to mean rule of faith, normative writings, or authoritative Scripture.
3. The word *kanon* was applied to the Bible in both an active and a passive sense: one in which it was the canon or standard, and the other in which it was canonized or recognized to be canonical by the church.

C. In regards to the Old Testament scriptures, the ancient Jews did not use the word *kaneh* (canon) in reference to their ancient writings. Nevertheless, several other phrases or concepts used by the Jews are equivalent.

1. Sacred writings:

- a. An inspired or canonical writing was considered sacred and was kept by the Ark of the Covenant ([Deut. 31:24-26](#)).
- b. After the temple was built, the sacred writings were kept in the Temple ([2Kings 22:8](#)).
- c. This special attention and reverence paid to the Jewish Scriptures is tantamount to saying that they were considered canonical.

2. Authoritative writings:

- a. Another concept that is synonymous with canonicity is “authority.”
- b. The rulers of Israel were to be subject to the authority of the Scriptures, ([Deut. 17:18-19](#)).
- c. This same concept is seen with Joshua, ([Josh. 1:8](#)).

3. Prophetic writings:

- a. [Josephus in his *Contra Apion* 1.8](#) says: “from Artaxerxes until our time

everything has been recorded, but has not been deemed worthy of like credit with what preceded, because the exact succession of the prophets ceased.

But what faith we have placed in our own writings is evident by our conduct; for though so long a time is now passed, no one has dared to add anything to them, or take anything from them, or to alter anything in them.

b. **The statement of the Talmud supports this. Seder Olam Rabba 30** says, “Up to this point [the time of Alexander the Great] the prophets prophesied through the Holy Spirit; from this time onward incline thine ear and listen to the sayings of the wise.”

c. **Roger Beckwith notes the following rabbinical statements** on the cessation of prophecy:

1). ‘With the death of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi the latter prophets, the Holy Spirit ceased out of Israel’ (Tos. Sotah 13.2: baraita in Bab. Yoma 9b, Bab. Sotah 48b and Bab. Sanhedrin 11a).

2). ‘Rab Samuel bar Inia said, in the name of Rab Aha, “The Second Temple lacked five things which the First Temple possessed, namely, the fire, the ark, the Urim and Thummim, the oil of anointing and the Holy Spirit [of prophecy]” ‘ (Jer. Taanith 2.1; Jer. Makkoth 2.4-8; Bab. Yoma 21b).

e. What this shows is that only the books written from Moses to Malachi, in the succession of Hebrew prophets, were considered to be canonical.

f. **Beckwith notes**, “an era is in view, which is variously described as the death of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the end of the empire of the Persians, the destruction of the First Temple or the transition from the First temple to the Second.”

g. So then, if a book were written after the prophetic period, it was not considered canonical. If it were written within the prophetic period, in the succession of the Hebrew prophets, it was canonical.

h. In brief, what were later called canonical writings were by the Jews considered to be those sacred and authoritative writings of the Hebrew prophets from Moses to Malachi. So sacred were these holy writings that they were preserved by the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple. The Hebrew canon, then, was that collection of writings which, because they possessed divine inspiration and authority, were the norm or rule for the believer’s faith and conduct.

D. One question that might be asked is “How was canonicity determined?”

1. In a real sense, **Christ is the key to the inspiration and canonization of the Scriptures.**

a. It was He who confirmed the inspiration of the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament.

1) In **Mark 7:5-13** Jesus refutes the traditions of the Jews.

2) In doing this He upholds the OT as canon.

b. Jesus also promised that the Holy Spirit would direct the apostles into all the truth. The fulfillment of that promise resulted in the writing and collection of the New Testament, **John 16:12-15** Being from the Holy Spirit it would also be considered canon.

2. **Carl F.H. Henry** writes: Jesus altered the prevailing Jewish view of the Scripture in several ways: (1) He subjected the authority of tradition to the superior and normative authority of the Old Testament; (2) He emphasized that He Himself fulfills the messianic promise of the inspired writings; (3) He claimed for Himself an authority not below that of the Old Testament and definitively expounded the inner significance of the Law; (4) he inaugurated the new covenant escalating the Holy Spirit’s moral power as an internal reality; (5) He committed his apostles to the enlargement and completion of the Old Testament canon through their proclamation of the Spirit-given interpretation of his life and work. At the same time He identified Himself wholly with the revelational authority of Moses and the prophets - that is, with the Old Testament as an inspired literary canon - insisting that Scripture has sacred, authoritative and permanent validity, and that the revealed truth of God is conveyed in its teachings.

3. **Precisely speaking, canonicity is determined by God.** In other words, the reason there are only sixty-six books in the canon is that God inspired only that many. Only sixty-six books were found to have the stamp of divine authority, because God only stamped that many, or invested that number with authority for faith and practice.

4. **Some other thoughts** on how canonicity was determined.

a. *A book is valuable because it is canonical.* A given book is not canonical because it was found to be valuable. Rather, it was found to be valuable because it was determined to be canonical by God. In other words, **a book is not inspired because it is inspiring; it is inspiring because it is inspired**

b. *A book is canonical because it is inspired.* Edward J. Young presents the correct view, that inspiration determines canonicity, as he writes, **“When the word of God was written it became Scripture and, inasmuch as it had been spoken by God, possessed absolute authority. Since it was the Word of God, it was canonical. That which determines the canonicity of a book therefore, is the fact that the book is inspired by God.**

Hence a distinction is properly made between the authority which the Old Testament possesses as divinely inspired, and the recognition of that authority on the part of Israel.”

E. Summary

1. The history of the word canon indicates a development from a literal rod or ruler to the concept of a standard for something.
2. Subsequently the word was applied to the rule of faith, that is, the normative writings or authoritative Scriptures, which were the standard of faith and practice.
3. The biblical view is that inspiration determines canonicity; a book is valuable because it is inspired, and not inspired because men found it valuable.
4. Canonicity is determined by God, not by the people of God.
5. The simple answer to “Why are there only these books in the Bible?” is that God inspired only these and no more. If God had given more books through more prophets, then there would be a larger canon.
6. Because propheticity determines canonicity, only prophetic books can be canonical.
7. Furthermore, it is probable that in God’s providence He has preserved all the prophetic books.
8. If so, then not only are all canonical books prophetic, but all prophetic books are canonical.
9. As Josh McDowell says, “One thing to keep in mind is that the church did not create the canon or books included in what we call Scripture. Instead, the church recognized the books that were inspired from their inception. They were inspired by God when written.”