

The Process of the Canon

Interpreting the Bible: Hermeneutics

The canon is the list of “authoritative” books that make up the Bible. These are the books that are recognized as being divinely inspired—human authors who were “**moved by the Spirit and they spoke form God**” (2 Peter 1:21).

The word “canon” literally means “measuring stick” . The idea is that there was a way to “measure” whether or not a particular writing is truly the Word of God. Based on Jude 1:3, the canon of Scripture has been settled for all time, and nothing can be added or taken from our Bible.

The process of “canon” differ between the Old and New Testaments.

The Old Testament

There is little historical data detailing the formation of the O.T. canon. The early books of the O.T. were passed on both orally and in written word.

The O.T. was written over a timespan of a period of over 1000 years in two languages, Hebrew and Aramaic by writers spanning three continents. Guided by the Holy Spirit some 40 writers penned the books of the O.T.

Unlike other examples of ancient literature in which early manuscripts are exceedingly rare, there are thousands of manuscripts that attest to the accuracy and reliability of the O.T. The prophet Isaiah declared **The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever** (Is. 40:8).

The Soferim

Beginning around 500BC, a class of scholars called Soferim were responsible for the laborious task of hand copying the holy manuscripts. These ancient scribes recognized the Scriptures to be the authoritative word. These scribes reverently approached the copying of the Scriptures with meticulous painstaking care.

It was the Soferim that began the process of identifying the O.T. canon. This group were considered experts in Mosaic Law and the application of Scripture to daily life. Over time, the traditional duties of the Soferim were taken over by a group of conservative scholars known as the Pharisees.

The Septuagint

As Greek became the predominant language throughout the world, a group of 70 or 72 scholars began translating the Jewish Bible into Greek during the third century BC known as the Septuagint (LXX—a reference to the number of scholars involved in translation). The Septuagint was highly regarded for its accuracy by the Jewish religious establishment.

The Testimony of Flavious Josephus

As to the authenticity and credibility of the ancient Hebrew Bible, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote, *“We have but twenty-two [books] containing the history of all time, books that are justly believed in; and of these, five are the books of Moses, which comprise the law and earliest traditions from the creation of mankind down to his death. From the death of Moses to the reign of Artaxerxes, King of Persia, the successor of Xerxes, the prophets who succeeded Moses wrote the history of the events that occurred in their own time, in thirteen books. The remaining four documents comprise hymns to God and practical precepts to men”* (Against Apion, Vol. 1, in Josephus, Complete Works, Kregel, 1960, p. 8).

While Josephus mentions twenty-two books that complete the Old Testament canon, other versions of the Hebrew Bible list twenty-four books, and our modern Bibles contain thirty-nine Old Testament books. The apparent discrepancy as to the number of books in the Old Testament canon is, in fact, no discrepancy at all.

The difference is in how the books were divided. For example, Josephus joined Ruth to Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah. Based on the testimony of Josephus, we may again conclude the canon of the Old Testament had long been settled in the minds of respected Jewish scholars.

Scribal Concerns

- the reputation of each book’s human author
- doctrines and statements within a given manuscript that conflict with the clear teachings of established biblical writings
- historical inaccuracies and/or spurious prophetic utterances that would cast a shadow of doubt on a manuscript
- a book’s widespread acceptance or rejection by respected scholars

The New Testament

The New Testament is in many ways has a clearer and more precise system of authenticating the canon.

It is important to note that church leadership did not decide which books to include in the canon as much as they attempted to discover which books God had actually given to the church and should therefore be included. When attempting to determine which books were inspired and authoritative (books that should be included in the canon), the early church had three primary requirements:

- **Apostolic Authority:** Christ gave His apostles the task of preserving His teaching and taking it to all the world. For a book to be included in the canon, it had to be linked to an apostle or to someone who had seen the risen Jesus and had heard His teaching in person.

Some of the books were written by apostles directly: Matthew, John, and Peter all wrote books included in the canon. The Gospel According to Mark is said to have been based on the preaching of Peter. Luke wrote Luke and Acts based on eyewitness interviews and firsthand documents (Luke 1:1–4). He was also a traveling companion of the apostle Paul and experienced many of the events in Acts firsthand.

James and Jude were written by the half-brothers of Jesus and were not believers during Jesus' lifetime. However, Jesus appeared to his brother James after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7), and he became a believer. Such an appearance is not reported for Jude, but it can be safely assumed that he had heard Jesus' teaching and that something spectacular made him change his mind about Jesus—most likely a post-resurrection appearance. Jesus appeared to Paul directly and commissioned him to be an apostle.

There were other books that may have been helpful to Christians, but, if they did not have an apostolic connection, they were rejected as non-canonical. Some books were written in the name of an apostle, but, if it was evident he did not actually write it, that book was rejected.

- **Orthodox Doctrine:** There were many early documents that claimed to teach Christian doctrine but were in error. Much of the New Testament was written to combat these errors. Any document that contradicted the accepted teaching of the apostles was rejected. The apostles' teaching was transmitted orally for years before the New Testament as we know it existed. Oral transmission within cultures that practice it has been shown to be very accurate—not like the “telephone game” to which it is often compared.

- **Broad-Based Acceptance:** There were a number of other books that may have been helpful and doctrinally correct and were used by portions of the church in various locations. However, to be considered canonical, a book had to have broad-based acceptance and recognition of its authoritative nature across the Christian world. Letters written by Paul to churches in Asia Minor were saved, copied, and circulated all over the civilized world, and Christians all over the world

recognized their authoritative nature. This is what we would expect if God was actually involved in the process of deciding the canon.

As these tests of authenticity were applied, 27 books began to emerge. For a while there were some doubts or disputes about a book here or there, but the 27 books of the New Testament that are accepted by Christians today were the ones that emerged as a result of the application of the above guidelines. As this view of the canon emerged, various church councils and synods gave formal acknowledgment of ***what the church had organically come to recognize.***

The Major Councils

The Synod of Laodicea (363) forbade the use of several non-canonical books. A formal list of canonical books was not given, but the difference between the two kinds of books was obviously evident, and none of the forbidden books were later accepted as canonical.

The Council of Hippo (393) stated that the 27 books in the New Testament were canonical.

The Synod of Carthage (397) stated that only canonical books should be read in the churches, and it listed the 27 books of the New Testament.

The Council of Carthage (419) reaffirmed the existing canon.

What About Mark 16:

The very last part of the Gospel of Mark has been a controversial passage for almost as long as the church has been in existence. The question is whether that portion of the Gospel, specifically, Mark 16:9–20, should be included as part of Mark, or if the Gospel should end with verse 8. Many scholars, from all theological persuasions, consider Mark 16:9–20 to be a spurious addition to Mark's Gospel.

If the number of later Greek manuscripts containing Mark 16:9–20 were the only factor, then the passage would be confirmed as genuine. But there are other factors. One that cannot be ignored is the evidence from other manuscripts.

Two of the oldest and most respected manuscripts, the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, do not contain the longer ending to the Gospel of Mark. Both of those ancient Greek manuscripts end at Mark 16:8. They are given credence because, the older the manuscript, the closer it is to the original autographs. The fewer generations of copies, the fewer opportunities for deviation, and thus an older manuscript can be assumed to be more accurate than a newer one. Since the oldest manuscripts do not contain Mark 16:9–20, many scholars doubt that these verses were in the original Gospel of Mark.

In addition to the commonly accepted wording of Mark 16:9–20, there exist two other endings to the book of Mark found among ancient manuscripts. This one is translated as an optional ending and included (in brackets) in the New American Standard Bible:

“And they promptly reported all these instructions to Peter and his companions. And after that, Jesus Himself also sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.”

And this passage is found in various other manuscripts:

“This age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who does not allow the truth and power of God to prevail over the unclean things of the spirits. Therefore reveal your righteousness now—thus they spoke to Christ. And Christ replied to them, The term of years of Satan’s power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near. And for those who have sinned I was handed over to death, that they may return to the truth and sin no more, in order that they may inherit the spiritual and incorruptible glory of righteousness that is in heaven.”

We should also consider the testimony of the ancient church leaders. Some early church fathers were aware of the long ending of the Gospel of Mark and even quoted from it. However, in the fourth century, two scholars who were aware of the long ending, Eusebius and Jerome, reported that nearly all the known Greek manuscripts ended with Mark 16:8.

Then there is internal evidence against the genuineness of Mark 16:9–20. Consider the transition between verses 8 and 9:

8 So they [the women] went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

9 Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons.

We can make four points here:

1) The transition is abrupt, and the two sections are disjointed. The subject of the narrative was the discovery of the empty tomb by the women, told from the women’s perspective. Suddenly, the focus shifts to Jesus and one woman, Mary Magdalene.

2) The word now at the beginning of verse 9 is a conjunction in the Greek. It is akin to saying, “but,” “and,” “therefore,” or “on the other hand.” The point is that now should link what comes next with what came before. It doesn’t, but only serves as a clumsy transition between verses 8 and 9.

3) The Greek participle translated “having risen” in verse 9 is masculine and should be referring to Jesus, but Jesus is not mentioned in the previous verse. (Some translations add the word Jesus to verse 9 for clarity, but the name is not in the original.) If Mark wrote verse 9 and placed it after verse 8, he was guilty of sloppy grammar and illogical sentence construction.

4) Verse 9 seems to introduce Mary Magdalene as if for the first time. But Mark had already mentioned her three times previously in his Gospel (Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1).

Beyond what has been shared already is the consideration of the unique vocabulary of Mark 16:9–20. **These last verses certainly don’t read like Mark’s.** There are eighteen words in this section that are never used anywhere else by Mark. For example, the title “Lord Jesus,” used in verse 19, is not found anywhere else in Mark. Other words unique to this section of Mark include *apisteó* (“disbelieve”), *blaptó* (“hurt”), *theaomai* (“behold, look”), and *husteron* (“afterwards, later”). Another word, *thanasimon* (“deadly”) is found nowhere else in the entire New Testament. The same can be said of the expression in verse 10, *toís met’ aftoú genoménois* (“those having been with Him”), referring to the disciples: nowhere else in the Bible is this wording applied to the disciples.

Also, the reference to signs in Mark 16:17–18 is unique. This is the only post-resurrection account in the Gospels of a discussion of picking up serpents, speaking in tongues, casting out demons, drinking poison, or laying hands on the sick. Of course, these signs were demonstrated during the apostolic age, so verses 17 and 18 don’t contradict any biblical doctrine, per se. But questions persist about whether Jesus actually said this. Because of the difficulties surrounding Mark 16:9–20, it is unwise to base a doctrine solely on what is found in this section of Mark.

Most likely, the long ending to the book of Mark represents an attempt by an ancient, anonymous someone to provide a more “satisfactory” ending. In reality, ending the book with verse 8 is entirely consistent with the rest of Mark’s narrative. Amazement at the Lord Jesus is a theme in Mark:

- “They were amazed at his teaching” (Mark 1:22)
- “They were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves” (Mark 1:27)
- “He healed the paralytic, and they were all amazed and were glorifying God saying, ‘We’ve never seen anything like this’” (Mark 2:12)