

SCRIPTURAL CANONS

Eusebius [c. AD 260-339]: “Before the persecution of my day, the message given through Christ to the world of reverence to God was accorded honor and freedom by all men, Greeks and non-Greeks alike. Rulers granted our people favors and even permitted them to govern provinces, while freeing them from the agonizing issue of [pagan] sacrifice. Emperors allowed members of their own households – wives, children, and servants – to practice the true faith openly. All governors honored the church leaders, mass meetings gathered in every city, and congregations worshiped in new, spacious churches that replaced the old.

But greater freedom brought with it arrogance and sloth. We began envying and attacking one another, making war on ourselves with weapons formed from words. Church leaders attacked church leaders and laymen formed factions against laymen, while unspeakable hypocrisy and pretense reached their evil limit. Those who were supposed to be pastors, unrestrained by the fear of God, quarreled bitterly with one another and only added to the strife, threats, jealousy, and hate, frantically claiming the tyrannical power they craved. *[Then it was that the Lord in his anger humiliated his daughter Zion and threw down from heaven the glory of Israel.]*”

Canonicity: “Surely, the Wrath of Man shall praise Thee” [Ps. 76:10]

A. The Diocletian Persecution

1. The Great Persecution (303-311 AD) – *Diocletian’s Final Solution*

- a. Diocletian ordered churches demolished, Scriptures burned, and death to those (especially clergy) unwilling to perform pagan sacrifices.

Eusebius: “All this was fulfilled in my time, when **I saw with my own eyes the houses of worship demolished to their foundations, the inspired and sacred Scriptures committed to flames in the middle of the public squares,** and the pastors of the churches hiding shamefully in one place or another, or arrested and held up to ridicule by their enemies. But I will not record the [pastors’] quarrels and inhumanity to each other prior to the persecution. **Instead, I shall include in my history only those things from which first we ourselves and then later generations may benefit.**” *[Eusebius: The Church History]*

- b. Diocletian determined to wipe out Christianity and restore the unity of Roman idolatrous worship to his empire.
- c. Diocletian saw Christianity as a foolish faith undermining Roman traditions and risking the wrath of his gods.
- d. Diocletian, with his co-emperor Galerius, believed that coordinated action could end the Christian movement for good.
- e. Diocletian declared a series of four Edicts resulting in the martyrdom of thousands of believers.
 - (1) Churches were ordered to be closed or destroyed.
 - (2) Scriptures and liturgical books were seized and publicly burned.
 - (3) Christians were forbidden from assembling for worship.
 - (4) Christians holding government or military positions were stripped of rank.
 - (5) Christians were denied legal rights, including access to the courts.
 - (6) Church leaders were arrested and tortured unless they renounced their faith.
 - (7) By AD 304 all Christians were required to demonstrate loyalty to Rome’s *religion*.
 - (8) These actions were especially severe in the Eastern provinces of the Roman empire, yet lighter in the West where *Constantius* (Constantine’s father) governed.

2. The Great Eradication

- a. The edicts devastated Christian leadership, drove believers either underground or into apostasy, and destroyed churches and Scriptures.
- b. Diocletian abdicated in AD 305, believing his campaign had been successful due to the apparent absence of open, organized Christian gatherings within his empire.

3. The Great Survival

- a. Christianity survived underground and persecution ultimately failed to suppress the faith – all within just one generation of 20-30 years.
- b. The resilience of Christian secret communities, through Scripture and the literature of martyrdom, ultimately strengthened Christian identity and faith.
- c. Christianity's lack of a public presence led Diocletian and his contemporaries to miscalculate the success of their persecution.
- d. Best estimates indicate the early Church grew from approximately 25,000 in AD 100 to about 5-7 million by AD 300, 10-15% of the world's population.

Tertullian: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

- e. Martyrs didn't just die – ***THEY DIED DIFFERENTLY!***

Matthew 10:28 – "And fear not them which kill the body but are not able to kill the soul."

- f. During plagues, pagans fled but Christians stayed, nursing the sick: Christian **and** pagan.

Julian (the Apostate): *"The impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well!"*

- g. Christianity reached every social class offering hope to slaves, dignity to women, and purpose to the wealthy.
- h. Persecution scattered believers, spreading the gospel wherever they fled.
- i. The Early church also had to learn to survive heretical attacks from within:
 - (1) Gnosticism: Matter is evil, spirit is good, Jesus only appeared human (*Docetism*)
 - (2) Marcionism: Rejected OT & created an edited NT; OT God ≠ NT Father of Jesus
 - (3) Montanism: New revelations > NT; Extreme apocalyptic views & asceticism
 - (4) Monarchianism: Denied the Trinity; made Jesus merely human (or 3 modes of One)
- j. These controversies, though painful, forced the church to articulate what she believed and the reasons why – laying the foundations for the resulting creeds.
- k. By AD 311 even Galerius (who had initially motivated Diocletian) admitted defeat. On his deathbed, he issued an *Edict of Toleration*, asking Christians to pray for him.
- l. Two years later, Constantine's *Edict of Milan* (AD 313) granted full religious freedom to believers.
- m. However, this newfound religious freedom brought more challenges to the early church
 - (1) Comfort can be more dangerous than persecution.
 - (2) Suffering clarifies priorities – When faith costs everything, only essentials matter.
 - (3) God uses opposition for His purposes.
 - (4) Preparation matters – Christians who knew Scripture stood firm; the shallow wilted.

B. The Dedicated Preservation

1. Scripture Preserved

(a) Concealment and Physical Protection

Manuscripts were hidden in hollowed-out walls, beneath floorboards, caves, secret rooms, underground chambers, remote rural areas, or even buried with martyrs to prevent their destruction. [cf. The Dead Sea Scrolls]

Christians risked their lives to conceal treasured copies in tombs or catacombs since Roman law allowed the secrecy of Christian burial practices.

(b) Communal Memorization and Oral Transmission

Christian communities relied on widespread memorization of the Scripture available. Christians would divide up key Scriptural passages into smaller sections for memorization before surrendering them or for carrying smaller portions for ease of concealment. Public recitation reinforced the memory of the Gospels and Epistles, often with word-for-word accuracy

(c) Selective Surrender and Scriptural Canon Clarification

In the eastern empire, communities surrendered apocryphal or uninspired writings when forced to surrender scrolls and manuscripts, preserving the Scriptures at great personal risk.

The requirement to decide which writings were worth dying for spurred local churches to solidify which manuscripts were canonical scripture, accelerating the New Testament's consolidation.

Christian communities created decoys [counterfeit scripture] or split up manuscripts so even if part were found, the whole would not be lost. The decoys were left in more accessible places while genuine manuscripts were concealed more secretly.

(d) Copying, Translation, and Networking

Scribes in various locations painstakingly copied manuscripts by hand, often in small, hidden groups, maintaining scriptural continuity even while Diocletian targeted Christian texts for destruction.

Because of its portability, secrecy, and unfamiliarity to the Romans, the Codex (or book form) became more highly favored than its awkward and bulky counterpart, the manuscript or scroll.

Scripture was quickly translated into Latin, Coptic, and Syriac to disguise it from a Roman Empire focused primarily on destroying any Greek or Hebrew manuscripts of the Christian community.

Christian couriers and clergy risked arrest by traveling between congregations to circulate and preserve scriptural fragments.

Texts were moved along secret routes, sometimes disguised among mundane objects, to evade Roman detection.

2. Canonicity Required [Rom. 8:28] – ***The Paradox: Persecution strengthened Preservation***

a. God's Canonical Tools: Heresy and Tyranny

(1) Heresy

1 Corinthians 11:19 – “For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.”

Heresies and Canonicity of NT

“The apostles themselves were aware of the problem of forged documents written under their names (2 Thess. 2:2). Also, other non-apostolic books were being circulated among the churches (e.g., *the Epistle of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*). By the second century, heretics such as the Gnostics had begun to produce documents for which they claimed authority (*the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Thomas*, etc.) The proliferation of writings forced Christian leaders and thinkers to ask which documents were genuinely inspired. Furthermore, persecution underlined the importance of knowing which books were worth giving one’s life for and which were not.”

(2) Tyranny [Psalm 76:10 – “Surely, the wrath of men shall praise Thee.”]

The Diocletian persecution highlighted how central Scripture was to Christian identity. Handing over a copy was seen as betrayal, while protecting the Word became a badge of faithfulness.

Tyranny brought to the forefront two constantly consuming questions: “What writings of the first century and beyond were worth dying for? And how is that to be determined?”

b. God’s Canonical Triumph

*The surviving manuscripts became even more treasured and more carefully copied afterward. In AD 313, the Edict of Milan legalized Christianity with **Constantine then commissioning lavish manuscript production.***

*Eusebius of Caesarea was asked to produce **50 high-quality copies of the Scriptures** for churches in Constantinople.*

*Christian Scripture went from being hunted to **being mass-produced and preserved at state expense.***

After Diocletian, Scripture was copied in abundance, preserved in libraries, and given a central role in worship.

Diocletian’s attempt to destroy the Bible set the stage for its explosive preservation and flourishing in the next generation.

In just 20-30 years after Diocletian, Scriptures were lavishly produced on vellum (fine parchment), in codex form, for all mankind including imperial rulers.

3. Canonicity Confirmed

Canonicity of the Old and New Testaments was determined by God and recognized by man.

a. Old Testament [*How did God help men accept His inspired writings as such?*]

(1) God began by clearly confirming Moses as His first prophet. [Ex. 3:11 – 4:9]

(2) God commanded the people to obey the writings of each prophet similar to Moses.

Deut. 18:15; Why discernment was important - Deut. 13 & 18

(3) God clearly indicated He would present a continuous account of Hebrew History; therefore, a sequel to the Pentateuch was to be expected. [Deut. 34:1-2; Joshua 1]

(4) Ruth 4:17-22 connected Joshua-Ruth with Samuel, Kings, & Chronicles

(5) The identical passages of 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-3b indicate a review and a sequel to previous Scripture. [cf. modern two-part series]

- (6) God used a succession of writing prophets who had the *gift* of the prophet, although all did not have the *office* of the prophet.

Office of the Prophet: Moses, Isaiah, Malachi, etc. – Gift of the Prophet: David, Solomon

- (a) Called by God (Exod. 3; Isa. 6; Jer. 1:4-10)
- (b) Received revelation from God (Josh 7:10-14; 1 Sam. 3:1-21; 1 K 3:5-15)
- (c) Spoke God's truth (Deut. 13:1-5)
- (d) Any prophecies they gave came to pass (Deut. 18:21-22)
- (e) Their words were often accompanied by miraculous signs.
(Exod. 4:3-9; 1 Kings 13:3-5; 2 Kings 20:8-11)
- (f) God simply marked the end of the Old Testament by discontinuing the prophetic line in Malachi 4:4-6 by commanding God's people to wait until one would come in the power of Elijah.
- (g) God's silence was even recognized by the Apocryphal books since they too were looking for the next prophet of God.

*1 Maccabees 4:46 - "And laid up the stones in the temple in a convenient place, **until there should come a prophet**, to shew what should be done with them."*

*1 Maccabees 9:27 - "So there was a great affliction in Israel, the like whereof was **not since the time that a prophet was not seen amongst them.**"*

*1 Maccabees 14:41 - "Also that the Jews and Priests were well pleased that Simon should be their governor and high Priest forever, **until there should arise a faithful prophet.**"*

Flavius Josephus (1st Century Jewish historian): "For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, but only twenty-two books** which contain the records of all the past times, which are justly believed to be divine.

It is true our [Jewish] history hath been written since Artaxerxes [the Apocrypha] very particularly, **but hath not been esteemed of the like authority** with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time; and how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation, is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one hath been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it is become natural to all Jews, immediately and from their birth, to esteem these books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them and, if occasion be, willing to die for them."

***Several books were grouped as one during the time of Christ and Josephus [Law, Prophets, Psalms – see Luke 24:44]. In addition, one book often stood as the title for all other books in its section. For example, "Psalms" was the title for the poetic section in the first century.*

- (h) God ended the silence when John the Baptist came in the power of Elijah and Christ foretold the coming of more revelation. (Matt. 17:10-13)

b. New Testament

John 14:26 - "bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (Gospels)

John 16:13a - "he will guide you into all truth" (Epistles)

John 16:13b - "and he will shew you things to come" (Revelation)

FOUR KEY TESTS of New Testament Canonicity

Apostolicity – The test of apostolicity was simplified by the fact that the apostles had written to several churches that still possessed their writings. During the early third century Tertullian claimed that the authentic writings of the apostles could be found in places like Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, and Rome (*Prescription Against Heretics* 36) [Key: **Apostolic Authority: Either Apostolic authorship or Apostolic approval**]

(Origen on Pauline authorship of Hebrews) - “If I were to venture my own opinion, I would say that the thoughts are the apostle’s thoughts, but the style and construction reflect someone who recalled the apostle’s teaching and recorded them. If any church, then regards this epistle as Paul’s it should be commended, since men of old had good reason to hand it down as his. But who wrote the epistle only God knows. (Other traditions: Luke, Barnabas or another of Paul’s co-laborers)

Against Heresies by Irenaeus of Lyons [c. 130-202 AD] – Refutation of heresy & strengthening of Apostolic faith
1st Apology, *2nd Apology*, and *Dialogue with Trypho* by Justin Martyr [c. 100-165 AD] – Christian Apologetics
Prescription Against Heretics & Against Marcion by Tertullian [c. 155-220 AD] – Heretics condemned
Refutation of All Heresies by Hippolytus of Rome [c. 170-235 AD] – Catalogued & Critiqued heretical sects
On First Principles by Origen of Alexandria [c. 185-254 AD] – Refutation of pagan philosophy and heretical views
Panarion by Epiphanius of Salamis [c/ 315-403 AD] – Massive compendium against 80 heresies

Authoritative – This is the argument that Irenaeus advanced against the Gnostics during the late second century. Irenaeus argued that the apostolic churches were well known (*Against Heresies* 3.3-4) and the apostles themselves trained the first pastors, and those pastors trained their successors, thereby maintaining an uncontrived unified teaching. This unity contrasted with the traditions of the Gnostics, whose teachings contradicted not only the apostolic churches but also each other.

Received, recognized, circulated, and used within the apostolic churches [Col. 4:16]
Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John were slowly accepted – Canon closed - Bible has a back cover!!

Witness of the Holy Spirit – Transformed Lives

John Calvin: “The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of Himself in His Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the apostles must penetrate our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.

[Calvin’s *Institutes* 1.7.4]

C. S. Lewis [*The Most Reluctant Convert*], Frank Morison [*Who Moved the Stone?*],
Josh McDowell [*Evidence that Demands a Verdict*], Chuck Colson [Watergate convert]

John Newton: “as wicked a man as has ever lived” – “accepted the lifestyle of all his contemporaries”

George Mueller: A German youth by 16 lived a life of drunkenness, gambling, thievery, and rebellion