

Canonicity: The New Testament Canon

It would not have been impossible for a man who had known Jesus in the flesh to have read the entire New Testament before his death; John Robinson argues, in *Redating the New Testament*, that the entire corpus was in existence by AD 70. (Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ*, 42-43)

First, there was never a council which debated the content of the New Testament canon until the late fourth century, by which time its broad lines had long been settled. No ancient writer ever suggests that the Church's reception of the canonical books was due to anything other than their intrinsic value as apostolic documents. Second, there is no indication that the canon represents a compromise between different schools of thought or the victory of one school over another. (Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ*, 46)

I. The Expectation of New Scriptures for the New Covenant

A. Documenting the Old Covenant

The Old Testament provides a foundation for canonization by anticipating the documents of the new covenant. Michael Kruger notes that most studies of canonization miss the element of covenant as grounds for the Old Testament and therefore miss its relationship to the new. He writes, *The covenantal structure of the Old Testament is illumined by the realization that it is patterned after the treaty covenants of the ancient near Eastern world from which it came.* (Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 111)

Among the correlating elements between these treaty covenants and the Mosaic covenant is the provision of a written copy of the terms of the covenant to be kept in the holy place. As a result of his covenant with his people, God supplied them with covenant documents, preeminently the Decalogue, but in a broader sense the Old Testament canon. Consider these passages from the Old Testament where God provides written instruction or commands it for a record of his interaction with his people and a witness for how they should live:

1. **Exodus 17:14** - God tells Moses to write the destruction of Amalek as a memorial in a book and then to recite it to Joshua as a reminder of God's power.
2. **Exodus 32:15-16** - On Mount Sinai God engraved on two stone tablets the law for his people.
3. **Deuteronomy 6:4-9** - At the heart of the life of Israel was to be the confession of God's identity as the only God and thereby Israel's duty to worship him alone through their wholistic love of God, which they would keep in front of themselves and their families by writing down copies.
4. **Deuteronomy 17:18-20** - The king that God would set over Israel was to live by the law of the Lord, therefore God required that the king write his own copy of the law of the Lord so that he could read and heed it daily.
5. **Deuteronomy 27:2-3** - As God's people crossed into the land beyond the Jordan they were to write the words of God's law on large stone pillars so that they might remember who gave them the land and how they were to live for him.
6. **Deuteronomy 31:24-26** - The author who completed Deuteronomy (Joshua?) Noted that Moses worked to finish writing the words of the law of God and when he had finished he commanded that the book of the law be carried along with the ark of the covenant as a witness against them.
7. **2 Chronicles 35:1-4** - When Josiah instructed the Levites to renew their service to God in the temple, he ordered that they should prepare themselves according to the divisions prescribed in the writing of King David and King Solomon.
8. **Jeremiah 30:1-3** - As God gave Jeremiah a word about the restoration of his people, he instructed the prophet to write these matters down in a book that his people would one day be able to look back and see all that he did for them.

9. **Jeremiah 36:1-3** - God commanded Jeremiah to write a copy of all the words that he spoke against Israel and Judah so that perhaps Judah would hear of impending judgment and turn away from evil and be forgiven.
10. **Jeremiah 36:27-30** - When King Jehoiakim of Judah burned the scroll that Baruch wrote at Jeremiah's dictation because he was angry that God was raise up Babylon against Judah, God commanded Jeremiah to write the words in a new scroll and then prophecy against the king.

B. Developing the New Covenant

Canonicity was inherent in these documents because they were required by the covenant. Even as they bore witness to the old covenant, the prophets foretold a fresh working of God among his people: a new and greater covenant was coming. Thus, the Old Testament canon awaited a new set of documents that would have similar inherent, canonical authority over the people of God as the written terms of God's new covenant with his people.

1. **Isaiah 43:18-19** Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
2. **Jeremiah 31:31-34** Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."
3. **Ezekiel 11:17-20** Therefore say, "Thus says the Lord God: I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.' And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations. And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.
4. **Ezekiel 37:26-27** I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

II. The Internal Witness to the Authority of the New Testament

With the foundation of the Old Testament and the promise of new revelation, the early church began the process of receiving and recognizing new works with authority equal to those texts comprising the believing community's canon. Many scholars contend that canonization was simply imposed upon select documents by the victors of the battle for orthodoxy, arguing that the New Testament writers had no idea that they were writing Scripture. However, Wright contends, the New Testament writers **were conscious of a unique vocation to write Jesus-shaped, Spirit-led, church-shaping books as part of their strange first-generation calling.** (Wright, *The Last Word*, 52)

A. Acknowledgement of the Scriptures of the New Covenant

1. **2 Timothy 3:14-17** But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.
2. **2 Timothy 4:13** When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.
3. **Hebrews 1:1-2** Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.
4. **Revelation 1:3** Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.
5. **Revelation 22:7** And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.
6. **Revelation 22:18-19** I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

B. Appeals to the Scriptures of the New Covenant

At least two New Testament writers clearly refer to the documents of the new covenant as having canonical status. Interestingly both of them refer not to themselves, but to other New Testament authors, demonstrating that the New Testament books were not only in circulation early in the life of the church, but also that they were quickly recognized as authoritative by the apostolic witnesses, whose preaching eventually gave way to written revelation.

1. **1 Timothy 5:18** For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

The first is Paul, who in 1 Timothy 5:18 quotes two passages, which he calls Scripture. The first quotation is from Deuteronomy 25:4, which Paul's readers would have known to be part of the Torah. It is his second quotation that presents support for the process of canonization for here Paul quotes what is almost certainly Luke 10:7, equating Luke's gospel with the authority of the Old Testament canon.

2. **2 Peter 3:15-16** 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, 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.

Similarly in 2 Peter 3:16, Peter references a body of Paul's work as Scripture. Though it cannot be known how many of Paul's letters Peter knew about, it is clear that Peter regarded what he did know of Paul's writings as on par with the Old Testament.

In addition to these clear appeals to the Scriptures of the New Testament, there are the subtle recognitions of the documents of the New Testament as authoritative Scripture.

3. **Luke 1:1-4** Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having

followed all things closely for some time past, **to write an orderly account** for you, most excellent Theophilus, **that you may have certainty** concerning the things you have been taught.

There are several subtle affirmations of canonicity in the New Testament. In the prologue to his gospel, Luke referred to many who had undertaken to compile a gospel narrative before him. Since nearly all of Mark is paralleled in Luke's Gospel, Mark was likely one of those to whom Luke was referring. (Polhill, NAC Acts, 27) Thus, **Luke at a minimum acknowledges the existence of legitimate, authoritative narratives of Christ** and perhaps gives a passing reference to the canonicity of Mark's narrative.

Not only does Luke recognize first-generation believers as authoritative witnesses of Jesus, but he also elevates his own writing to their level as authoritative testimony of the life of Christ. Kruger notes that **this suggests that Luke intends his Gospel to be taken as an apostolic witness to how the Old Testament Scriptures have been realized and completed by the ministry of Jesus Christ** and thus Luke's writings could be conceived as a 'sequel' to the historical narrative of the Old Testament. (Kruger, *Question of Canon*, 140)

4. **Mark 1:1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

Mark seems to understand his own composition as authoritative Scripture. He opens his gospel with a declaration of its content. Kruger notes Mark's use of the word gospel in this opening, writing, **that term was not originally used among early Christians to refer to written texts, but rather was a reference to the authoritative message of the apostolic preaching.** (Kruger, *Question of Canon*, 131) Thus, Mark recognized his written narrative of Jesus' life as having authority in the believing community, authority on par with canonicity.

5. **2 Thessalonians 3:14 If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. .**

A final example of the evidence for canonicity within the New Testament itself is found in 2 Thessalonians 3:14. Here, Paul clearly states that his letter to the believing community is not simply good advice, but is inherently authoritative in the tradition of Scripture over the church to the point that disobedience to its content merits church discipline. (Kruger, *Question of Canon*, 129)

Note: 2 Peter relies heavily on Jude for its content, another internal witness to the authority of the New Testament writings.

Across the New Testament, both in the gospels, the Pauline epistles, and the catholic epistles, there is an authoritative witness as to the inherent canonicity of these documents.

III. The External Witness to the Authority of the New Testament

A. The Testimony of the Church Fathers

1. Clement of Rome (c. 95 AD)

As the early church recognized the authority of these new works for their inherent qualities, they imposed canonical status on them, both formally and informally. From the second century, Christian leaders began recognizing that the written revelation of the new covenant had come to an end with the end of the apostolic age. In AD 95, a leader in the Roman church named Clement wrote an epistle in which he referred to the epistle of the apostle Paul. Kruger argues that Clement recognized the canonicity of Paul's writings by acknowledging Paul's apostolic authority, referencing Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in a manner that assumes its broad circulation among Christians, and referring to it as carrying divine inspiration. (Kruger, *Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 136-137)

2. *The Didache* (c. 100 AD)

The *Didache*, written around AD 100, served as a practical guide to the outworking of the Christian faith. In giving instruction on how a Christian should pray, it quotes Matthew 6:9-13. Kruger contends that the reference shows not only the spread of the written gospels, but their canonical authority within the church. (Kruger, *Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 139-140)

3. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 AD)

Several Christian leaders early in the second century lent support to the canonization of the New Testament. While on his way to martyrdom in Rome, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote a letter in which he referenced the epistles of Paul. Though he does not call the epistles of Paul Scripture, Kruger argues that he does not have to expressly state this because he speaks to his readers in a way that assumes their knowledge of Paul's writings in a personal, authoritative way. (Kruger, *Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 141)

4. Polycarp of Smyrna (c. 110 AD)

In AD 110, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, wrote a letter to the church at Philippi in which he references a quotation that is most assuredly Ephesians 4:26 as coming from Scripture, thus affirming Paul's writings as canonical.

5. Dionysius of Corinth (c. 170 AD)

In AD 170, Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, distinguishes his writing from the "Scriptures of the Lord." (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 137) Kruger notes that while Dionysius does not detail what these Scriptures are, he understands it to be a closed, authoritative canon that does not include the writings of people like him who are generations removed from the apostolic witnesses. In AD 180, Irenaeus gives a clear portrait of the canon within the canon as being closed by referring to the number of gospels as set at four. (Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 282)

6. Origen (c. 250 AD)

One of the earliest, most complete New Testament canons is that of Origen in AD 250 given in a homily on Joshua. This list includes at least twenty-six books, and possibly all twenty-seven books. (Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 283-284)

7. Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 367 AD)

A final example of the acceptance of the New Testament books as canonical by the early church was that of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who in AD 367 included in his *Thirty-ninth Easter Letter* a canon or list of both the Old and New Testaments. (Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice*, 101) Numerous other examples could be marshaled to demonstrate the role of the early church in the process of New Testament canonization. However, these demonstrate a clear, increasing imposition of canonical status upon the New Testament books as the church moved farther from the apostolic era.

B. The Transmission of the New Testament Documents

1. The Gospels

The first sub collection to close appears to have been the fourfold Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Churches widely—though probably not universally—accepted these four Gospels as a collection by the end of the second century. Around AD 180, Irenaeus wrote, 'It is not possible that the Gospels be more or fewer than these in number' (*Against Heresies* 3.11.8). Shortly after Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies* 3.13.93.1), Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 4.2), and Origen (*Commentary on John* 1.21-2; *Sermons in Luke* 1.2) all affirmed that the church had only the four Gospels. (Meade & Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture*, 150)

No Greek manuscript groups the canonical Gospels with any apocryphal Gospels, though some examples of mixture can be found in other language traditions, such as Latin and Coptic. (Meade & Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture*, 150)

Irenaeus tells us that other groups, such as the Valentinians, had more Gospels than there really are (as Origen also acknowledges of heretics in *Sermons in Luke* 1.2). (Meade & Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture*, 150)

2. Acts

By the time Christians drafted canon lists [3rd Century AD], they all included Acts, but in different places...The early reception history of Acts is less clear, though Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.13.3), Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies* 5.12.82), and Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 5.1-4) attest to it. (Meade & Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture*, 151)

3. The Pauline Epistles

There was an early question as to whether Paul wrote Hebrews or not, and therefore, some early testimonies attribute either thirteen or fourteen letters to the Pauline collection. Though not as definitively as the fourfold Gospel, the Pauline Epistles collection crystallized by the end of the second century. Origen (*Sermons in Joshua* 7.1) accepted fourteen letters as written by Paul. Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 5) detailed a critique of Marcion's collection of Paul's letters, defending the text of Paul's thirteen letters (excluding Hebrews). Clement of Alexandria (AD 215) did not say how many letters of Paul there were, but he quoted and attributed to Paul, all fourteen letters... (Meade & Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture*, 152)

4. The Catholic (Universal) Epistles

The primary manuscript evidence for the Catholic Epistles as a collection comes from the fourth- and fifth-century Greek codices. One fourth-century codex, called P72, which combined various books from early Christianity, contains 1-2 Peter and Jude. But 1-2 Peter were added secondarily to the codex containing Jude and other non canonical works. (Meade & Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture*, 155)

5. The Revelation

At first, Revelation was received as Scripture. It maintained that status in the West, but many of the later Eastern canon lists show that it fell into a more dubious status, only to be received finally into the Greek Orthodox canon in the seventeenth century, but still never incorporated into the Orthodox liturgy. (Meade & Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture*, 156)

Canonization, or record of officially accepted writings, was a lengthy process dependent upon the spiritual maturity of the believing community and the faithfulness of God to give and maintain the documents of the covenant with his people. Though the councils of Hippo in AD 393 and Carthage in 397 were the first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canon of the New Testament, they were merely the capstone events to the process of canonization. (Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, 19) They affirmed what had long been held by the believing community as the complete revelation of God.