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## **Canonicity – from “How We Got the Bible”**

By: Sid Litke, Th.M – March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008

### I. Introduction

How do we know that the 66 books in our Bible are the only inspired books? Who decided which books were truly inspired by God? The Roman Catholic Bible includes books that are not found in other Bibles (called the Apocrypha). How do we know that we as Protestants have the right books? These questions are addressed by a study of canonicity.

“Canon” is a word that comes from Greek and Hebrew words that literally means a measuring rod. So canonicity describes the standard that books had to meet to be recognized as scripture.

On the one hand, deciding which books were inspired seems like a human process. Christians gathered together at church councils in the first several centuries A.D. for the purpose of officially recognizing which books are inspired. But it’s important to remember that these councils did not determine which books were inspired. They simply recognized what God had already determined.

This study discusses the tests of canonicity that were used, the history of canonization and a brief explanation of why certain disputed books are not scripture.

### II. Summary

**The collection of 66 books were properly recognized by the early church as the complete authoritative scriptures not to be added to or subtracted from.**

### III. Tests of Canonicity

The early church councils applied several basic standards in recognizing whether a book was inspired.

- A. Is it authoritative (“Thus saith the Lord”)?
- B. Is it prophetic (“a man of God” 2 Peter 1:20)?
  - a. A book in the Bible must have the authority of a spiritual leader of Israel (O.T. – prophet, king, judge, scribe) or and apostle of the church (N.T. – It must be based on the testimony of an original apostle.).
- C. Is it authentic (consistent with other revelation of truth)?
- D. Is it dynamic – demonstrating God’s life-changing power (Hebrew 4:12)?
- E. Is it received (accepted and used by believers – 1 Thessalonians 2:13)?

(from: Norman L. Geisler & William Nix, A General Introduction To The Bible. pp. 137-144).

#### **IV. The History of Canonization**

##### **A. Old Testament Canon – Recognizing the correct Old Testament books**

1. Christ refers to Old Testament books as “scripture” (Matthew 21:42, etc.).
2. The Council of Jamnia (A.D. 90) officially recognized our 39 Old Testament books.
3. Josephus, the Jewish historian (A.D. 95), indicated that the 39 books were recognized as authoritative.

##### **B. New Testament Canon – Recognizing the correct New Testament books**

1. The apostles claimed authority for their writings (Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27; 2 Thessalonians 3:14).
2. The apostle’s writings were equated with Old Testament scriptures (2 Peter 3:1, 2, 15, 16).
3. The Council of Athenasius (A.D. 367) and the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) recognized the 27 books in our New Testament today as inspired.

#### **V. The Disputed but non-canonical books**

##### **A. The Apocrypha is not scripture.**

The Apocryphal books are 15 books written in the 400 years between Malachi and Matthew. They record some of the history of that time period and various other religious stories and teaching. The Catholic Bible (Douay Version) regards these books as scripture. The Apocrypha includes some specific Catholic doctrines, such as purgatory and prayer for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:39-46), and salvation by works (almsgiving – Tobit 12:9). Interestingly, the Catholic Church officially recognized these books as scripture in A.D. 1546, only 29 years after Martin Luther criticized these doctrines as unbiblical.

Below are listed several additional reasons for rejecting the Apocrypha as inspired:

1. The Jews never accepted the Apocrypha as scripture.
2. The Apocrypha never claims to be inspired (“Thus saith the Lord” etc.) – In fact, 1 Maccabees 9:27 denies it.
3. The Apocrypha is never quoted as authoritative in scriptures. (Although Hebrews 11:35-38 alludes to historical events recorded in 2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42).
4. Matthew 23:35 – Jesus implied that the close of Old Testament historical scripture was the death of Zechariah (400 B.C.). This excludes any books written after Malachi and before the New Testament.

## **B. Other disputed books are also not scripture**

1. There were other books that some people claimed to be scripture. Some of them were written in the intertestamental period and called Old Testament psuedopigrapha (or “false writings”). Others were written after the apostolic age (2nd century A.D. and following). These are called New Testament psuedopigrapha.

The writers often ascribed these books to the 1st century apostles (Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Peter, etc.). Evidently, they figured they would be read more widely with an apostle’s name attached. They include some fanciful stories of Jesus’ childhood and some heretical doctrines. No orthodox Christian seriously considered them to be inspired.

2. There were some other more sincerely written books that had devotional value and reveal some of the insights of Christian leaders after the 1st century (Shepherd of Hermas, Didache, etc.). Although they are valuable historically, and even spiritually helpful, they also do not measure up to the standards of canonicity and were not recognized as scripture.

From: <https://bible.org/seriespage/canonicity>

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