

The Canon of the New Testament



What Books Belong in the Bible?
Robert C. Newman



The Term 'Canon'

- Derived from the Greek 'Kanon'
 - Early meaning – a measuring rod
 - Later meanings:
 - A standard by which something is judged
 - A list
- Our interest here:
 - The list of books that belong in the Bible



Various Views on the Extent of the Canon

- Traditional Protestant View
 - OT – 39 books
 - Matching the traditional Jewish view
 - NT – 27 books
 - Matching the traditional Christian view

Various Views on the Extent of the Canon

- Larger Canons:
 - Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox add books to the Old Testament
 - The Apocrypha
 - Mormons accept three additional collections besides the Bible:
 - Book of Mormon
 - Doctrines & Covenants
 - Pearl of Great Price

Various Views on the Extent of the Canon

- Smaller Canons:
 - Marcion – c150 AD
 - Only Luke & 10 Letters of Paul
 - Swedenborgians
 - NT – only 4 Gospels & Revelation
 - OT – only 29 books
 - Theological Liberalism
 - A 'canon' within the canon

Divergent Views of the Basis of Canon

- Recognition by a church council
- Old books are canonical
- Valuable books are canonical
- Books which agree with previous revelation
- God-inspired books are canonical



The Recognition of Canon

- The importance of time-perspective:
 - Information is lost with the passage of time.
 - So later people (typically) have less information on which to make a judgment.
- So, an important distinction exists between recognition:
 - **Soon** after writing;
 - **Long** after writing.

Recognition of a Work Recently Written

- How recognize inspiration?
 - Use arbitrary principles?
 - Use God-given principles?
- God-given tests for inspiration:
 - Connection with supernatural phenomena
 - Connection with earlier inspired books
 - Agreement with earlier inspired books

A Bible Survey of the Application of These Tests

- Mosaic period
 - Old covenant established
- Prophetic period
 - Old covenant developed
- Ministry of Christ
 - New covenant established
- Ministry of Apostles
 - New covenant developed



Connection with Supernatural

- Mosaic period
 - Moses gives signs to Pharoah & Israel
 - Plagues, exodus, Sinai
- Prophetic period
 - Prophets attested by miracles & short-term prophecies
- Ministry of Christ
 - Miracles, short-term prophecy
- Ministry of Apostles
 - Miracles, short-term prophecy

Connection with Earlier Revelation

- Moses
 - Rescue predicted to Abraham (Gen 15:13)
- Prophets
 - Prophets predicted by Moses (Deut 18)
- Christ
 - Predicted by prophets (e.g., Isa 53)
- Apostles
 - Chosen by Jesus

Connection with Earlier Revelation

Who is expected now?

- Jesus at his return
- The two witnesses
- The Antichrist
- False prophets & false Christs
- We should not want to follow the teaching of those in these last 2 categories!

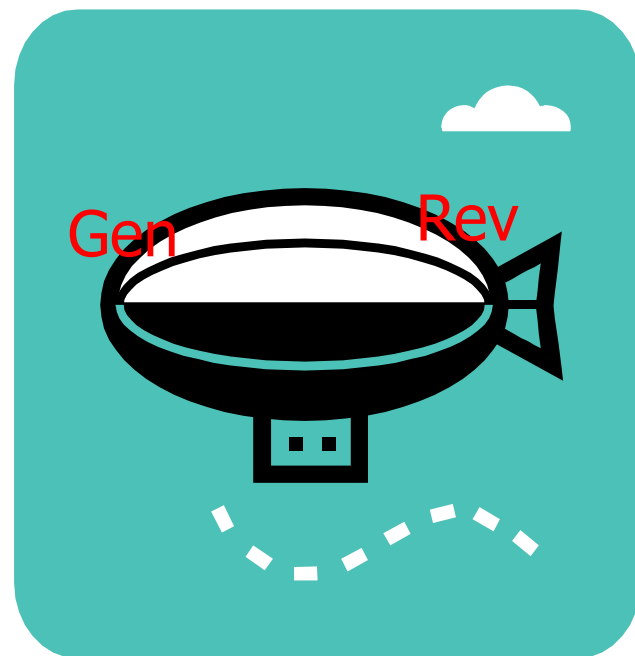
Agreement with Earlier Revelation

- Cannot contradict
 - See Deut 13:1-3 – no other gods
 - See Acts 17:11 – responsibility to test
 - See Gal 1:8-9 – no other gospel
- Can explain and clarify
 - Otherwise, why more revelation?
 - Looks like book of Revelation was designed to close the canon.

Revelation to close canon?

Rather like a blimp,
the Bible closes off
on the back end as
it opens on the
front:

- Creation
- Sin & death
- Tree of life
- Garden
- God dwelling



Recognition of a Work Written Long Ago

- We cannot easily re-do what was done long ago.
- We suggest the following as a check that the Bible is what it claims to be:
 - Christian evidences point to Christ and to salvation through Him.
 - Christ endorses the Bible:
 - OT explicitly
 - NT implicitly

Recognition of a Work Written Long Ago

Canonicity then reduces to two historical questions:

- What writings had Palestinian Jews come to recognize as Scripture at Jesus' time?
 - OT canon
- What Christian writings did Christians come to recognize as Scripture in the few centuries after Jesus' time?
 - NT canon



Old Testament Canon

- We pass the buck to our OT professors
 - Vannoy, Putnam
- But see my paper "The Council of Jamnia and the OT Canon"
 - Westminster Theological Journal (Spr 76)
 - IBRI website (<http://www.ibri.org/DVD-1/RRs/RR013/13jamnia.html>)



New Testament Canon

Overview:

- Stimuli to recognize NT Scripture
- NT evidence for preparation & recognition of Scripture
- Indications of recognition in:
 - The Apostolic Fathers (95-130 AD)
 - Early Heretical Writers (before 150)
 - Late 2nd Century (to 200)
- Towards formal recognition (to 400)



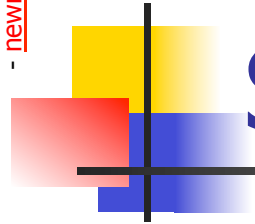
Stimuli to Recognize Scripture

- Need for revelation
- Problem of persecution
- Priorities of translation
- Threat of heresy



New Testament Evidence

- Selection of materials for inclusion
- Protection from error
- Public reading in the churches
- Circulation among the churches
- Collection
- Quotation as authoritative



Selection of Materials

- The NT shows an awareness that writing was going on. The apostles themselves were involved in the selection process.
- The apostles made the decisions about what elements of Jesus' ministry were important to preserve.



Selection of Materials

- John 20:30 (NIV) *Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.*
- But enough is given so that we can recognize who Jesus is and trust in Him.



Selection of Materials

- John 21:25 (NIV) *Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.*
- So we can't write down everything he did.



Selection of Materials

- Luke 1:1-4 (NIV) *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us ... 3 Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*
- Here we see evidence of careful investigation, selection, and concern for accuracy.



Protection from Error

- Luke made a careful investigation as there were apparently amateurs who did not.
- John claims to be an eyewitness, and corrects a popular misunderstanding of what Jesus had said about John not dying.



Protection from Error

- 2 Tim 1:13-14 (NIV) *What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.*
- Paul is concerned that people guard the treasure entrusted to them.



Protection from Error

- 2Tim 2:2 (NIV) *And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.*
- Paul did not just make up this stuff; these other witnesses backed up his message. Implies there were still many witnesses alive.



Protection from Error

- 2Tim 2:14 (NIV) *Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.*
- Paul is concerned to protect the message from word games.



Protection from Error

- 2Tim 3:16-17 (NIV) *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*
- Scripture is from God; we should study it and live it.



Protection from Error

- 2Thess 2:1-2 (NIV) *Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come.*
- Apparently refers to an attempt to forge a letter from Paul.



Protection from Error

- 2The 3:17 (NIV) *I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.*
- Paul makes it clear in this passage that he signs each of his letters.



Public Reading in Churches

- See public reading commanded in several places: 1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16; Rev 1:3.
- This is an important criterion for later test; when the churches got together after persecution had ended, one of their main questions was, 'Do we know this book was read in the old churches?'



Circulation among Churches

- Copies of NT writings were also circulated from church to church.
- Rev 1:3 shows Revelation was sent to seven churches.
- In Col 4:16 Paul commands Colossians to be read in Laodicea and vice versa.
 - Laodicean letter probably Philemon, perhaps Ephesians.



Collection of Books

- NT not bound into one volume initially.
 - Papyrus not strong enough
 - Typically, one or more Gospels bound together.
 - Paul's letters in one volume.
 - Acts & General Epistles in another.
 - Revelation in another.
- Not until parchment began to be used do we find whole NTs or whole Bibles.



Collection of Books

- 2Pet 3:15-16 (NIV) *Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. 16 He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.*
- Paul's letters were circulating, generally known, and probably already collected.



Quotation as Authoritative

- 2 Peter 3:15-16 – "Distort Paul's letters as they do the rest of Scripture"
- 1 Timothy 5:18 – refers to OT and NT (Luke 10:7) under the heading "Scripture says."
- Jude's citation of 2 Peter 2 & 3
- So concept of "Scripture" applied to NT by NT itself.

Recognition in the Apostolic Fathers

- Term given to early Christian leaders & their writings
- Many allusions to NT writings here
- Three explicit references to NT as Scripture:
 - 1 Clement (~95) to 1 Corinthians
 - Polycarp (~110) to Ephesians 4:26
 - Pseudo-Barnabas (~130) to Matthew 22:14



1 Clement 47

- *Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the Apostle. What wrote he first unto you in the beginning of the Gospel? Of a truth he charged in the Spirit concerning himself and Cephias and Apollos, because that even then you made factions.*
- Clement implies 1 Cor is inspired Scripture, and that it is widely known.



Polycarp to Philippians 12

- *For I am persuaded that you are well-trained in the sacred writings, and nothing is hidden from you. But to myself this is not granted, only, as it is said in these scriptures, "Be ye angry and sin not," and "Let not the sun set on your wrath."*
- Polycarp cites Eph 4:26 as included in "sacred writings" and "these scriptures."



Pseudo-Barnabas 4

- Very allegorical
- In an exhortation, the author quotes Matthew 22:14 "*many called, but few chosen,*" under the heading, "*As it is written.*"



Summary

- The concept of "Scripture" is not limited to the OT alone, either by apostles or by early Christian leaders, but both include NT books in this category.
- By ~130 AD, all but the few shortest books of the NT have been definitely mentioned as authoritative.

Recognition in the Early Heretical Writers

- Basilides (~120-140)
 - Quotes 1 Cor as Scripture.
 - Alludes to Mt, Lk, Jn, 2 Cor, Eph, Col as authoritative, possibly also 1 Tim, 1 Pet.
- Ophites (~120-140; thought snake in Eden the good guy!)
 - allude to Mt, Lk, Jn, Rom, 1&2 Cor, Eph, Gal, probably Heb, Rev.

Recognition in the Early Heretical Writers

- Marcion (~140)
 - Creator God of OT a real but lesser god.
 - Had canon: edited forms of Luke and 10 Pauline epistles.
- Valentinus (~140)
 - Authored *Gospel of Truth*.
 - Cites Eph as Scripture.
 - Alludes to Mt, Lk, Jn, Rom, 1 Cor, perhaps Heb, 1 John.



Summary on Early Heretics

- They too applied concept of Scripture to NT.
- We see clear evidence among them for all Gospels but Mark, all Pauline epistles but Pastorals.
- Irenaeus points out (*AH* 3.11.7) which canonical Gospels each heretical leader prefers, and how these leaders are confuted by these very Scriptures.



Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*

So firm is the ground upon which these Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these [documents], each one of them endeavors to establish his own peculiar doctrine. For the Ebionites, who use Matthew's Gospel only, are confuted out of this very same ... But Marcion, mutilating that according to Luke, is proved to be a blasphemer of the only existing God, from those [passages] which he still retains ... Those, moreover, who follow Valentinus, making copious use of that according to John ...

Recognition in the Late Second Century

- By the late 2nd century, even more explicit Christian evidence.
- We do not see the idea that the canon grew slowly over time. Instead each book appears to be recognized as soon as received, then circulated widely.
- Some problem books:
 - Hebrews extensively cited early, then doubted as authorship not known.
 - Revelation also used early, but later doubted because of millennial problem.

Recognition in the Late Second Century

- Justin Martyr (130-160)
 - Refers to "Gospels," calling them "memoirs of the apostles and those who followed them."
 - Uses Mt, Mk, Lk, Jn, Rom, 1-2 Cor, Col, 2 Thess, Heb, Rev.
- Irenaeus (~180)
 - Quotes from all of NT but Phm, 2 Jn, poss 2 Pet and Jude.
 - Does cite Hermas with "Scripture says."

Recognition in the Late Second Century

- Muratorian Canon (~180)
 - Fragmentary at beginning, end, maybe middle, beginning w/ Luke as 3rd Gospel.
 - Present form lacks Heb, Jas, 1-2 Pet, poss 3 Jn.
- Tertullian (~200)
 - Quotes from all of NT but Phm, Jas, 2-3 Jn.
- Clement of Alexandria (~200)
 - Uses some of non-canonical Gospels, but distinguishes them from "those handed down."

Towards Formal Recognition

- Origen (~230) – two categories
 - Books acknowledged by all Xns (21/27)
 - 4 Gospels, Acts, 13 Paul, 1 Pet, 1 Jn, Rev
 - Disputed by some Xns (6/27 + 4 outside)
 - Heb, Jas, 2 Pet, 2-3 Jn, Jude
 - Didache, Hermas, Ps-Barnabas, Gosp Hebrews
- Eusebius (~325) – four categories
 - Acknowledged (21-22/27) – adds Heb; Rev?
 - Disputed but familiar to most (5/27) – not Heb
 - Spurious but Orthodox (0-1/27) – Rev?
 - Heretical – Gnostic Gospels & Acts



Towards Formal Recognition

- Athanasius (369) – *Festal Letter*
 - Great opponent of the Arians
 - Later becomes bishop of Alexandria
 - All 27 NT books listed as canonical.
- He is supported by:
 - Jerome
 - Augustine
 - Gregory of Nazianzus
 - Cyril (except for Revelation)



Decisions by Church Councils

- Several decisions by regional church councils bring the discussion of canon to a close. These include:
 - Synod of Laodicea (365) – all but Revelation, with some doubt on authenticity of list.
 - Synod of Rome (382)
 - Synod of Hippo (393)
 - Synod of Carthage (397)



Summary on Canon

- Final details seem to have been providential, as with OT Canon.
- The early scholars and councils seem to have made good use of historical information.
- Questions were raised for Hebrews, Revelation and a few of the shortest books.
- Category of Scripture applied to NT writings already in apostolic period.
- Nearly all the NT canon seen as authoritative in early 2nd century.



Summary on Canon

- We don't have all the information we would like ...
- ... but it is clear that **these** books came to be recognized as Scripture.
- God has retained control of history in His hands.
- He will carry out His word whether we believe it or not.
- So we might as well trust Him and seek to be on His side rather than on the other.



The End

We need not fear that God has botched up the choice of books to go into the Bible.