

Question: “How did the Canon of the Bible come to be and can we trust that nothing was left out that should have been included and that nothing was included that should have been left out? How can Protestants embrace the Bible if it was Rabbis who decided what would be in the OT and Roman Catholic bishops who decided what would be in the NT? Is it true what Dan Brown said in the *Da Vinci Code* that the Canon wasn't decided until AD 325, and that it came about as the result of a vote that was coerced by the Roman emperor to present a certain viewpoint about Jesus that HE was promoting for political purposes?”

The OT canon appears to have coalesced sometime in the 4th century BC. We know it predates the pre-250 BC split between the Dead Sea community and the temple leadership because their canons are identical (see the handout in the attachment [below this article]). This is the argument I have presented before the Society of Biblical Literature, which is largely a liberal body of scholars: because of the animosity these two groups held toward each other, had one of the groups moved forward and canonized another book or books, the other community would have immediately denounced the accepting community and accused it of cooking the books to support their own sectarian positions. We hear of nothing of the sort from either group's literature. Secondly, the other community would have outright rejected the book(s) on principle: they would NEVER have simply acknowledged the legitimacy of the conclusion of the accepting sect, since this would put them late to the party AND dependent on a group they despised and disagreed with on everything else to determine what their own Bible consisted of!

So we can safely forget about the scholarly theory of a rabbinic “Council of Jamnia” in AD 90. This is a mythical scholarly invention based on Mishnah Yadaim 3:5, which never mentions an official meeting, a vote, or any old books being removed or new books being added! (Again, see the handout, where I reproduce all the relevant rabbinic material). If this is the case, then, and the canon of OT scripture had come to be accepted as sacred Scripture in the very early 3rd century or the 4th century BC, how would development have occurred? This is a VERY important question, because it goes to the heart of the question, “How did we get our Bible?” Everyone I've ever read or heard on the subject assumes that there was an official meeting of some sort, an eventual vote, and an official pronouncement announcing the final decision of this body/council.

Here are the problems with this scenario: 1) absolute silence about anything like this theoretical meeting. Thus, any argument suggesting it is by definition an argument from silence. No such meeting ever took place. 2) in the 4th or early 3rd century BC, there was NO GOVERNING BODY in existence to convene or to make such a momentous decision. The Jewish people were still under Persian domination and possessed no deliberating body such as would be required to make such a weighty decision. The Sanhedrin had not yet come into existence—this is a 2nd century BC development. There was no king, high priest, or governor who was vested with the kind of authority that would be required to publish a unilateral decree that would define the parameters of the canon. So in the absence of any mechanism that could accomplish such a feat, it

must be concluded that the way all Jewish congregations throughout the Mediterranean world came to embrace the same 39 books of the OT canon was these books had undergone an historical process by which all the books eventually came to be accepted by all Jewish communities in the Old World, communities separated by hundreds of miles, different cultures, different languages, different political allegiances, and the like. Because of these differences and the basic nature of human beings (which is to differ from one another on almost everything!), it is therefore highly unlikely that the same canon would come to be embraced by every Jewish community. The fact that it DID happen, however, is simply a matter of the historical record. In the absence of a written record that describes this process, the principle of “Ockham’s Razor” is to be employed (“The simplest explanation of a phenomenon is likely to be the correct explanation of that phenomenon.”). The biblical worldview is unequivocating: human history is sovereignly orchestrated by God. It is not a series of random, accidental, disconnected events, but has a specific beginning and a specific end, and that end is arrived at through God’s personal involvement in the affairs of humankind. God is not detached or indifferent to the way that end result is arrived at; rather, God has a PLAN, some kind of blueprint or script from which He is working, and is moving history along according to that plan, from A to Z, from the Garden back to the Garden (the new heavens and the new earth). If that is the case, then surely the contents of what His “Word” (His instructions to His people as to how they are to live with one another and before Him in the interim) consists of would surely be a matter of concern for Him, and HE would direct/guide its formation. Universal acceptance of the same 39 books cannot be said to have occurred by accident—this would violate the scientific method principle of Ockham’s Razor. Nor could it have been the result of an official pronouncement of a Council or of some individual in authority, because no such Council or authority existed at the time the canon arose. Therefore, out of all the options, the theory of sovereign guidance is the most plausible. If that is the case, then, the OT Canon is not a Persian Canon, a Rabbinic Canon, or a High Priestly Canon; rather, it is a Divine Canon.

This reconstruction, by the way, comports quite well with the fact that Jesus, Paul, the other writers in the NT, the rabbis of Jesus’ time, the earlier (pre-Christian rabbis going back to the origins of the Pharisaic movement in the early second century BC), the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical documents, and the Dead Sea Scrolls all assume the exact same canon and accept it as binding and authoritative. Some have raised the question of the variants in the canon embraced by the Roman Catholic Church, which admits additional books from among the intertestamental “Apocrypha”, thinking that since the RCC predates Protestantism, its canon must surely be the more original version of the canon. Interestingly, however, it is NOT. Roman Catholics did not officially endorse these apocryphal books as canonical until April 8, 1546 at one of the meetings of the Council of Trent. In comparison, the Protestant Canon is exactly the same as that of traditional Judaism, which as noted above, is pre-Christian in origin.

Similarly, the NT Canon did not originate at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 (as is usually assumed, and strongly promoted on the popular level by writers like Dan Brown in the *Da Vinci Code*, etc.), the Council of Chalcedon, the Council of Carthage, or the Council of Hippo. Instead, we hear of NT works already being considered canonical

WITHIN THE TEXT OF THE NT itself! 2 Peter 3:16 speaks of the letters of Paul as having the same authority as “the rest of the Scriptures,” which is likely a reference to the existing OT canon. 1 Clement, written in AD 95 cites NT texts as equal in authority to those of the OT. Papias of Hieropolis, himself a disciple of John the Apostle, who lived from AD 60 to 120, describes the NT books and their authors, accepting them as having the same authority as the OT books. Other early Church Fathers such as Saint Ignatius of Antioch (martyred in AD 108), Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 130-202), and Tertullian of Carthage (AD 155-240) all quoted from the NT books we have today as equal in authority to the books of the OT Canon. The archeological evidence follows suit with this literary evidence: the Muratorian Fragment (AD 155-200) and what are called the “Anti-Marcionite Prologues” (late second century AD) all attest to a second century church that already had a very good idea as to what was included and what was not included in the canon of Scripture.

It should be noted (especially in the instances of Papias, Clement, etc.) that these writings derive from more than 200 years before the great church councils that began with Nicaea in AD 325. Therefore, the same problem appears here that we wrestled with regarding the formation of the OT canon. From NT times throughout the second century AD, Christianity had no one and no group vested with the authority to make such a decision. At this point, there was no College of Cardinals, no Pope, and no Christianized Roman emperor such as Constantine in AD 325. Further, there was NO great church council called during these years—the first of the councils was still hundreds of years in the future. Instead, the Christian church was beleaguered, persecuted, geographically separated, linguistically diverse, and existed in a time when communication was incredibly difficult, costly, and slow. In spite of all these impediments, somewhere between the closing years of the first century and the middle of the second century (Marcion’s Canon appeared in about AD 140), a consensus canon arose almost simultaneously throughout the Mediterranean world. Therefore, the same question asked above has to be asked of this historical development as well: was this merely an accident? Was it driven by some pronouncement of an authoritative figure like a Pope? Did it come about as the result of deliberation by representatives at a council? The easy answer to all these possibilities is no—no such things existed. In their absence, therefore, and again following the guiding principle of Ockham’s Razor, the only satisfying answer is that the NT canon arose as the result of Christian communities all over the Mediterranean world copying, the reading publically, then preaching from the same texts. Each community was asking the same questions: does this document come from a recognized, trusted source—an apostle or someone close to the apostles (e.g., Mark and Luke)? Does it comport with books we have already accepted as divinely inspired? Is its message consistent within itself and with previously-accepted documents? Does it promote the same level of godly living promoted by previously accepted materials? The answers to these questions were apparently universal, as all the pre-Nicaean evidence indicates. It seems that God was moving in accordance with a pattern, sovereignly orchestrating the events of human history in much the same way He had in the 4th-3rd century BC at the time of the coalescing of the OT Canon. Therefore, the NT Canon was not the result of historical accident, Papal decree, or the vote of bishops at a church council. Instead, it was also

a Divine Canon. The same Spirit Who guided the thoughts of the original authors of Scripture had been at work guiding the thoughts of scribes, preachers, and the rank-and-file people who listened to them, and universally came to the same conclusion: these are books that are deserving of preservation, proclamation, and obedience.

Drawing the two Canons together, therefore, is the recognition that BOTH are the result of a completed historical process that God sovereignly orchestrated, NOT the result of an accident, the unilateral decree of a High Priest or Pope, or the vote of fickle, politically-minded, imperfect representatives. Rather than a schizophrenic Jewish OT and a Roman Catholic NT, the 39 OT books and 27 NT books comprise a God-canon that has been time-tested, scrutinized by thousands of scholars, trusted and lived out by millions, and still possessing the power to transform lives 3,400 years after Moses wrote its first words.

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THE CANON OF THE BIBLE IN THE TIME OF JESUS

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4QMMT 9:10-11 (c. 250 BC)

"We have written to you so that you might understand what is [written] in the book of Moses and in the words of the Prophets and in David and in the Words of the Days of All the Generations..."

REMAINDER OF KUMRAN--Commentaries only on biblical books

BEN SIRA (c. 180 BC)

Greek Prologue (130 BC): "For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this work, but even the law itself, the prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little as originally expressed."

Chapters 44-50: "Let us now praise famous men" (Adam-Nehemiah, only non-biblical figure mentioned is the High Priest Simon son of Onias [50:1-21], who is not the subject of any extra-biblical book).

2 MACCABEES 2:13-15 (c. 105 BC)

"Nehemiah [420 BC]... collected the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David ...in the same way Judas [Maccabeus, died 160 BC] also collected all [these] books...

PHILO, *DE VITA CONTEMPLATIVA* 25 (vol. IX, pp. 126-7) (AD 20-30)

"Laws, and oracles delivered thru the mouth of the prophets, and psalms and all the others which foster and perfect knowledge and piety."

JOSEPHUS, *AGAINST APION* 1:39-40 (vol. I, pp. 178-179)

"For we have ... only 22 books ... which are justly believed to be divine, and of them five are the books of Moses... the prophets...wrote down what was done in their times in 13 books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life."

Luke 24:44

"Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

Matthew 23:35

"...that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar (II Chron. 24:21ff.)."

4 Ezra (2 Esdras) 14:45 (c. AD 70)

"And...the Most High spoke to me saying, 'Make public the 24 books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them.'"

Mishnah *Yadaim* 3:5

"All the Holy Scriptures [O.T.] render the hands unclean [i.e., are canonical]. The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes render the hands unclean. Rabbi Judah says: The Song of Songs renders the hands unclean, but about Ecclesiastes there is dissention. Rabbi Yose says: Ecclesiastes does not render the hands unclean, and about the Song of Songs there is dissention. Rabbi Simeon says: Ecclesiastes is one of the things about which the School of Shammai adopted the more lenient ruling, and the School of Hillel the more stringent ruling. Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai said: I have heard a tradition from the seventy-two elders on the day when they made Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah head of the Academy of Sages, that the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes both render the hands unclean. Rabbi Akiva said: God forbid! No man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs that it does not render the hands unclean, for all the ages are not worth the

day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies. And if anything was in dispute, the dispute was about Ecclesiastes alone. Rabbi Yochanan ben Yehoshua, the son of Rabbi Akiva's father-in-law said: According to the words of ben Azzai so did they dispute and so did they decide.

Tosefta *Yadaim* 2:13-14

The Gospels and the books of the books of the heretics do not impart uncleanness to hands. And the books of Ben Sira and all the books written thenceforward do not impart uncleanness to hands. ¹⁴R. Simeon ben Menassia' says, "The Song of Songs imparts uncleanness to hands, because it was said by the Holy Spirit. Qohelet does not impart uncleanness of hands, because it is [merely] the wisdom of Solomon." They said to him, "And did he write only this alone? Lo, it says, 'And Solomon uttered three thousand proverbs and his songs were a thousand and five' [1 Kings 5:12]. And it says, 'Do not add to his words lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar' [Prov. 30:6]."

Conclusion: OT canonized 400-300 BC, not AD 90!

(over)

Cf. also Babylonian Talmud *Bava Batra* 14b-15a

Our Rabbis taught: The order of the Prophets is, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Twelve Minor Prophets. Let us examine this. Hosea came first, as it is written, God spake first to Hosea. But did God speak first to Hosea? Were there not many prophets between Moses and Hosea? R. Johanan, however, has explained that [what It means is that] he was the first of the four prophets who prophesied at that period, namely, Hosea, Isaiah, Amos and Micah. Should not then Hosea come first? Since his prophecy is written along with those of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, and Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi came at the end of the prophets, he is reckoned with them. But why should he not be written separately and placed first? Since his book is so small, it might be lost [if copied separately]. Let us see again. Isaiah was prior to Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Then why should not Isaiah be placed first? Because the Book of Kings ends with a record of destruction and Jeremiah speaks throughout of destruction and Ezekiel commences with destruction and ends with consolation and Isaiah is full of consolation; therefore we put destruction next to destruction and consolation next to consolation. The order of the Hagiographa is Ruth, the Book of Psalms, Job, Prophets, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther, Ezra and Chronicles. Now on the view that Job lived in the days of Moses, should not the book of Job come first? We do not begin with a record of suffering. But Ruth also is a record of suffering? It is a suffering with a sequel [of happiness], as R. Johanan said: Why was her name called Ruth? Because there issued from her David who replenished the Holy One, blessed be He, with hymns and praises.

Who wrote the Scriptures? Moses wrote his own book and the portion of Balaam and Job. Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and [the last] eight verses of the Pentateuch. Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the Book of Judges and Ruth. David wrote the Book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah. Jeremiah wrote the book which bears his name, the Book of Kings, and Lamentations. Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote (Mnemonic YMSHK) Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. The Men of the Great Assembly wrote (Mnemonic KNDG) Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther. Ezra wrote the book that bears his name and the genealogies of the Book of Chronicles up to his own time. This confirms the opinion of Rab, since Rab Judah has said in the name of Rab: Ezra did not leave Babylon to go up to Eretz Yisrael until he had written his own genealogy. Who then finished it [the Book of Chronicles]? Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.

TEXTS WHICH CONTAIN CANON LISTS PERTAINING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

By William P. Griffin, Ph.D.

DATE	SELECTION	GAP	Hb	Ja	1P	2P	1J	23J	Ju	Rev	Add	List	NT
c.170-190	The Muratorian Canon	*	M	M	M	M	*	*	*	K	VK	C	+-
150-215	Clement of Alexandria (Eus. CH 6.14.1)	*	*	?	?	?	?	?	D	*	U	C	?
182-254	Origen (Eus. CH 6.25.3-10)	*	*	M	*	D	*	K	*	*		C	-
d.254	Origen Comm. on John 19.23; frags. 6; 38;126			E									
d.254	Origen Selections on the Psalms 118			E									
Early 4th cent	The Canon of Mommsen	*	*	M	*	*	*	*	M	*		C	-
324/5	Eusebius Church History 2.23.5; 3.25	*	*	K	*	K	*	K	K	K	R	C	=
348	Cyril of Jerusalem Instruction 4.36	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	M	*	C	-
350	Codex Sinaiticus	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	M	*	*	C	+-
4th cent	Constitutions of the Holy Apostles 85	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	M	*	C	+-
c.356-8	Hilary of Poitiers On the Trinity 4.8			E									
360	The Canon of the Synod of Laodicea	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	M		C	-
367	Athanasius 39th Easter Letter	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	V	C	=
380	Amphilochius of Iconium To Seleucus	*	*	*	*	D	*	D	D	P		C	-
382	Damasus The Tome of Damasus	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		C	=
Late 4th cent	The Apostolic Canons Can. 85	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	M	*	C	+-
Late 4th cent	Jerome Lives of Illustrious Men	*	*	K	*	K	*	D	K	*	V	C	-
315-403	Epiphanius Against Eighty Heresies 76.5	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		C	=
c.383-9	Gregory of Nazianz Poems 1.1.12	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	M		C	-
393	Council of Hippo Can. 36	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		C	=
397	The Canon of the Synod of Carthage	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		C	=
397	Augustine Christian Instruction 2.8.13	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		C	=
c.401-4	Rufinus The Apostles' Creed 35	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	V	C	=
419	African Code Can. 24	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		C	=
c.490-500	Pseudo-Athanasius Synopsis of Sacred Scr.	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		C	=
6th cent	Codex Claromontanus	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	C	+

KEY:

* = Canonical
 + = Additional books
 - = Missing books
 = = Protestant NT canon
 ? = Possible allusion; info. not secured; not known; confusing
 D = Disputed
 E = James specifically cited as Scripture
 J = Pertains only to James
 K = Disputed, but considered canonical
 M = Missing
 P = Disputed and rejected
 R = Rejected
 U = Position unclear
 V = Not canonical, but considered valuable

GAP = 4 Gospels, Acts, Paul's 13 epistles
 Heb = Hebrews
 Ja = James
 1P = 1 Peter
 2P = 2 Peter
 1J = 1 John
 23J = 2 and 3 John
 Jud = Jude
 Rev = Revelation
 Add = Additional books (i.e. The Shepherd of Hermas, The Didache, 1 Clement, etc.)
 List = Canon list
 NT = NT canon: +, -, +-, or =
 C = Canon list