

The Canon of the Bible

Introduction

Bible is actually a collection of 66 individual books, 39 in the OT and 27 in the NT.

Bible was written by about 40 different men over a period of about 1600 years.

Why is it that we have only 66 books? What about all other books that we hear about. Why is Apocrypha in the Roman Catholic Bible and not in the Bible of all other Churches around the world?

The Greek word *kanon* comes from the Hebrew word *kaneh*, meaning a reed or measuring stick.

The term actually occurs only in two places in the New Testament and is translated in the King James Version as "rule".

2 Corinthians 10:13 But we will not boast of things without our measure, but according to the measure of the rule which God hath distributed to us, a measure to reach even unto you
Galatians 6:16 And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy.

Just as some form of standardization is necessary in science to make any conversation and comparison and agreement possible, in faith also we need to make standards. Reeds and yardsticks were standards of length. We need a standard in faith because we want to know what to believe and not to believe. This standard is the basis of our life and interaction. Just as there are metric and British systems of standards, we can have different standards. But then we cannot agree of the measured quantity. 5 yards of length cannot be compared with 5 meters of length unless we know how they are related. This is what makes us different. If you have a different canon, then we believe in different things. It is interesting to note that the unit of length was derived generally from the length of an arm, which evidently varied from person to person. Hence to make uniformity it was defined by consensus. Unless a consensus is reached we cannot compare. Though we have international standards in length, mass and time, there are countries that use different units of measurement. We cannot compare a length unless we convert them to some standard. With different units we get different measures. To expect them to be identical will be stupid.

It is interesting to ask the question, Who is a Christian. A Christian may believe in different things. I believe that the fact that early Christians believed in a flat earth do not make them non-Christians. So there are certain core facts that define a Christian and there are other beliefs that are not critical.

I normally consider it as three circles. There are the core faiths that cannot be compromised. (This is the canon). There are faiths and beliefs that are not critical. There are faith and beliefs that do not matter at all. Let me explain.

Jesus of Nazareth is God incarnate and that he died to save mankind is the core of Christian faith.

If I reword it as "Jesus of Nazareth is a man whom God used as a means of saving mankind" it will not be a Christian faith.

Thus the center of faith is the Person of Jesus Christ, the God incarnate.

Then we have matters like pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, post-tribulation Second Coming groups. These are not critical. Should we have immersion or sprinkling in baptism?

Then there are matters of forms of worship. Should we stand in worship or sit? Should we raise our hands in prayer or kneel down? These are immaterial

The question is simply who decide this basic standard or canon. Where do we draw the circle for core faiths? The ultimate standard in faith is God's standard, which we can know only through revelation. But then revelations are so numerous and some of them fake that we cannot rely on every revelation, prophecy or vision. Bible even speaks of a God giving a lying spirit to prophets.

1 Kings 22:21 Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the LORD and said, 'I will entice him.' 22 " 'By what means?' the LORD asked. " 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,' he said. " 'You will succeed in enticing him,' said the LORD. 'Go and do it.' 23 "So now the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you."

So we need to look into objective revelation which is verifiably as coming from God for our good. The Old Testament Canon therefore takes their stand on the revelation at the Mount Sinai which was verified by a million people and in particular by 72 elders and Moses, Aaron and Abihu. They saw Yahweh and received from Him a covenant. All Old Testament books have to be in alliance with this revelation. Thus the basic Canon of Old Testament is the Five Books of Moses. All the others stand on it. Even here there were the core laws and permitted laws.

Mat. 19:8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.

So the questions asked are:

1. Is it in accordance with the laws as received by Moses?
2. Did Jesus accept it?

When it comes to New Testament Canon we have Jesus as our standard. Whatever Jesus agreed upon, as scripture from the Old Testament is acceptable to us. Since then the directly received canon is based on the Apostles and those who walked with Jesus. They were the witnesses to the second covenant. Thus authentic writings of the Apostles and those directly related can be accepted (as long as they all received the apostolic agreement.) Thus even though revelation continue in history, Canon is closed with the death of John in AD 100.

So the questions asked are:

1. Is it in accordance with the teachings of Jesus?
2. Has it got any apostolic acceptance?
3. When was it written?

A closed Canon does not mean a closed revelation. Every believer is the result of direct revelation. It can never end. But since every person is subject to large number of forces in their thought and vision and spirit, they are subject to error of interpretation. Hence we test them against the Canon.

What about Apostolic Succession? Are they reliable in setting a Canon? This is the claim of both the Roman Catholic Church and Hindu Orders. Prampara or succession is used in handing down teachings from the teacher to the disciples. This is how we hand down traditions and faith. The only problem is that the transmission is always liable to errors. Additions and deletions, fluctuations and variations are inevitable in any means of transmission. Hence we would rather rely on documentation and transmissions that are least susceptible to errors. In this case it is the written word. You don't need to go very far to see these errors than to look into the traditions of churches and Hindu divisions.

If the Roman Church or the Mormon Church or the Christian Science wants a different Canon, that is all right for them. But we would rather stick to the conservative canon, which cannot err.

The Septuagint

As the Jews were scattered all over the Roman Empire where Greek was the lingua franca it became necessary to translate the OT into Greek for the purpose of teaching children born in dispersion. The OT was translated into Greek by the joint effort of 70 Scholars around 250-150 BC. Hence it was called LXX or The Septuagint. Thus both the Hebrew Scripture of the Palestinian Jews and the Greek Scripture Septuagint of the Alexandrian Jews remained side by side and popular at the time of Jesus. Paul extensively used the Septuagint.

The Greek scholars did take numerous liberties in modifying the text while translating from the Hebrew to the Greek.

Apocrypha.

During the intertestament period from Malachi (433 BC) to the time of gospels several books were written. The Greek Septuagint contained forty-six books while the Hebrew Scripture contained only thirty-nine. The additional books are

Tobias, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (Ecclesiastics), Baruch, and 1 & 2 Maccabees. In addition, there were additions of fragments and chapters in the Septuagint versions of Esther and Daniel. The seven last chapters of Esther (10, 4 to 16, 24); the prayer of Azarias and the canticle of the three children in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3, 24-90); the history of Susanna (Dan. 13); and the history of Bel and the Dragon (Dan. 14) are not found in the Hebrew versions. These additions constitute the Deuterocanon (Second Canon) and are accepted only by the Roman Catholic Church.

They were never quoted directly by Jesus himself during his ministry and none of the evangelists or Apostles quoted them. The Catholic Church acknowledges many of these books as part of their canon. But all Protestant churches reject them essentially because they bring in teachings, which are not supported by gospels or epistles, which we know as authoritative.

Several apocryphal books indirectly concede that they were meant to be stories rather than theological treatise or inspired work.

The 2 Maccabees for example concludes with the Author's apology as follows: "Since Nicanor's doings ended in this way, with the city remaining in possession of the Hebrews from that time on, I will bring my own story to an end here too. If it is well written and to the point, that is what I wanted; if it is poorly done and mediocre, that is the best I could do. Just as it is harmful to drink wine alone or water alone, whereas mixing wine with water makes a more pleasant drink that increases delight, so a skillfully composed story delights the ears of those who read the work. Let this, then, be the end" (15:37-39).

These may be read as a story but cannot be used for doctrine or instruction. The word *apocryphal* literally means to "hide from," that is, to withhold from the public. Anyone reading through these books will easily see the difference in the tenor and content of the matter.

When was the Old Testament canon closed? One theory is that it was decreed by Ezra in 400 BC. This is a view that was held by some of the early Fathers, a number of more recent Catholics and many Protestants.

However there must have been several redaction to it after this date since in the second book of Ezra contains genealogies of the High Priests extending beyond this date by over 150 years the descendents of King David is traced down to the sixth generation after Zerobabel, down to about 300 BC. We can be certain that even at the time Jesus the Sadducees and Samaritans accepted only the first five books of Moses as inspired and canonical. Strictly speaking all other books receive their credence only through these five books of Moses. Books of Moses are the only five books that received the direct approval of God and hence the objective standards. In the same way only the Books written by the Apostles and acknowledge or accepted by Apostles will have the objectivity of the New Testament canon.

A similar situation arises in the Hindu Scriptures where the Jain , Sankya, and Charvaka systems do not accept the vedas as scriptures because their origin or authorship can not be objectively established.

Another method used in establishing the canon is the succession of prophets. But obviously this transmission entails errors. This is what is known in Hinduism as Smrithi or remembered. They do not have the same status as the Sruthi - the revelation.

Josephus Flavius thus asserts:

"From the time of Artaxerxes to our own time, our history has been written down very particularly (accurately and in detail), but these books have not been considered worthy of the same credit as the books of earlier date, *because there has not been an exact succession of prophets.*"

Final determination of the Old Testament Canon was made in the *Council of Jamnia (Javnah)* in 90 AD. This was again confirmed by the Jewish Council in 118 AD. Here the deutrocanon i.e. all the Apocrypha was rejected by the Jews

The Canon included only

- (i) those written in Hebrew;
- (ii) those that conformed to the Torah;
- (iii) those that were written before the time of Ezra; and
- (iv) only those that were written in Palestine

The Roman Catholic retort to this rejection of Septuagint is that the Jamnia Council is no longer authoritative as the authority has already been given to the Roman Catholic Church through Petrine Succession, which supercedes the Jewish Priesthood

Canon of the Old Testament

Jews divided the OT into divisions:

- The Law
- The Prophets
- The Writings

Christians divide the OT into 5 divisions:

- The Books of the Law
- The Books of History
- The Books of Poetry
- The Major Prophets
- The Minor Prophets

The Law

The books of the Law or Pentateuch

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Exodus 24:4 (Moses began to write down all the words of God)
Exodus 40:20 (2 tablets placed in the ark of the covenant)
Deuteronomy 31:9, 24-26 (Moses writes book of the law which is then placed beside the ark of the covenant)
Deuteronomy 17:18-20 (Kings were decreed to make a copy of the law on a scroll by their own hand and to read and observe it)
Joshua 1:8 (importance of the book of the law)
2 Kings 22 (Josiah finds the book of the law; acknowledges that it is the divinely authorized word of God)

The Prophets - Nebiim

Former Prophets:

Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings.

Latter Prophets:

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel

Twelve Minor Prophets:

Hosea-Malachi

The Writings

Five books of Poetry:

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon

Eight other books :

Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 & 2 Chronicles.

NT References to OT Canon

"Scripture" (John 10:35; 19:36; 2 Peter 1:20)
"Scriptures" (Matthew 22:29; Acts 18:24)
"Holy scriptures" (Romans 1:2; 2 Timothy 3:15)
"law and prophets" (Matt 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; 24:44; Acts 13:15; 28:23)
"oracles of God" (Romans 3:2; Acts 7:38; Hebrews 5:12; 1 Peter 4:11)
Scripture generally refer to the OT as a whole.

Jesus Sanctioned the Old Testament Canon as Scripture:

Matthew 5:17, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill."
Matthew 7:12, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."
Matthew 22:40, "[Love God and neighbor...] On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."
Luke 16:16, "The law and the prophets were until John, since that time the kingdom of God is preached."
Luke 16:29, Abraham said to the rich man in Hades concerning his five brothers, "They have Moses and the prophets...."
John 10:31-36 (Jews were going to stone Him; He refers to OT by quoting Psalm 82:6 and then states that scripture cannot be broken.)
Matthew 26:54 (He accepted being arrested so that the scriptures might be fulfilled, indicating His acceptance of numerous OT writings concerning the Messiah; all combined constituted "the scriptures.")
Luke 24:44, "And He said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me."

There are over 700 quotations and references to the OT in the NT.

Out of the 39 books, citations from 31 are made, coming from all parts of the OT and from every division.

Original Languages

The OT was originally written in Hebrew, except

Jeremiah 10:11; Daniel 2:4-7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18, 7:12-26 which were written in Aramaic. Aramaic was the language spoken by Jesus and was the language of the early church.

The original Scriptures were written on animal skins, called vellum or parchment, or on papyrus, a form of paper made from the marsh reeds of Nile. Neither the original law written on the stone nor the original historical, prophetic and literature writings are now in existence. It will be too foolish to expect them to exist knowing the fragileness of the medium on which they were written. But these were copied meticulously and with reverence by the scribes. The scribes copy each letter with total reverence. They prepared themselves and sanctified the day and took their jobs as a sacred duty. They were never in a hurry. It took years to copy the entire scripture. Thus the scripture was preserved more or less in their pristine form to this day.

Obviously we have slight variations in places through the centuries.

Some of the books contained the notes of the scribes, which in due course became part of the text and cannot be distinguished. With hundreds of copies of copies spread over thousands of years and spread over large geographical areas and libraries we can be certain of the underlying unity. In most cases the variations are slight and do not have any theological import.

Texts of the Old Testament

Masoretic Text.

The earliest manuscripts were of AD 900 - 1000. . These manuscripts are the work of Jewish scholars called the Masoretes

However the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls found near the village of Qumran discovered in 1947 dates back to BC 200. These documents were the treasured books of a group called Essenes. Almost all parts of the Old Testament were found in this library with the exception of Esther. Some of them were complete books, which gives us a chance to see how well the scripture has been transmitted to us with faithfulness. There had been intentional destruction of scriptures by the enemies. In the second century BC. Antiochus Epiphanes burned all the copies he could find. In AD 70 Romans burned all scriptures they could put their hand on. Under these conditions Essenes kept their sacred library from falling into the hands of their enemies and guarded them zealously. They were preserved in large jars well hidden in the caves. It was also the practice to destroy the old manuscript after making the new copy so that it may not fall into the hands of the enemies and thus profaned.

Canon of the New Testament

Paul wrote letters to several churches and asked that they be read publicly when the Christians assembled (1 Thessalonians 5:27; Colossians 4:16). Early historical accounts clarify that apostolic writings were read on a regular basis in the Christian assemblies.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, he commands that they exchange letters with the church of the Laodiceans (4:16). It appears that early Christians soon began to circulate many of the apostolic writings. It is in this way, most likely, that various books of the NT began to be gathered into collections. Peter, in 2 Peter 3:16, indicates already a collection of Paul's letters (notice that Peter calls them "scriptures" and places them alongside that of the OT).

Soon, however, spurious or pseudonymous letters came into circulation among the churches (letters falsely bearing apostolic names and/or claiming apostolic authority). Furthermore, false teachers arose claiming knowledge handed down by tradition. All this led to the beginning of the canon as Christians realized the need to determine what writings were genuine and what writings were not.

Unless a book could be shown to come from the pen of an apostle, or at least to have the authority of an apostle behind it, it was peremptorily rejected, however edifying or popular with the faithful it might be. But how could early Christians know whether a book was Apostolic? Certainly not simply by a book's claim to be so, since the Gospels were anonymous and there were numerous spurious gospels and epistles in circulation. During the Apostolic Period, the Apostles and the direct witnesses who were with Jesus were able to handle heresies. Hence the need of date of writing. Today with the higher criticism we can establish the claims and validity of any manuscript by examination. Evidently a gospel written in AD 300 cannot be authentic and we will be safe in rejecting it.

The apocryphal writings (such as the Didache, Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Gospel of the Hebrews) were of such an inferior class that such could be noted with reasonable certainty. These books were generally more concerned with miracles than on the person of Jesus and his teachings. Even today most false teachings are surrounded by emphasis on miracles, signs and wonders. Since these are scientific and critical examination, there can be difference of opinion over some books. So the safest approach is to accept only those that are strictly acceptable rather than open wide the canon and err.

The gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John, Acts of Apostles, the 13 letters of Paul, 1 Peter and 1 John passed the test very easily. Several years passed by until the remaining books were accepted.

In the list given by Origen, who lived in the third century, we have in addition Revelation and mentioned Jude, James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. He hesitated over Hebrews because he was not sure of its authorship. Eusebius (of fourth century) on the other accepted Hebrews and James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 John. Finally, in AD367 Athanasius gave the list of 27 books as we know today.

Since then those who were for it and those who were antagonistic to it subjected every word in these books to criticism and study. These studies indicate beyond doubt the validity of these books as canon.

Original Languages

Most of the New Testament was written in Koine Greek, which was the language of the time.

Few Aramaic phrases comes in naturally in the NT:
Mark 5:41 (*Talitha cumi*);
Mark 7:34 (*Ephphatha*);
Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46 (*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*);
1 Corinthians 16:22 (*Maranatha*);
Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6 (*Abba*).

Texts of the New Testament

Greek manuscripts of the NT during the period upto the third century were written in uncial or majuscule style where all letters were of large size (over one inch in height) and all letters in upper case. With the availability of papyrus, books were made on them and they were bundled together in the form a codex. Later they were mostly made on vellum parchments (animal skins) until the tenth century. From tenth century the style changed to cursive style as of today. This was the method until printing presses and papers came to be common.

New Testament Books

Gospels

Book	Dates	Author
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Mark	50-70AD	John Mark scribe of Peter
Matthew	55-75AD	Matthew/Levi
Luke	59-75AD	Dr. Luke (referred to by Paul in his letters.)
John	53-110AD	John, the 'disciple whom Jesus loved.'

Acts of Apostles

Acts of Apostles	63 -70+ AD	Dr. Luke
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Epistles and Revelation

Romans	51AD	Paul
II & II Corinthians	52AD	Paul
Ephesians	60AD	Paul
Phillipians	61AD	Paul
Colossians	60AD	Paul
I Thessalonians	51AD	Paul
II Thessalonians	52AD	Paul
I & II Timothy	63AD	Paul
Titus	63AD	Paul
Philemon	60AD	Paul
Hebrews	65-70 AD	Paul
James	63AD	James the brother of Jesus. James the Apstole died in 44AD
I & II Peter	65-68AD	Peter
I & II Corinthians	55AD	Paul
I, II & III John	85-95AD	John
Jude	65-80AD	Judah brother of Jesus
Revelatoion	95AD	John