



The Bible as Canon

If our faith . . . is such that it is destroyed by force of argument, then let it be destroyed; for it will have been proved that we do not possess the truth.

—Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*

Because of its background in Judaism, the early Christian church was accustomed to recognizing the authority of written documents as scripture—that is, the Christians believed that the revelation and will of God were located in a deposit of written materials that served both the cultic and moral needs of the community of faith. The notion that authority resided in what was later called the OT scriptures was never doubted in the earliest Christian community, even though the normative status of the law itself was questioned by many Christians (Heb 8:5–8a). The example of Judaism recognizing its own divinely inspired (and therefore authoritative) writings later became a model for the church to recognize some of its own literature as authoritative (that is, prophetic and inspired) for faith and conduct, especially when it became clear to many Christians that parts of the OT, for example, its legal codes and rites, were no longer relevant to their developing communities. The specific factors that led to this “recognition,” however, are somewhat obscure.

We should note in passing that the terms “Old Testament” and “New Testament” were not originally identical to the OT and NT canons. Although the term “new covenant” is found in both the OT (Jer 31:31) and the NT (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24) and “first” covenant (Heb 9:1) is used for the “old covenant,” the terms never refer to a body of literature as they came to be used in the second to the fourth centuries. The terms were used by some of the church fathers in the late second century but were not generally and regularly employed

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in the churches as a designation for the Hebrew scriptures (the OT or the scriptures of the “First Covenant”) and the Christian scriptures (the New Testament or the “Second Covenant”) until the middle of the fourth century. See, for instance, in canon 59 of the Synod of Laodicea (ca. 360) where we read, “[It is decreed] that private psalms should not be read in the church, neither uncanonized books, but only the canonical [books] of the New and Old Testament (οὐδὲ ἀκανόνιστα βιβλία, ἀλλὰ μόνα τὰ κανονικὰ τῆς καινῆς καὶ παλαιᾶς διαθήκης).”¹

However, the terms first appear in the writings of Irenaeus (ca. 170–180), who writes,

Inasmuch, then, as in both Testaments there is the same righteousness of God [displayed] when God takes vengeance, in the one case indeed typically, temporarily, and more moderately; but in the other, really, enduringly, and more rigidly. . . . For as, in the New Testament, that faith of men [to be placed] in God has been increased, receiving in addition [to what was already revealed] the Son of God, that man too might be a partaker of God.” (*Adv. Haer.* 4.28.1–2, ANF)

See also Tertullian (ca. 160–225), who writes,

If I fail in resolving this article [of our faith] by passages which may admit of dispute out of the Old Testament, I will take out of the New Testament a confirmation of our view, that you may not straightway attribute to the Father every possible (relation and condition) which I ascribe to the Son.” (*Adv. Prax.* 15, ANF)

About 220 CE in Alexandria, Origen commented,

It appears to me, therefore, to be necessary that one who is able to represent in a genuine manner the doctrine of the church, and to refute those dealers [the Gnostics] in knowledge, falsely so-called, should take his stand against historical fictions, and oppose to them the true and lofty evangelical message in which the agreement of the doctrines, found both in the so-called Old Testament and in the so-called New, appears so plainly and fully.” (*Commentary on John* 5.4 ANF. See also 10.28 and *De Prin.* 4.11)

Eusebius (ca. 260–340 CE), describing Josephus’ canon of scripture writes, “In the first of these he gives the number of the canonical scriptures of the so-called Old Testament, and showed as follows which are undisputed among the Hebrews as belonging to ancient tradition” (*H.E.* 3.9.5, LCL). Later, while speaking of the NT, Eusebius says, “At this point it seems reasonable to summarize the writings of the New Testament which have been quoted” (*H.E.* 3.25.1, LCL).² Almost certainly

¹See Theron, *Evidence*, 124, for the complete reference.

²Both Hennecke, *Apocrypha*, 1.24, and Grant, *Formation*, 161, appear to have missed the references to a “New Testament” in Irenaeus and Tertullian. Melito,

these terms originated in the second century but were not generally used in the churches until the fourth century. The reference to the “*so-called* Old Testament” mentioned in both Origen and Eusebius (see above) suggests that these designations for the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures were not yet commonly employed when these authors wrote.

Many of us were taught in seminary that the early church simply recognized (as opposed to deciding) its own inspired NT scriptures and that this literature was believed by the church at that time to be *apostolic*, that is either written by or “authorized” by an apostle; *early*, written within general proximity to Jesus and the apostles or written in the first century; *unified in its traditional teaching* about the gospel (orthodoxy); and for these reasons, *recognized by the majority of the churches to be inspired by God*. In regard to the Hebrew scriptures, we were often taught that Jesus, the church’s final authority, cited or referred to a closed canon of Hebrew scriptures (he cited scriptures from the three major parts of the OT: Law, Prophets, and Writings) and that his authentication of them was the church’s mandate for accepting them as authoritative scripture. In other words, the church simply adopted the canon of Jesus.

This traditional view has been eroding slowly over the years largely as a result of several landmark studies on the formation of the canon, especially those of Adolf von Harnack, Robert M. Grant, Hans von Campenhausen, A. C. Sundberg, James Barr, and more recently G. M. Hahneman. Their efforts have caused many scholars to reexamine the historical data related to the formation of the Christian biblical canon. Until recently most (not all) introductions to both the OT and NT allowed only a few pages of their research to be given over to this discussion, but the newer OT and NT introductions give serious attention to the major questions involved in canonical research and by doing so stimulate further research. Of course, not all of the more recent works on the formation of the biblical canon are of equal value. Some of them offer few advances and appear to repeat previously unjustified claims.³

a second-century source, speaks of “the books of the old covenant [testament] (τὰ τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης βιβλία).” These words are preserved in the *fourth-century* Eusebius, *H.E.* 4.26.13f., but we also find similar references in Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 15.5.85 and Origen, *De Prin.* 4.11.

³The most disappointing aspect of William T. Farmer and Denis M. Farkasfalvy’s otherwise excellent work on the canon, *The Formation of the New Testament Canon* (ed. Harold W. Attridge; New York: Paulist, 1983), is that both men continue to employ the traditional assumptions of canonical research: (1) if ancient authors cited a NT writing, they must have considered it as scripture; (2) if one author considered a text “scripture,” then everyone in the writer’s general era and location did the same; and (3) the compilation of all of the citations, quotations, or allusions to biblical literature by an ancient author constituted that

Chapter 2 will address the difficult issue of what is meant by “scripture” and “canon.” It is often surprising to some to find out that there is little agreement on the meaning of these terms. I will set forth my understanding of both and then see how the early church applied these terms to its sacred literature.

Part I looks at the origins of the Christian OT canon. Chapter 3 will focus on the growth and development of the three-part OT canon. This is a highly complex study, and a number of scholars disagree on the significance of the surviving witnesses from antiquity. Chapter 4 examines the Jewish collections of scriptures and explores a number of noncanonical Jewish sources as well as some familiar texts from the NT and the early church fathers. Chapter 5 examines the early church’s OT canon and how it came to be recognized in the various communities.

Part II turns to the scriptures that are specifically Christian. Chapter 6 will make the transition from the OT to the NT canon. It will trace the growth in the early church’s recognition of Christian writings as sacred scripture. Chapter 7 points to key historical factors that gave rise to a fixed canon of NT scriptures. Many factors were involved, but I believe that Constantine, who urged the church toward unity, played a most significant role in helping the church come to a general consensus regarding its biblical canon. Chapter 8 will investigate some supposed NT canonical lists as well as several undisputed ones. The variation in these lists and the tenuous positions of some of the books in these lists indicates that the formation of the church’s biblical canon took a considerable period of time and was accomplished with a great deal of difficulty and disagreement. A number of important theological questions are raised as a result of this study. Chapter 9 will scrutinize again the elusive “criteria” for canonicity employed consciously or otherwise by the early church.

The final chapter is a summarizing look at many of the issues that have emerged from this study. It is intended to provide a basis for understanding some of the new directions going on in canon studies today.

Five appendixes conclude the study. Appendix I contains tables of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature alluded to or cited in the NT, the lists of OT canonical books from both the Eastern and Western churches of the fourth and fifth centuries, and the fourth-century lists of NT canonical books. Appendix II is a brief summary of the rest of the sacred literature of ancient Judaism: the Mishnah, the Tosephta, and the two Talmudim. Appendix III is a look at some of the books that did not make it into the biblical canon and at how to deal with the use of pseudonymity in Judaism of late antiquity

writer’s biblical canon. These assumptions should have been laid to rest by von Campenhausen, *Formation*.

and early Christianity. Appendix IV briefly discusses the sayings of Jesus not found in the canonical Gospels, commonly identified as the "agrapha." Appendix V examines the form of the biblical text that is authoritative or canonical for the church and Brevard Childs' approach to this issue. Finally, Appendix VI provides a summary of the most significant ancient sources for the study of the formation of the Old and New Testament canons.