

Canonization of the Scriptures

The point has been made that since the Bible is the creation of the church, the church has the authority to disregard or change the Bible. That is wrong. The role of the church was to *recognize* which writings were divinely inspired. That task has been completed. The church does not have the authority to reject books now in the canon, nor to add new books to the canon. We are not permitted to accept one part of scripture and reject another. A purposeful attempt to do this is one indicator of heresy.¹ The church has a continuing role to provide the church with translations into the languages of the people, to engage in continuing scholarship and teaching, to help us understand the meaning of Scripture, and to apply it to questions of the day.

The quest for the establishing the content of the originally penned scripture is fascinating. It was God's choice to use humans in the process. Divine inspiration operated in selecting the writers, the first writing, the transmission, and the editing, as God continued to reveal himself to man.² As divine editor, the Holy Spirit even selectively considered pagan writings, to edit and explain them, or to provide a rebuttal or correction.^{3 4} What is important is to *establish the content as of the time the scripture was accepted into the canon*. When a thesis is written, it is the version that is signed by the committee that is accepted as the authoritative document, not the first draft. This applies to the book level, as in Genesis, as well as to the whole Bible. *The canon was closed with the locating of Revelation at the end of the New Testament.*⁵ *The Bible says what God wants it to say.*

You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.⁶ Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it or take from it.⁷ Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you, and you be found a liar.⁸ I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!⁹

The Seventh of the Articles of Religion, ratified by the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States on **12 September 1801** refers to Holy Scripture as the foundation for validity of the creeds. It is very interesting to note that 200 years later, the day after we were attacked by Taliban Muslims, the people of the United States of America publicly reasserted the primary Article of Faith, "In God We Trust", and publicly prayed "God Bless America". The first

¹ St. Athanasius, "It Profits not to Receive Part of Scripture, and Reject Part" in *To the Bishops of Egypt*, Chapter 1, Section 4; contained in *Circular Letter. Ad Episcopos Aegypti*; contained in *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius*, Archibald Robertson, contained in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Volume 4, Philip Schaff (editor) (1997). The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software.

² Ephesians 3:1-21

³ Acts 17:22-31

⁴ Genesis

⁵ John Wesley, "Notes on The Revelation of John, Chapter 22, v. 18-19", *John Wesley's Notes on the Whole Bible: The New Testament*, in "Commentaries: John Wesley – Notes on the Bible", Master Christian Library, AGES Software (1997).

⁶ Deuteronomy 4:2

⁷ Deuteronomy 12:32

⁸ Proverbs 30:5-6

⁹ Revelation 22:18-20

creed many of us learned was, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Even this links faith to Holy Scripture as our source of knowledge about God.

Josephus makes extensive use of material from the Hebrew Testament. His work parallels that in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Ester, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Nahum, *Esdras*, *1 Maccabees*, and *2 Maccabees*.¹⁰ The last three are among the Apocrypha. Missing from this list are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and the New Testament. Josephus lived during the period 37 AD to after 100 AD. It is reasonable to assume that Josephus reflected Jewish thinking of his time, even though we do not accept his writings as being inspired by God. (The translation of his complete works is 726 pages, 2 columns, 8-point type. Josephus wrote it without using a computer.) It is reasonable to assume that Jesus was aware of the same kinds of observations about Jewish thinking that Josephus recorded.

*We have ... but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them, five belong to Moses, which contain his laws, and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years. ... The prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down that was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life.*¹¹

Questions of authorship, date, history of development, original languages, organization, etc., are fascinating. For the New Testament canon, authorship and divine inspiration were key issues. Books used to support heresy were excluded from the canon. Controversies in today's church primarily challenge the canon of the New Testament.

¹⁰ Flavius Josephus, *The Complete Works of Josephus*, Kregel Publications (1981), William Whiston (translator), pp 738-746.

¹¹ Joseph ben Matthias, *Flavius Josephus Against Apion*, Book I, Section 8 (before about 100 AD), in *The Complete Works of Josephus*, Wm. Whiston (translator) (1737), Kregel Publications (1981). [Wm. Whiston, mathematician and theologian, succeeded Newton at Cambridge in 1703.]

An undated list of books of early origin (sometime near 325 AD) titled “The Canons of the Holy and Altogether August Apostles” contains the following.

Category	Books
Venerable and Sacred	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John fourteen Epistles of Paul 1 Peter, 2 Peter 1 John, 2 John, 3 John James Jude Acts of us the Apostles
Not to be Published to All	1 Clemens, 2 Clemens Constitutions of me Clemens

Table 1 Canon 85, *Canons of the Holy and Altogether August Apostles*.¹²

The Synod of Laodicea was held sometime during the period of 343 – 381 AD. The exact dates are not recorded in the canons resulting from this council. This Synod consisted of the Asian bishops, and took place between the First and Second Ecumenical Councils. Canon 60 of this Synod lists the following books.

Books
Matthew, Mark, Luke, John James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Phillipians, Collosians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

Table 2 *Synod of Laodicea Canon 60*.¹³

In the early Fourth Century AD, Eusebius of Caesarea categorized contenders for the New Testament into accepted, disputed, and rejected writings. His assignments were as follows.

¹² Canon 85, “Canons of the Holy and Altogether August Apostles” (circa 325 AD), contained in *The Apostolical Canons*, in Appendix of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Volume 14, Philip Schaff (editor), AGES Software (1997).

¹³ Canon 60, “The Canons of the Synod Held in the City of Laodicea, in Phrygia Pacatiana, in Which Many Blessed Fathers from Divers Provinces of Asian Were Gathered Together” (circa 343 – 381 AD), contained in *The First Ecumenical Council*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Volume 14, Philip Schaff (editor), AGES Software (1997).

Category	Books
Accepted	Holy quaternion of the Gospels Acts of the Apostles Epistles of Paul Extant former epistle of John [1 John] Epistle of Peter [1 Peter] Apocalypse of John [also rejected]
Disputed	Epistle of James Jude Second epistle of Peter [2 Peter] Second and Third of John [2 John, 3 John]
Rejected	Acts of Paul Shepherd Apocalypse of Peter Extant epistle of Barnabas Teachings of the Apostles Apocalypse of John [also accepted]
Cited by heretics, set aside as absurd and impious	Gospel of Peter Gospel of Thomas Gospel of Matthias Acts of Andrew and John and the other apostles

Table 3. Categorization of Texts by Eusebius.¹⁴

Eusebius reports Origen’s review of canonical scriptures as follows.

Category	Books
Indisputable	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John Paul Peter [1 Peter] Apocalypse Epistle by John [1 John] Hebrews
Doubtful	Peter, perhaps second [2 Peter] Epistles by John, perhaps 2 nd and 3 rd [2 John, 3 John]

Table 4. Categorization of Texts by Origen.¹⁵

¹⁴ Eusebius, “The Divine Scriptures That Are Accepted and Those That Are Not”, Chapter 25 in Book 3 of The Church History of Eusebius, (early 4th Century AD). Rev. Arthur Cushman McGiffert (translator), in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Volume 1, Philip Schaff (editor), AGES Software (1997).

¹⁵ Eusebius, “His [Origen] Review of the Canonical Scriptures”, Chapter 25 in *The Church History of Eusebius, Book 6*, AGES Software (1997).

Category	Books
Canonical	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John Acts of the Apostles James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon Revelation of John
Not canonical, but may be appointed to be read	Wisdom of Solomon Wisdom of Sirach Esther Judith Tobit Teaching of the Apostles Shepherd

Table 5. Categorization of Texts by Athanasius.¹⁶

By the time of Athanasius (367 AD), all 27 of the present books of the New Testament had been accepted into the canon. The Third Council of Carthage (397 AD), in its *Canon 24*, declared a canon of the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament canon of this council has the same list as given by Athanasius, but in a different order. This was a council of African bishops. It roughly corresponded to the present Episcopal General Convention. This canon also stipulates that “the Church across the sea shall be consulted”.¹⁷ The council recognized that on matters of great importance that consensus of all the churches was desirable, such as the present day Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion. The approval of this canon (excluding Hebrews) by Pope Innocent I appears in his letter to Bishop Exsuperius of Toulouse in 405 AD.¹⁸

The Council at Carthage (419 AD) was attended by 217 bishops. It produced a collection of canons known as “The Code of the African Church”. Canon 24 is a list of Canonical Scriptures. That canon also stipulated that only these scriptures may be read in church. Here is the list.

¹⁶ Athanasius, “Festal Letter 39 for 367 AD”, in *Selected Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, Archibald Robertson, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Volume 4, Philip Schaff (editor), AGES Software (1997).

¹⁷ “Third Council of Carthage (A.D. 397)”, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/carthage.html>, 04 August 2002.

¹⁸ “Innocent I (A.D. 405)”, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/innocent.html> (05 August 2002).

Books
Matthew, Mark, Luke, John James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Phillipians, Collosians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

Table 6. Council of Carthage (419 AD) Canon 24.¹⁹

The Council of Trent (1546) fixed the Roman Catholic canon of Holy Scripture which includes all 27 books of the New Testament.²⁰

Notice that Jude is listed as accepted in all the lists except for the one by Eusebius. This is important because some people now claim, based on its status as a “disputed” book, that Jude is not inspired and should not be used for guiding doctrine, faith, and practice.²¹ For a book to be accepted as inspired, a book had to be written by an apostle or someone directly associated with an apostle, and the book was not to have been used to craft heresy. Books that were disputed (not rejected) were disputed over the issue of authorship. Sheler gave the following explanation regarding Jude.

*The letter of Jude is considered by some too late (early in the second century) to have been written by the attested author, the “brother of James” (and thus of Jesus). The letter warns against false teachers and quotes two apocryphal books, The Assumption of Moses, and Enoch. Luther refused to include it among the “true, certain chief books” of the New Testament. However, many scholars find the presumption of a second-century provenance to be “largely guesswork” and see little reason to doubt that Jude is its author.*²²

One of the apocryphal quotes in Jude 14-15 come from the Book of Enoch, verse 9, which follows.

*Behold! He cometh with ten thousands of His holy ones
To execute judgement upon all,
And to destroy all the ungodly:*

¹⁹ “The Canons of the 217 Blessed Fathers Who Assembled at Carthage” (419 AD), contained in *The Canons of the Synods of Sardica, Carthage, Constantinople, and Carthage Under St. Cyprian, Which Canons Were Received by the Council in Trullo and Ratified by II. Nice*, contained in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, Philip Schaff (editor), AGES Software (1997).

²⁰ “Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures”, in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, The Fourth Session* (08 April 1546). <http://www.bible-researcher.com/trent1.html> 05 August 2002.

²¹ Rev. Canon Edward Messersmith, Episcopal Chaplain, The Pennsylvania State University (1986).

²² Jeffery L. Sheler, *Is the Bible True? How Modern Debates and Discoveries Affirm the Essence of the Scriptures*, Harper/Zondervan (1999), page 39.

And to convict all flesh

Of all the works of their ungodliness which they have ungodly committed,

*And of all the hard things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.*²³

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* conjectures that the Book of Enoch (also called Book of Henoch) got the text from Jude, rather than the Jude getting the text from the Book of Henoch.²⁴

The canon of Holy Scripture is important. By it, we are able to discern obvious heresy and can shield our families from errant teachings, such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, who have added to or altered the canon. The canon (standard by which we make decisions) distinguishes Jews, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants from one another. When people try to throw out Jude or Romans, or place Gospel of Thomas or other Gnostic writings above Holy Scripture, we know they are heretics and are not to be listened to.

Faithfulness of Transmission

Irenaeus tells us of one episode of the transmission of Holy Scriptures. While this does not give us a continuous authentication, it demonstrates the care that God has exercised in preserving his written Word. The following story has been repeated in many textbooks.²⁵

2. For before the Romans possessed their kingdom, while as yet the Macedonians held Asia, Ptolemy the son of Lagus, being anxious to adorn the library which he had founded in Alexandria, with a collection of the writings of all men, which were [works] of merit, made request to the people of Jerusalem, that they should have their Scriptures translated into the Greek language. And they — for at that time they were still subject to the Macedonians — sent to Ptolemy seventy of their elders, who were thoroughly skilled in the Scriptures and in both the languages, to carry out what he had desired. But he, wishing to test them individually, and fearing lest they might perchance, by taking counsel together, conceal the truth in the Scriptures, by their interpretation, separated them from each other, and commanded them all to write the same translation. He did this with respect to all the books. But when they came together in the same place before Ptolemy, and each of them compared his own interpretation with that of every other, God was indeed glorified, and the Scriptures were acknowledged as truly divine. For all of them read out the common translation [which they had prepared] in the very same words and the very same names, from beginning to end, so that even the Gentiles present perceived that the Scriptures had been interpreted by the inspiration of God. And there was nothing astonishing in God having done this, — He who, when, during the captivity of the people under Nebuchadnezzar, the Scriptures had been corrupted, and when, after seventy years, the Jews had returned to their own land, then, in the times of Artaxerxes king of the Persians, inspired Esdras the

²³ Verse 9, *Book of Enoch*,

http://anes235-1.ff.cuni.cz/projects/semite/ethopian/books/Enoch/book_1/ei1.htm, 04 August 2002.

²⁴ A. J. Maas, "Enoch", transcribed by Don Ross, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume VII (1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07218a.htm>, 04 August 2002.

²⁵ Irenaeus (lived 120-202 AD), "A Vindication of the Prophecy in Isaiah (7:14) Against the Misinterpretations of Theodotion, Aquila, the Ebionites, and the Jews. Authority of the Septuagint Version. Arguments in Proof that Christ was Born of a Virgin", *Irenaeus Against Heresies*, Book 3, Chapter 21, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Volume 1, Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (editors) (06 January 1885). The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

priest, of the tribe of Levi, to recast all the words of the former prophets, and to re-establish with the people the Mosaic legislation.

3. Since, therefore, the Scriptures have been interpreted with such fidelity, and by the grace of God, and since from these God has prepared and formed again our faith towards His Son, and has preserved to us the unadulterated Scriptures in Egypt.