

The Rule of Books

1 Pet 3:15-16 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. 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.

As many times through the centuries Roman officials came to see that the suppression of Christianity demanded the destruction of the Scriptures.. **When we look back over Christian history, we find few— if any— decisions more basic than those made during the first three centuries surrounding the formation of the Bible.**

THE BASICS OF THE BIBLE

The name— **Bible**— suggested that Christians considered these writings special. *Jerome, the fourth century translator, called them “the Divine Library.”*

Today the Scriptures are grouped

- Old Testament (or Covenant) *which the early Christians claimed — along with the Jews*
- New Testament. *which the early Christians produced—in spite of the Jews*

In the ancient world a “testament,” or “covenant,” was the term for a special relationship between two parties. *Biblically the term stands for the special relationship between God and man, initiated and sustained by the grace of the Lord God.* The old covenant: between the Lord and Abraham, then between God and Abraham’s descendants – who became known as the Jews. *So the Old Testament contains the books that tell the story of the Jews and their ancient worship of God.* Jesus was God’s promised Messiah, who established a new covenant with his new people, the church. *So the New Testament stands for the books telling the story of Jesus Christ and the birth of the church.*

The word for the special place these books occupy in Christianity is **canon**. The Greek term meant “a measuring rod” or, as we might say, “a ruler.” **It was a standard for judging something straight.** “*Scripture cannot be broken the very thing written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled*” (John 10:35: Luke 24:44).

Early believers went to great lengths to make the Old Testament into a Christian book. They developed a method of interpretation that discovered Jesus Christ and the Christian message all over the Old Testament. **We call this allegorical interpretation**, because it turns actual events into a symbol for something else. (Crossing of the Jordan River, into a symbol of baptism).

Origen, who spoke of the different levels of Scripture: “The Scriptures were composed through the Spirit of God, and have both a meaning which is obvious, and another which is hidden from most readers. . . . The whole law is spiritual, but the inspired meaning is not recognized by all— only by those who are gifted with the grace of the Holy Spirit in the word of wisdom and knowledge.” Christian appeals to allegory infuriated pagan critics of the faith because their case depended on their taking the Old Testament only on the surface.

THE QUESTION OF THE APOCRYPHA

When Christians retained the Old Testament they did not settle which books this included. Today Christians differ over the inclusion or rejection of the ‘Apocrypha’ in the Old Testament list of books.

Reasons for protestant view:

- Jews in Palestine in the early years of Christianity had a canon corresponding to the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament.
- Jesus referred to this list when he spoke of the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms (Luke 24:44).
- The evidence seems to indicate that neither Jesus nor his apostles ever quoted from the Apocrypha as Scripture.
- Early believers in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire, nearest Palestine, did not use the apocrypha.
- During the sixteenth-century Reformation most Protestants accepted the view of early eastern Christians and rejected the Apocrypha as canonical.

Reason’s for including Apocrypha:

- Beyond Palestine Jews were more inclined to consider as Scripture writings of the Apocrypha.
- The Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) included books of the Apocrypha.
- In the West Christians under the influence of Augustine usually received the Apocrypha as part of Scripture.

- The Roman Catholic church, following Augustine, accepted the books. And that is how the churches differ to this day.

During the days of the apostles congregations often read letters written to other churches (Ephesians, Galatians, Romans). *These letters were intended to be read in public worship, probably alongside some portion of the Old Testament or with some sermon.*

The question is, **out of this growing body of Christian literature, how did the twenty-seven books we know as the New Testament come to be set apart as Scripture?** How and when did they cross the line between books regarded as important and even authoritative, and books regarded as holy and the Word of God? How did they become canonical?

1) First, the books that are Scripture and are truly the Word of God have about them a self-evidencing quality. *They have always exercised, and still exercise, an unparalleled power upon the lives of men.*

2) Certain Christian books were added to Scripture because they were used in Christian worship (commonly excepted). The apostle Paul urged the Colossians 4:16.: *“After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.”*

3) A book's ties to an apostle. This was the test of a book's validity: Was it written by an apostle, or at least by a man who had direct contact with the circle of the apostles? *Did not Jesus say: “He who receives you receives me” (Matt. 10:40)?*

A LIST OF CHRISTIAN BOOKS

About A.D. 140 a wealthy and much-traveled ship owner from Sinope on the Black Sea came to Rome. His name was Marcion. Son of a bishop, Marcion fell under the spell of the gnostic teacher Cerdo, who believed that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Marcion developed Cerdo's distinction – *the Old Testament God was full of wrath and the author of evil. This God was only concerned for the Jewish people.* He was prepared to destroy all other people. Contrast, *the Christian's God was a God of grace and love for all, who disclosed himself in Jesus Christ, his Son.*

Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and also those New Covenant writings that he thought favored Jewish readers — ie: **Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Hebrews.** He also rejected other Christian writings that appeared to him to compromise his own views, including the Pastoral Letters (**and 2 Timothy and Titus**). So he was left with only a mutilated version of Luke's Gospel (omitting the nativity stories) and ten letters of Paul. **The Apostle to the Gentiles, it seems, was the only apostle who did not corrupt the gospel of Jesus.**

Marcion's garbled Christian views were firmly repudiated by the church in Rome, and Marcion was excommunicated from the church in **A.D. 144.**

----Marcion presented the orthodox churches with a twofold problem: his list of New Testament books, shaped in the image of Paul, and his rejection of the Old Testament. **Marcion's worship of Paul was little short of idolatry.**

----As Tertullian put it, Paul had become the apostle of the heretics! ***Of course, Marcion had to misinterpret Paul to make the apostle fit his beliefs, but that didn't make the churches' problem any less real:*** how could they accept Paul's letters as God's word without endorsing Marcionite teaching?

In the end Paul meant too much to the church to dismiss him because of Marcion's extreme views. The apostle's letters were too well known and too widely used to discard them. ***The church chose, instead, to restore the Pastorals and the letters of the other apostles and to link all the letters to four Gospels by using the Book of Acts as the bridge.*** While the

church treasured the grace of God preached by Paul, it realized that jettisoning the Old Testament was suicidal. *The New Covenant won't make sense without the Old*

By retaining the Old Testament the church scored two important points.

- It insisted that faith for the Christian would have to reconcile both the wrath and the love of God.
- By retaining the Old Testament the church underscored the importance of history for the Christian faith.

If Marcion nudged the churches into thinking about forming a New Testament, another troublemaker, Montanus, forced the churches into thinking about closing it.

FRESH VOICES FROM GOD

John 16:13-15 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. Jesus promised his people the Spirit of Truth to guide them. SO...how did there come a time when the church declared that all the inspired books that could be written had been written, and that nothing more could ever be added to the written word of God? Tertullian bitterly put it, "the Holy Spirit was chased into a book"?

More and more people were joining the churches, but the distinction between church and world was fading (*as today*). The church was becoming secularized;. **Into this situation, sometime between A.D. 156 and 172 Montanus appeared a voice in the wilderness of Asia Minor. He came with a demand for a higher standard and a greater discipline and sharper separation of the church from the world.**

He and his two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla, went about prophesying in the name of the Spirit, and foretelling the speedy second coming of Christ (*like today*). But these new prophets, in contrast to prophets in biblical times, spoke in a state of ecstasy, as though their personalities were suspended while the Spirit spoke in them.

---Montanus was convinced that he and his prophetesses were the God-given instruments of revelation.

The prophet claimed the right to push Christ and the apostolic message into the background. **The fresh revelation of the Spirit could override important notes of the Christian gospel; Christ was no longer central.** In the name of the Spirit, Montanus denied that God's decisive revelation had occurred in Jesus Christ.

The difference was that in the first days the Holy Spirit had enabled men to write the sacred books of the Christian faith; ***in the later days the Holy Spirit enabled men to understand, to interpret, and to apply what had been written.***

One of the first is a document written about A.D. 190: the Muratorian Canon, *from its discoverer L. A. Muratori, who first published it in 1740.* (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 1, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Galatians, 1, 2 Thessalonians, Romans, Philemon, Titus, 1, 2 Timothy, Jude, 1,2, 3 John, and Revelation), ***the Apocalypse of Peter, and The Wisdom of Solomon.*** The last two did not remain on the approved list. But by A.D. 190 the churches clearly accepted the idea of Christian Scriptures alongside Jewish Scriptures, one fulfilling what the other promises.

The first complete list of books, as we have them today, came in an Easter letter written in 367 by Bishop Athanasius from Alexandria. Shortly thereafter councils in North Africa at Hippo (393) and at Carthage published the same list.

The shape of the New Testament shows that the early churches' primary aim was to submit fully to the teachings of the apostles. In that purpose they shaped the character of Christianity for all time. The faith remained catholic precisely because it was apostolic.