The Canon of the Scriptures

“…it is necessary to emphasize that no church through its councils *made* the canon of scripture. No church – in particular the Roman Catholic Church – by its decrees gave to or pronounced upon the books of the Bible their infallibility. The Bible owes its authority to no individual or group. The church does not control the canon, but the canon controls the church. Although divine authority was attributed to the New Testament books by the later church, this authority was no derived from the church but was inherent in the books themselves. As a child identifies its mother, the later church *identified* the books which it regarded as having unique authority.” (How We Got the Bible, Lightfoot, pages 86-87)

**Introduction:**

* Many religious books were written during the time the Old and New Testament books were written. How do we know what books rightly take their place in the Bible? What books should be excluded?
* **Principle:** Writings that are inspired of God make up the canon. Books that are not inspired do not belong. Differentiating between the two groups is referred to as a study of the *canon* of scripture.

**Canon**

* English word derives from Greek *(kanon)* and Hebrew *(qaneh).* The word literally has reference to a *reed.* (Our English word *cane* came from the same word). Since reeds were used as measuring rods, the word came to mean a standard or rule. (Also a list or index).
* The canon of the Bible is the list of works (writings) which have divine authority and belong in the book.

**Authority**

* Inspired scripture is authoritative as soon as it is written! (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:37; 2 Peter 1:20-21; 3:14-16).
* So, a book is considered canonical **because of** its inherent authority!
* No church council by its decrees (Council of Nicaea, 325. BTW, there is no legitimate evidence that the canon of scripture was even discussed on that occasion) can *make* the books of the Bible authoritative.
* **Question:** Why are the apocryphal books excluded from the canon? **Answer:** Because the apocryphal books were never recognized by Christians as inspired works. They were seen to be spurious and counterfeit.

**The Canon of the Old Testament**

* Law of Moses, Prophets and Psalms (Luke 24:44)
* Note: Hebrew Bible of today is the same:
  + **Law:** Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
  + **Prophets:** (Former Prophets) Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel; 1 and 2 Kings. (Latter Prophets) Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Book of the twelve (what we know of as the Minor prophets)
  + **Writings:** Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1 & 2 Chronicles.
* Jesus referred to the first and last martyrs of the Old Testament (Luke 11:51). (Gen. To 2 Chron.)
* Jewish leaders at Jamnia (near the coast of Palestine) confirmed what for some time had been recognized as the canon of the Old Testament near the end of the first century.
* Josephus refers to 22 books (combined Ruth with Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah) = our 39 books. “only twenty-two books which contain the records of all time, and are justly believed to be divine.” (Josephus, *Against Apion* I. 8.)
* In the 3rd century, Origen confirmed the testimony of Josephus (Cited by Eusebius*, Ecclesiastical History* VI. 25). Jerome (a little later) pointed to the same books as canonical materials for the O.T.

**The Canon of the New Testament**

* Paul gave instructions that his writings be read in all the churches (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27)
* Jesus had said that the Holy Spirit would “guide” them “into all truth” (cf. John 16:13). It is not surprising that Christians would gather Paul’s writings, the gospels, and the other epistles, and respect them as they did the words of the Lord Himself.
* In the middle of the second century Justin Martyr refers to readings of the “memoirs of the apostles” along with the “writings of the prophets” (Justin Martyr, First Apology, Chapter 67).
* By the last half of the second century, substantial lists of the New Testament books appear in writings.
  + Muratorian Fragment: (part of it lost) Luke (referred to as the third gospel), John, Acts, 13 letters of Paul and others. The only books not listed Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter and 1 John.
  + Origen (3rd Century) – Lists all, noting that some questioned Hebrews, James, 2 & 3 John. (ibid)
  + Eusebius (4th century) – Lists all, notes that some suspect James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John and Jude, but that the majority accept them all as inspired.
  + Athanasius of Alexandria (3676 A.D.) Listed all of the 27 books which were accepted without reservation in his time as canonical. Same 27 as we have today.

“The Bible had grown in relative proportion to its divine revelation – gradually - and its books likewise had gradually assumed the roles **which their inherent authority demanded**.” (How We Got the Bible, page 85, emphasis mine, SC).

**Note:**

* A number of good books circulated among Christians during the early days of the church, such as the Epistle of Barnabas (near the close of the apostolic age, not the Bible Barnabas) and the Shepherd of Hermas (1st half of the second century). These books were NEVER received on a par with the genuine apostolic writings!
* **Example:** Muratorian Fragment, re: Shepherd of Hermas – It could be read in public worship but it was not to be counted among the prophetic or apostolic writings.

**Note concerning Apocrypha:**

* **Old Testament Apocrypha** (Books that appear between the Testaments in the Catholic Bible). 15 books, written between 200 B.C. and 100 A.D. Were never included in the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament. (Jews do not regard them as canonical). No evidence they were ever accepted as canonical by Jesus or the apostles. Do not evidence intrinsic qualities of inspiration (legendary, fictitious, self-contradictory, etc.). Were not claimed as canonical by Catholic church until the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent, April 8, 1546.
* **New Testament Apocrypha** (Most obviously spurious. Contain fanciful stories about Jesus and the apostles. Were written under the assumed names of the apostles in the second century and later. Were never considered by Christians a part of the New Testament. Most have obvious agendas, and peculiar doctrines that contradict scripture, ex: Gnostic heresies).
* **Both the Old and New Testament apocrypha are rightly rejected from our Bible.** Dan Brown’s fanciful claims (The DaVinci Code) are fiction and sensationalism, and have no basis in scholarship or reality.

**Conclusion:**

* There was little disagreement or controversy in ancient times regarding the canon either of the Old or New Testament. The texts that are included in our Bible are there by acclaim. They have intrinsic authority that has been recognized through the centuries.
* It is only in modern times that sensationalistic claims concerning “lost books” and “other gospels” have incited the imaginations of the ignorant. By the providence of God we have *the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints”* (cf. Jude 3).