

Canonicity

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of canonicity can be a relatively simple or enormously complex discussion. It is intricately related to yet distinct from the topic of inspiration. Nevertheless, it is an important part of understanding Scripture, as it touches on a variety of issues important for the Christian life. Consider the following questions as an example of the importance of canonicity for Christian life, apologetics, and evangelism:

- How did we come to have these 66 books in our Bibles?
- How did these books come to be recognized as “canonical”?
- What was the criteria for determining a book to be canonical?
- Is the canon still open, or is it closed?
- What about the books found in the RCC canon?

We may answer some of these questions holistically in regard to the entire Scripture. Others, however, require a little more explanation as they relate to the development of the two testaments. In general, we’ll keep our discussion of canonicity broad in scope and avoid the weeds of historical criticism. We will also delay discussion of textual criticism and treat it more thoroughly at a later point.

2 CONCEPT OF CANONICITY

The word “canon” derives from the Greek term *kanw,n*, referring to a “reed” or “rod” used for measuring (see Ezek 42:16 for an example of the Hebrew equivalent used in this way). The term came to be used as a way of expressing the standard by which a written document was measured for inclusion in the collection of sacred (i.e., inspired) writings. Thus, authors have expressed canonicity in the following ways:

- “The list of writings acknowledged by the Church as documents of divine revelation”¹
- “Those writings which conform to the rule or standard of divine inspiration and authority.”²
- “The set of writings regarded as authentic and definitive for Scripture’s contents.”³
- “The list of books that the church acknowledges as inspired Scripture, hence normative for faith and practice.”⁴

¹ Hanson, *Origen’s Doctrine of Tradition* (London,

² Gleason Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 73.

³ William D. Barrick, “Canonicity,” in *Basic Christian Doctrine* (unpublished paper).

⁴ David. F. Farness, NT Introduction syllabus (Fall, 2009), 88.

Notice, however, that in each case these expressions of canonicity all relate these writings back in some way to the concept of inspiration. No careful study of canonicity can proceed without a clear acknowledgement of this relationship. Far too often, we tend to link canonicity with a set of criteria by which individual books are measured without identifying what those criteria were intended to discern. At the end of such studies, we're left with the unwarranted—indeed, unbiblical—assumption that at the end of the day, the church, through its various criteria and “tests,” came to determine the biblical canon. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

3 DETERMINATION OF CANONICITY

Two major concepts of “canon” have developed over the centuries which represent this canon/inspiration relationship. The first we could call the **active ecclesiastical view**. It is associated with the Roman Catholic Church. This approach holds that the “canon” is the *authoritative collection of writings*. The key distinction with this view is that the authority of this canon rests on the ecclesiastical body as the collecting agency. The *agency* designates or declares a writing canonical and thus authoritative. In other words, it *actively determines* the canon, and a writing cannot be said to be “canonical” (and thus authoritative) until the body designates it as such.

The second view we could call the **passive ecclesiastical view**. With this view, the “canon” is considered the *collection of authoritative writings*. In other words, the writings themselves have inherent authority, and they are deemed canonical not in an active sense by an ecclesiastical body, but passively through the agency's recognition of their authority. The writings, being inspired, are inherently authoritative, and the ecclesiastical body comes to recognize such authority as the writings give evidence of inspiration.

It should be obvious that only the second view has biblical warrant. If canonicity is determined by a book's inspiration, then no human or ecclesiastical agency can determine or *make* a book canonical. Only God can determine a book's canonicity, and since a book was inspired at the moment of its writing, it was also canonical at that moment as well, regardless of how long it took for God's people to recognize it.

Thus, we must remember a fundamental truth regarding canonicity:

The only true test of canonicity is the testimony of God the Holy Spirit to the authority of His own word.⁵

Numerous theologians have written on this point, and their writings are instructive to us. Thus, I have included a number of passages which fill out the critical importance of understanding this truth:

⁵ Archer, *OT Introduction*, 85.

*Canonicity is determined by God. A book is not inspired because men make it canonical; it is canonical because God inspired it.... Canonicity is determined or established authoritatively by God; it is merely discovered by man.*⁶

*When the Word of God was written it became Scripture and, inasmuch as it had been spoken by God, possessed absolute authority. Since it was the Word of God, it was canonical. That which determines the canonicity of a book, therefore, is the fact that the book is inspired by God. Hence a distinction is properly made between the authority which the Old Testament possesses as divinely inspired, and the recognition of that authority on the part of Israel.*⁷

*The Church no more gave us the NT canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave gravity, by His work in creation, and similarly He gave us the New Testament canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up.*⁸

*The church, in both Jewish and Christian eras, has served as custodian of and witness to the contents of the inspired Scriptures, but the latter do not derive their authority from any ecclesiastical body. Canonization was not a matter of the closing of a list of entries, partial or final, but a recognition of the inherent canonical quality and qualification of each portion as it became available. Thus canonicity, an innate authenticity by virtue of divine inspiration, may be viewed as antecedent to canonization, the acknowledgement of the authenticity and authority of the writings of the community of believers.*⁹

If there's one takeaway from any discussion on canonicity, it is that God is the only determiner of canonicity. Man discovers and recognizes what God has written. This simple theological principle distinguishes the biblical view from bad ecclesiology (e.g., RCC position) and bad bibliology (higher criticism). What is more, if we hold that inspiration gives Scripture an inherent authority, then we must remember that Scripture never suggests that any standard exists *outside* of Scripture itself for judging the canonicity of a writing.

Having established that a writing's canonicity is determined only by God, we must now discuss how God's people throughout the ages (both OT and NT) came to recognize and given assent to these particular books as canonical and thus authoritative. What processes, if any, were used to come the conclusions they did, and when did all this take place?

3.1 INADEQUATE VIEWS OF DETERMINING CANONICITY

There have been certain "criteria" which have been proposed in recent times, mostly by theologically liberal scholars, to explain the formation of the Christian canon. These criteria, as will become immediately apparent, are wholly inadequate for explaining the origins of the canon, first, because they oversimplify

⁶ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. and exp. Ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 221.

⁷ E. J. Young, "The Canon of the Old Testament," in *Revelation and the Bible*, p. 156.

⁸ J. I. Packer, *God Speaks to Man: Revelation and the Bible* (Westminster Press, 1965), 81.

⁹ Milton C. Fisher, "The Canon of the Old Testament," in *EBC*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 1:386.

what was a long and somewhat mysterious process, and two, because they tend to confuse determination and recognition. As we have already emphasized, men had no part in determining what comprised Scripture. However, when one rejects the concept of divine inspiration outright, the only conclusion that can be made for how the canon formed was to propose various “criteria” by which ecclesiastical bodies.

3.1.1 Age determines canonicity

In the late 18th century, J. G. Eichhorn suggested the age of a book to be the determining test for a book’s canonicity. Concerning the formation of the OT canon, he argued that books were excluded if they were composed *after* the time of Malachi. Yet we might immediately ask, What about those numerous works referenced throughout the OT which predate Malachi by centuries? Works like the Book of Jashar (Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18), the Book of the Wars of Yahweh (Num 21:14), and others are far older than Malachi, and yet never appear in any collection of OT writings.

3.1.2 Language determines canonicity

E. Hitzig in the 19th century proposed that the Jews used the Hebrew language as a test of canonicity. But what about books such as Ecclesiasticus, Tobit, and 1 Maccabees, which were not included in the OT canon though they are written in Hebrew? Even more, what should we think of those portions of Daniel, Ezra, and Jeremiah which are written in Aramaic?

3.1.3 Conformity to Torah determines canonicity

Some scholars suggest that the Pentateuch acted as the canonical barometer for a book’s acceptance. Now, at first blush we might assent to such criteria. After all, if all Scripture is authored, ultimately, by God himself, then we would expect all canonical books to conform to the Torah. But the fatal flaw lies simply in this: are we sure that every other book written (e.g., the Words of Nathan [2 Chron 9:29], or Isaiah’s Acts of Uzziah [2 Chron 26:22] or Jeremiah’s Lamentations for Josiah [2 Chron 35:25]) did not conform wholly to the Pentateuch?

3.1.4 Religious value determines canonicity

This argument proposes that a book’s ability to produce moral or religious influence on the individual was a guiding principle in the canonization process. But even when we look in our own church bookstore, we see shelves of books which, I hope, offer religious value to our spiritual lives. Yet we would not dare suggest they are equal in authority with Scripture. Rather, we recognize that a book’s *effect* on an individual is not the same as inspiration. This view echoes the classic Neo-Orthodox view of inspiration (see discussion in Inspiration).

3.1.5 Christian character determines canonicity

Similar to several previous criteria, this view suggests that if a book exudes Christian morality, ethics, and theology, then it was included in the canon. But once again, we run into the same problems as before. Should we include books like *Pilgrim’s Progress* as well? After all, they exemplify Christian character! Taken a different way, there are many works, both old and new, which have excellent Christian character and yet are *not* included in the canon.

3.1.6 Religious community determines canonicity

As we have already discussed, this view is akin the *active ecclesiastical view* of canonicity. A book’s inclusion in the canon was determined by its acceptance by God’s people. But as we’ve already emphasized, canonicity is determined by inspiration, and no individual or group of people is capable of

producing an inspired work. If this view were correct, it would insinuate that a book did not possess canonical authority until it was accepted by the religious community. But often, such “acceptance” did not take place until *centuries* after its original composition. Are we to suggest that a book of the Bible only became authoritative when it was officially “recognized” as such by the church?

3.2 ORTHODOX VIEW OF DETERMINING CANONICITY

Once again, we emphasize that Scripture nowhere suggests that any authority *outside* of itself should be used to judge the canon. If there was, it would indicate that Scripture is a canon within a canon, and not the highest authority and judge of truth. In reality, we must recognize that ***the only true test for canonicity is the testimony of God the Holy Spirit to the authority of His own Word.***

We see this reality expressed repeatedly in the NT. First Corinthians emphasizes that only the Holy Spirit possesses the persuasive power to accept and recognize Scripture as God’s inspired word. The unbeliever—as a “natural” (i.e., Holy Spirit devoid) person, does not accept God’s word. But when the Holy Spirit empowers his word, people believe, because the Spirit is the operative power behind it (1 Thess 1:5). Just as the Spirit testifies with us regarding our spiritual adoption in Christ (Rom 8:15-16), so he testifies to the authority of his word. In fact, it would be absolutely illogical to suggest that the authority for determining the canon of Scripture rested on the very community which is *established* on the foundation of the Word (Eph 2:20).

To this, Archer offers a profound thought:

In the nature of the case we could hardly expect any other valid criteria than this. If canonicity is a quality somehow imparted to the books of Scripture by any kind of human decision, as Liberal scholars unquestionably assume (and as even the Roman Church implies by her self-contradictory affirmation: “The Church is the mother of the Scripture”), then perhaps a set of mechanical tests could be set up to determine which writings to accept as authoritative and which to reject. But if, on the other hand, a sovereign God has taken the initiative in revelation and in the production of an inspired record of that revelation through human agents, it must simply be a matter of recognition of the quality already inherent by divine act in the books so inspired. When a child recognizes his own parent from a multitude of other adults at some public gathering, he does not impart any new quality of parenthood by such an act; he simply recognizes a relationship which already exists. They did not impart canonicity to a single page of Scripture; they simply acknowledged the divine inspiration of religious documents which were inherently canonical from the time they were first composed, and formally rejected other books for which canonicity had been falsely claimed.¹⁰

To summarize Archer’s point with Scripture: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

¹⁰ Archer, *OT Survey*, 85.

4 PROCESS OF CANONIZATION

We must distinguish the term *canonization* from the term *canonicity*. The latter refers to an inherent quality of the text on the basis of inspiration. The former, however, refers to the process by which the canonicity of the biblical books came to be recognized. In other words, *canonicity* is determined by God through a process called inspiration and recognized by his people through a process called *canonization*.

Any discussion of the canonization process must be met with humble caution. Bruce Metzger's words provide an apt introduction to such a discussion, and although he speaks specifically of the canonization of the NT, his words apply equally to the OT process as well:

The recognition of the canonical status of the several books of the New Testament was the result of a long and gradual process, in the course of which certain writings, regarded as authoritative, were separated from the much larger body of early Christian literature. Although this was one of the most important developments in the thought and practice of the early Church, history is virtually silent as to how, when, and by whom it was brought about. Nothing is more amazing in the annals of the Christian Church than the absence of detailed accounts of so significant a process.¹¹

Because of the notable contextual differences between the canonization of the OT versus the NT, we must necessarily discuss these two processes separately. However, before we do so, we must acknowledge one important fact regarding both: the canonization of Scripture, as mysterious and historically hazy as it might be, was nevertheless providentially guided by God. We have our Bible as it exists today not only because God preserved it, but also because he guided and protected it from unauthorized incursion by non-inspired works.

4.1 CANONIZATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The OT we have in our Protestant Bible is a collection of 39 books written over the course of one thousand years. To this, the Roman Catholic Church added 14 other books to their canon in 1546 at the Council of Trent.

4.1.1 Order and Division of Books

The Jewish (Masoretic) canon observes a different order of books from the LXX and even our Protestant Bibles. The latter two appear in a more or less topical arrangement, the former is divided into 3 distinct units and have come to be designated by the word **Tanakh**, which is actually an acronym:

Torah (Law)

Nebi'im (Prophets)

Ketubim (Writings)

It's difficult to discern when this tripartite developed. Liberal scholars, of course, suggest that this division is the result of a three-stage developmental process. The Torah was "completed" in 398 B.C.,

¹¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford, England: Clarendon University Press, 1987), 1.

the Prophets were gradually assembled into a list between 300 and 200 B.C., and the Writings were not collected (or even written) until as late as A.D. 100.

From a developmental standpoint, we see in the text of the OT hints at stages of composition over the course of the progress of revelation. Israel received the Torah during its infancy as a nation, and in Deuteronomy 31:9 we learn that a copy of the Torah was laid up before the ark shortly after the death of Moses (c. 1405 B.C.). As for the Former Prophets, Freedman suggests that they were once joined together with the Torah into a “Primary History” of Israel. However, by the time of the post-exilic period, the Torah was separated from the rest as a means of enhancing the figure of Moses as a prophet and lawgiver and to focus the nation upon the role of the Law in covenant life.

The collection and inclusion of the Latter Prophets, we may assume, occurred in progressive fashion as each book was composed and recognized, most likely by means of its authorship (cf. Deut 18). The books of the Writings were by far the most varied in terms of which books were included. Judging by the various citations in ancient historical sources, both the order of the books in the Writings, as well as which books were included in it, varied considerably. The evidence suggests that at one time, perhaps even during the NT era, several books of the Writings (Ruth and Lamentations) were included among the Prophets. Their later inclusion among the Writings most likely occurred as a result of their role in the celebration of certain Jewish feasts.

What was the ultimate catalyst for the development of the tripartite division of the Hebrew canon? Freedman hypothesizes,

The effort to rewrite or revise the classic history of Israel did not entirely succeed, but the Chronicler's work, ultimately supplemented by the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, constituted the framework of a third circle of literature in the canon. Such books as the Psalter, Proverbs, and others that could be associated with the house of David (for example, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes) were included, as well as those that dealt with the fortunes of the sacred city and its Temple (for example, Lamentations, and later, Daniel).¹²

In other words, historical circumstances in Israel's life led the community to arrange the canon in such a way so focus upon three primary subject: Moses (Torah), the Prophets, and David (Writings). This arrangement is consistent with NT references to the OT canon, such that Jesus refers to the OT as “The law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44), the latter being the book most associated with the person of David. This new emphasis also may clarify why books such as Ruth, Daniel and Chronicles were separated from the Prophets. All three are “historical,” yet their focus differs drastically from those of their contemporary “prophetic” counterparts (Judges, Kings, and the writing prophets).

In reality, the order of the books of the OT have varied considerably throughout history. Kaiser writes that

there is no evidence to show that any Hebrew manuscript ever contained the books of the Old Testament canon as they are arranged in our Hebrew Bibles as now printed.... In short, of more

¹² David Noel Freedman, “The Formation of the Canon of the Old Testament,” in *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. Edwin B. Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss, and John W. Welch (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 320-21.

than sixty lists [surveyed], no two present exactly the same order for the books comprising the Old Testament canon; so that it can be affirmed positively that the order of those books [and their position in a certain division] was never fixed by any accepted authority of either the Jewish or Christian Church.¹³

Thus, what we learn from a discussion on the various orders and divisions of books in the OT is not that some authoritative order exists by which we must read and understand the OT. What we learn is that, regardless of the order in which the books appear, the *same* books appear again and again on these lists, indicating the antiquity of Jewish recognition of the OT canonical books.

4.1.2 Disputed Books

This does not suggest that discussion did not occur concerning certain books within the OT canon. We find mention of controversy among Jewish groups in the 2nd century A.D. concerning the canonicity of Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Proverbs. A century earlier, objections were raised about Ezekiel.

Esther, in particular, raised concerns among some subsections of Judaism over the absence of any mention of God or key OT theological concepts (temple, Jerusalem, law, covenant, sacrifice, etc.). In fact, it is the only OT book not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Nevertheless, the book was included in the canonical list of Josephus (A.D. 96) and the Talmud (2nd century A.D.). Ultimately, it appears that the believing community came to recognize its canonicity because of its historical accuracy, its explanation for the origins of the feast of Purim, and the hope and consolation it offered to the Jewish community scattered throughout the Roman empire following the destruction of Jerusalem. However, as we've already discussed, its *recognition* as canonical did not determine its *status* as canonical. In the case of Esther as well as other works, it took time for the believing community to recognize the books for what they were. Once it did, Esther became exceedingly popular, sparked numerous Jewish commentaries, was twice given a Talmudic translation (alone out of all the Writings and Prophets). In fact, more medieval manuscripts of Esther exist than any other book of the OT.

4.1.3 Council of Jamnia

In A.D. 90 the Rabbinic Academy met in the city of Jamnia to discuss objections raised over Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. In the end, the council affirmed that these two books "defiled the hands," i.e., were canonical. It was an event that had occurred before, and similar discussions continued into the following centuries. Unfortunately, numerous scholars have painted the picture that the conclusions at Jamnia served as an official "close" to the OT canon. In reality, all that occurred were discussions over minority objections concerning books that had already been widely recognized by the Jewish community as canonical. "These minority objections," Archer writes, "should not be misconstrued as having delayed the canonicity of the five books concerned here, any more than Martin Luther's sixteenth-century objections to James and Esther delayed canonical recognition of these books."¹⁴

¹³ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 44.

¹⁴ Archer, *OT Survey*, 77.

4.1.4 The Deuterocanonical Problem

In addition to the 39 books found in the Hebrew and Protestant Bibles, the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox traditions contain 14 other books which they deem canonical. This longer list, sometimes called the *Alexandrian canon* (as opposed to the *Palestinian canon* as represented in the Masoretic and Protestant traditions), first appeared as part of local church councils in North Africa in the 4th century A.D. By A.D. 1546, however, it was given formal ecclesiastical approval by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent.

At this point, a brief note on nomenclature is in order. Protestants commonly refer to these books as the “apocrypha” (“hidden” books), but the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches prefer to call them the *Deuterocanon*, meaning the “second canon.” Additionally, a number of other works, such as the Book of Enoch, the Assumption of Moses, as well as additions to Esther and Daniel have been referred to by Protestants as the *pseudopigrapha*, meaning “false writings.” Because of this, it best to avoid the term “apocrypha” as a title for these 14 books, since it’s a term that has been used rather broadly to refer at times to the pseudopigrapha, books which are not represented in the Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox deuterocanon.

The question of the canonicity of the deuterocanon is an important consideration as we look at the OT. Obviously, the Roman Catholic Church includes them in their list of authoritative writings. Should we include them as well? Why don’t they appear in our Protestant Bibles, and why did the Jewish community reject them?

The first argument is that early versions of the OT contain them. Yet, as Archer points out, this is only partially correct. Some versions did include them, but others did not. They are absent in the Aramaic Targums, the Syrian Peshitta, and it is apparent that Jerome, who translated the OT into Latin, did not accept them as equally authoritative with the rest of the OT books. In fact, this argument ultimately rests on the auspices of the LXX witness. All the later versions that contain them (Itala, Coptic, Ethiopic, and later Syriac versions) are all translations derived from the LXX and not from the Hebrew text. Yet even a closer look at the different LXX versions demonstrate that the inclusion of these various books were all but certain. As Archer puts it, “The three earliest MSS of the LXX show considerable uncertainty as to which books constitute the list of Apocrypha, and that the fourteen accepted by the Roman church are by no means substantiated by the testimony of the great uncials of the fourth and fifth centuries.”¹⁵

A second argument is that the presence of the deuterocanon in the LXX indicates the existence of an accepted canon which included these books. But such an argument is thin at best, because it’s not at all certain that these books in the LXX were even considered canonical. Even Philo, who lived in the 1st century A.D. and was from Alexandria (where the Alexandrian canon supposedly originated) quotes frequently from the OT books, but never quotes from the deuterocanon. Instead, it seems that the Jews in Alexandria chose to include in their addition to the OT books which they deemed valuable for edification, though not considered authoritative.

A third argument is that since the NT usually quotes from the LXX version of the OT, this is indication that the NT authors accepted the deuterocanon as authoritative. Additionally, they suggest that NT authors at

¹⁵ Ibid., 81.

times alluded to deuterocanonical works (Wisdom of Solomon 11:22 and 12:12-18 in Rom 9:19-23). However, this does little to explain how the Book of Enoch, which is quoted in Jude 14-15, *doesn't* appear in the deuterocanon! And it suggests, under this line of argument, that Aratus' *Phaenomena* (quoted in Acts 17:28) and Menander's *Thais* (quoted in 1 Cor 15:33) should be considered canonical as well! In reality, these parallels are better explained on the basis of common background, training, language, and the setting between these books and the NT writers.

A fourth argument is that the church Fathers quote from these books, which indicate that they considered them authoritative. However, not all did so, and even for those who did cite them, there's no indication that these references indicate they considered the entire book canonical. And it is apparent that key church Fathers, such as Athanasius, firmly rejected them.

In conclusion, despite the various arguments offered by supporters of the deuterocanon, none supply strong evidence that the deuterocanon ever received widespread recognition. Its appearance in the LXX and subsequent versions based on it does not indicate acceptance, but just as equally indicates their edificational quality. But a book's ability to encourage and inspire does not indicate inspiration! The fact that the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches adopted them as part of their canon is more of indication of the spiritual shift that took place in those movements.

4.2 CANONIZATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Similar to the OT process of canonization, the NT canon was shaped and formed over a period of several centuries. We acknowledge the fact that all the NT books were *canonical* at the moment of composition. However, the process by which the NT church came to recognize and affirm these books was long and gradual.

4.2.1 Factors influencing NT canon

Certain historical factors played a critical role in how and why the canon formed the way it did. To start, a clear outline of the core NT canon is evident by the close of the 2nd century A.D. Churches during this period were scattered and isolated, influencing the time in which this process occurred. Nevertheless, despite the diverse and scattered nature of these early churches, a wide unanimity existed over the greater part of the NT canon. As Christianity grew, certain movements and persons, both religious and socio-cultural, put pressure on the early church to clarify exactly which books were authoritative and which were not.

4.2.1.1 Gnosticism

Gnosticism came to flourish alongside Christianity around the 2nd century A.D., although traces of its philosophies can be detected in the writings of certain NT books as well. It was both a religious and philosophical teaching that was heavily influenced by Platonism. Gnosticism basically held that humans were "divine sparks" that had become imprisoned in physical bodies because of some pre-cosmic catastrophe. Certain elect individuals could obtain salvation by means of a special knowledge (*gnosis*) of their origin and destiny. Gnosticism was syncretistic by nature, and came to rival Christianity itself because it blended Christian teaching with pagan concepts, thus resulting in a degeneration of Christian thinking. It proved to be a huge threat to early Christianity, and many congregations were affected by it to some degree.

Gnosticism produced a vast array of literature that was meant to instruct people about where the world came from, but also to supply the means by which someone could gain victory over this world and return to the realm of the highest god. This compelled the early church to clarify orthodox theology and separate what was authoritative Scripture from the mass of spurious literature put out by the gnostics.

4.2.1.2 *Marcion*

Marcion was the name of one particular gnostic who published his own list of authoritative NT writings around A.D. 140. He accepted only 10 of Paul's epistles, and trusted only the gospel of Luke. To him, these 10 Pauline epistles became the source, the guarantee, and the norm of true doctrine. He rejected the OT and excluded any NT citation of the OT as a Judaizing interpolation.

His canon was received favorably by some Christians, and it forced the orthodox church to respond, lest many of the recognized books of the NT become excluded.

4.2.1.3 *Montanism*

Montanism would be called the 2nd century A.D. expression of the "charismatic movement." It fostered prophetic and apocalyptic expressions, and its influence spread from Phrygian Asia Minor throughout the whole church, both in the East and the West. In this movement, congregations were claiming the gift of prophesy and thus adding to the Scriptures. It was a significant factor in the "hardening" of the NT canon.

4.2.1.4 *Persecution*

Persecution had an enormous influence on early Christianity. Not only did it function as a purifying agent, but it also had a heavy impact on the formation of the canon. Roman emperors made frequent campaigns against Christians, sometimes going door to door to confiscate Christian writings. It forced Christians to be certain which books were Scripture and which were not. In the end, Christians had to decide which books to protect and potentially die for. Christians would most likely only risk their lives for truly inspired works.

4.2.2 Historical Development of NT Canon

The development of the NT canon was a slow and gradual process. Some of this was the result of the communication and transportation barriers of the day. It took much longer for believers in the West to become aware of the evidence for books written in the east, and vice versa. Added to that were the factors of persecution, especially during the reign of Diocletian, when NT writings were being confiscated. Thus, **universal recognition** of the full NT canon took several centuries. In general, this historical development unfolded in three phases of recognition.

4.2.2.1 *PHASE 1: From the Apostolic Period to Hegisippus (A.D. 70-170)*

During this period, the NT canon was composed and the majority was recognized. The Pauline corpus was the first to be formed, as can be seen in the early church father's recognition of Paul's authority in their own writings. By the turn of the century, all 27 books of the NT were recognized as authoritative *somewhere*, though not all together. Some congregations remained unaware of some of the books.

4.2.2.2 *PHASE 2: To the Period of the Persecution of Diocletian (A.D. 170-303)*

During this period, the full canon gained broader acceptance. Only 2 Peter and Revelation came under notable dispute. It was during this period that Gnosticism's influence becomes overtly heavy. It was also during this time that certain influential individuals such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria arose in defense of the canon.

4.2.2.3 PHASE 3: To the Period of the 3rd Council of Carthage (A.D. 303-397)

The beginning of this period saw the rise of Diocletian's persecution against Christians, in which he attempted to rid the empire of all Christian writings. It was also the period of two significant church councils. The first was the Council of Laodicea (A.D. 363), a local gathering of clergy from parts of Lydia and Phrygia (and thus not representative of the whole church). This council seem to especially focus on the NT books, and all but Revelation were recognized. It was the first church council to move toward a formal ecclesiastical recognition of the NT canon.

The second council was the 3rd Council of Carthage (A.D. 397). It was here that the NT canon was formally "ratified" by council authority. However, it was not a "formation" of the canon was merely a certification of what had already gained universal recognition in the church by the late 4th century. Significant for this council was that here any previously disputed books (e.g., 2 Peter, Revelation) received conciliar confirmation of the majority view—that they were inspired and thus canonical. For all intents and purposes, this event ***fixed the NT canon in the West***.

4.2.3 Guiding Principles of NT Canonization

We've already stressed that only the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit comprises the one true test of canonicity. Yet that is not to say that certain principles may have influenced the early church as it carefully considered which books carried divine authority. While they may not have been explicitly and mechanically applied, they nonetheless stimulate us to think about this process more carefully.

4.2.3.1 Was is written by a prophet of God?

Both Hebrews 1:1 and 2 Peter 1:20-21 emphasize that God spoke to his people through the prophets of old. Additionally, Ephesians 2:20 stresses that the NT church is built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets. By the very nature of their office, the NT apostles were direct spokesmen for God (John 14:26; 16:13), and the church was founded and grew upon their teachings (Acts 2:42). In addition to the apostles, the church was also given prophets, who provided local congregations with divinely authoritative teaching (1 Cor 12:10).

Thus, every NT book was written by an apostle or a prophet. Those books written by prophets carry apostolic authority. Those books written by prophets contain apostolic teaching, and in each case (except for Hebrews) can be associated with an apostle (Mark with Peter, Luke with Paul, James and Jude with Jesus).

Nonetheless, we must remember that even though all canonical books are prophetic, not all prophetic books are included in the canon, as were all apostolically authored books (1 Cor 5:9; Col 4:16).

4.2.3.2 Was is confirmed by an act of God?

Miracles, in a technical sense (as opposed to the popular use of the term today), was an act of God that was given as an confirming sign of a person's prophetic credentials. The OT contains numerous instances in which a prophet's authority was confirmed through miraculous acts (e.g., 1 Kgs 18), and in the NT era, the apostles were given special signs to confirm their message (Heb 2:3-4; 2 Cor 12:12).

However, we must acknowledge that it's doubtful whether every prophetic revelation was confirmed by a specific miracle.

4.2.3.3 Does it tell the truth about God?

Both the OT and NT emphasize that the authenticity of a true prophetic utterance was whether it contains accurate testimony concerning God. Since God cannot contradict himself (2 Cor 1:17-18) or lie (Heb 6:18), no book which claims to be divinely inspired can contain false teaching (Deut 13:1-3; 18:21-22).

However, we must remember that just because a book does not contain false teaching does not make it canonical. Rather, it tests for a work's inauthenticity rather than its canonicity. It is a negative test. A book which did not agree with the rest of God's Word would certainly be dismissed. But a book that *did* agree could not automatically be regarded as canonical.

4.2.3.4 Does it have the power of God?

The Bible teaches that God's Word is "living and active" (Heb 4:12) and thus has a transforming force for a person's spiritual growth (2 Tim 3:17). A simple comparison of canonical and non-canonical books makes it immediately clear the lack of divine power in the latter yet inherent in the former.

Nevertheless, we must remember that a book's effect on an individual is at once subjective and not determinative of the book's canonical status.

4.2.3.5 Was it accepted by the people of God?

We see numerous instances in which the writers of Scripture emphasize that God's people recognize and accept what God has said (1 Thess 2:13; 2 Pet 3:15). The NT evidence suggests that books gained immediate acceptance into the canon by contemporary writers (1 Tim 5:18; 2 Pet 3:15-16; 1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16; Rev 1:3).

4.2.3.6 Summary

Once again, we shouldn't get the impression that these principles were in any way applied in an explicit or mechanical matter. Rather, we should look at them as guiding concepts throughout the various stages of canonization. Some were only implicitly present, and some seemed to be more important than others (such as apostolic authorship). In all this process, however, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit was at work.

The recognition was not a mere matter settled by a synod of ecclesiastical council. It was a providential process directed by the Holy Spirit as he witnessed to the church about the reality of the Word of God.... This is not the say that in some mystical way the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers settled the question of canonicity. The witness of the Spirit only CONVINCED them of the REALITY of the canon, not its extent or limits. The canon was recognized by a twofold method of faith and science. Objective principles were used, but the subjective testimony of the Holy Spirit used to the objective evidence, thus confirming the reality of God's Word to His people. The tests for canonicity were not mechanical means for measuring out the exact extent of the canon nor settled matters of textual criticism. He did PROVIDENTIALLY GUIDE the process that gave assent to the limits of the canon as well as give witness to the people of God as to the reality of God's Word when they read or heard it.¹⁶

¹⁶ David Farnell, "New Testament Introduction Notes" (Fall 2009, TMS), 97.