

What is the Canon?

The word 'canon' has a number of English meanings and comes from the Greek *kanon* meaning 'rule' deriving from a measuring rod. It can refer to a rule or regulation by which something is judged (as in the Canons of the Synod of Dort). It refers to an ecclesiastical decree or an order of clergy. It means the works of an author and also a musical piece in overlapping parts. But for our purposes here it means a collection of sacred books accepted as genuine.

The Bible is a collection of 66 books written over 1,500 years and collated by the Christian church. The OT was collected by the Jews and accepted by Jesus and the apostles. The church took over the Greek Septuagint version (LXX), which was universally used by Jews at that time, but the church did not accept the Apocrypha (a part of the LXX accepted by Roman Catholics). Jews then abandoned the LXX and commissioned a new Greek version of the OT.

The NT was written by 95 AD and gradually accepted as authoritative by the general consensus of the church. This means that many books claiming divine origin were rejected; also there was some debate for many years over the authenticity of a few apostolic letters. The Gospels, Acts and Paul's letters were always widely accepted and the early fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and the Didache) confirm this. Other books, used as authority by unorthodox sects (such as the Gnostic gospels), prompted the church to actively consider what was authentic.

By the end of the 2nd century there was general acceptance of all the NT books except for some debate about: James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, Hebrews & Revelation. During the 3rd c. the canon was clarified with the Eastern Church coming to the orthodox position before the Western. Eusebius (c. 265-340) tells us that all the books of the NT were generally acknowledged except James, Jude, Peter, 2-3 John, which were still recognised by the majority. The first council to concentrate on scripture was the Council of Laodicea in 363. Athanasius' Easter Letter (367) sets out the canon in detail affirming only the 27 orthodox NT books. The Synod of Carthage confirmed a similar list in 397, rubber-stamping what was accepted in the church. In the West certain disputed NT books were accepted by the time of Jerome and Augustine [354-430] and under their influence. A Roman document of the late 2nd c. called 'The Muratorian Fragment' contained almost all the NT. All of the NT except 2-3 Jn, 2 Pt, Jude and Rev were included in the Peshitta (the Syriac Bible), but even the omitted books were included by 508.

God ordained the protection and affirmation of his word by his Spirit through the church. Councils merely confirmed the general consensus.

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