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The Principles, Process, and Purpose of the Canon of Scripture

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Abstract

There are many factors that contribute to the questioning of the Bible's reliability and authority. One of these is ignorance of how the modern Biblical canon was formed. Dan Brown, in his best-selling novel, *The Da Vinci Code,* took inspiration from an erroneous position that the Bible was pieced together by politically motivated members of the Council of Nicaea at the order of Constantine where some books were banned, and others accepted. Holding this view, or others like it erodes the very foundation of the Christian's faith, and calls into question the relevance of Scripture to modern everyday life as well as its historic reliability and authority as it pertains to one's relationship and position with God.

Therefore, it is necessary to examine what canonicity is, how (if at all) it differs from Scripture, and how the Old and New Testament books came to be accepted. It will be shown through a brief look at internal evidence as well as documents from the Apostolic Fathers and summaries of the councils that actually discussed canonicity (along with various tests they used to recognize canonicity and authority) that the documents which compose the modern Bible were viewed and accepted as Scripture in their contemporary context, and that the terms "scripture" and "canon" (as pertains to this discussion) are practically synonymous. An understanding of this process should bring great confidence in the authority and reliability of Scripture which is compiled in the modern canon of the Bible.

Introduction

There have been many attacks on the authority and reliability of the Bible, especially in recent years. One of these attacks centers around how the Bible was compiled. This is an important topic because it speaks to the authenticity and reliability of the Bible. Who decided what books would be included and what criteria were used? How can we know what is canon and what is not? Additionally, there have been accusations (recently popularized in *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown) that the councils (namely the Council of Nicaea in Brown's book) that discussed this issue were politically motivated. As a result, arguments are made indicating that the Bible we have today is merely a tool of political propaganda.

If the Bible was compiled arbitrarily by politically motivated councils, then its relevance to a person's life is called into question. More importantly, if the authenticity and authority of Scripture are questionable, then what should one do with the message of Salvation? If the foundation of faith is weakened, these are but a few questions that arise. Therefore, researching the true compilation and canonization process is of utmost importance to secure the foundation of the authority and reliability of Scripture.

These questions have been answered in different ways, and in modern times, the answers are disturbing. They undermine the authority and reliability of the Bible, and through this misinformation have provided a sliver of doubt that has caused many to fall away. To begin to answer these questions, it is important to understand what canonicity is, and the importance of a closed canon. Also, paramount to this discussion is understanding how the canon was recognized and by whom. The canon of Scripture is a closed list of authoritative books which were organically and contemporarily accepted; the church councils through specific tests merely recognized the inherent canonicity of these documents, and an understanding of this process will provide a firm foundation for the reliability and authority of Scripture.

Canon and Scripture

Definition of Terms

Canon

To fully understand this topic, it is important to know how certain words are used. The word "canon" can have different meanings. Merriam Webster defines "canon" as, "an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture [or] the authentic works of a writer."[1] Webster further defines this term as, "an accepted principle or rule [or] a criterion or standard of judgment."[2] When it comes to applying this word to the Bible, the waters get a bit muddied. There seems to be no consensus on the use of this word when it is applied to the books of the Bible. This is where much of the misunderstanding originates. Two models seem to be prevalent: the community model and the intrinsic model.

The Community Model

Some scholars apply the first definition and therefore canonicity is externally imposed upon the writings. John Peckham describes this as the "community model" of canonization. He suggests that some texts that did not merit canonization were selected as canon and continues, "Thus, the authority resides in the community to select the writings that are in the canon and thus used for theology."[3] This is the fertile ground where Dan Brown harvested his plot hook. It is also where many modern Bible scholars, as well as opponents of the faith get entangled.

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[1] Merriam Webster, "Canon," accessed April 10, 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/canon.

[2] Ibid.

[3] John C. Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canonicity," *Trinity Journal* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 230, accessed April 10, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001663021&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Embroiled in this model are the concepts of canon 1 and canon 2 as defined by Gerald Sheppard. Peckham describes these two delineations, "the former refers to an authority or standard, and the latter refers to writings in a fixed or permanent state. Sheppard states, 'one can say that Christian scripture had a canonical status (canon 1) long before the church decisions of the fourth century delimited a fixed list of books (canon 2).'"[4] While these definitions recognize that the documents were canon prior to the councils, this also supports the strict authoritative imposition of this status by one or more councils which, in Peckham's words, "makes allowance for no recognized canon until a late date."[5] This, as will be shown, does not seem to be supported by history.

With this approach, there also begins to develop a separation between "canon" and "Scripture." Where A. C. Sundberg made a sharp distinction between scripture and canon indicating that the former included religious writings which were viewed as authoritative, while the latter referred to a list of official authoritative books resulting from a committee's decision to exclude certain books deemed non-canonical,[6] Brevard Childs disagrees with this separation. Describing Childs' view, Michael Kruger relates, "If a collection of books functions as a religious norm, regardless of whether that collection is open or closed, then Childs is comfortable using the term canon…[and] argues against any rigid separation between Scripture and canon,

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[4] Ibid., 232.

[5] Ibid., 236.

[6] Brevard S. Childs, "The Canon in Recent Biblical Studies: Reflections on an Era," *Pro Ecclesia* 14, no. 1 (Wint 2005): 28-29, accessed April 10, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001580060&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

saying that they are 'very closely related, indeed often identical.'"[7] This leads to the second model of canonization.

The Intrinsic Model

The second, and arguably better, model of canonization Peckham dubs the intrinsic model. In this model, the documents were not deemed canon based on a community's vote. Instead, it was the intrinsic nature and merits of the books causing them to be inherently canonical. Peckham explains, "the books of the Bible are inherently canonical, even if they were not always universally recognized, just as Jesus was truly the Messiah even though some did not recognize him."[8] This seems to be the most tenable model. As Peckham continues, "though a community of faith recognized the canon historically, that very recognition, including usage, did not add any intrinsic merit to the book that bestows value for canonicity."[9] He goes on to declare, "the only books that are candidates for the biblical canon are the sixty-six books of the Protestant biblical canon"[10] Therefore, it seems to be that canonization occurred the moment these documents were written, and not the cause of one or more councils deciding what books to include. This will become clear when looking at how both the Old and New Testament became accepted and recognized as Scripture. This formation process will show that these documents were recognized as Scripture in their contemporary context and accepted as Scripture organically. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, it will be understood that "canon" refers to

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[7] Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon : Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013, 34-35.

[8] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 234.

[9] Ibid., 245.

[10] Ibid.

the list of documents that contain intrinsic divine authority and that have been recognized as Scripture, and therefore "Scripture" and "canon" are synonymous.

Scripture

The definition of "canon" brings up the question of the definition of "Scripture," in that one word is used to describe the other. Turning to Meriam Webster, again, the following general use definition (when not referring to the Bible specifically) comes to light, "a body of writings considered sacred or authoritative."[11] The word authoritative is a word that will surface many times in this discussion. When used to describe the canon, this one word can be used to describe the list or the actual books, i.e. an authoritative list of books or a list of authoritative books. The key word is "authoritative." If "canon" refers to an authoritative list, then the authority is with the humans who decided on the list. The latter seems to be a more biblical approach, since, as 2 Timothy 3:16 states, "All Scripture is breathed out by God…"[12] This indicates that God determines the authority. Therefore, unless in a direct quote, "canon" and "Scripture" will be used interchangeably.

<div align="center">Closed vs. Open</div>

The discussion around the term "authoritative" brings into question whether the canon should be closed or open. Wilber Dayton suggests that the problem is not in the definition of the word "canon," but in, as he quotes H. N. Ridderbos, "the material authority that the writings incorporated into the canon had from the very beginning of the church, and that, at least in the West, also determined the ecclesiastical use of the term 'canon' in the sense of a standard, rule,

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[11] Meriam Webster, "Scripture," accessed April 10, 2020 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/scripture.

[12] All direct Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

and norm for faith and life."[13] When subscribing to the community model of canonization, there is the temptation to leave the canon open. Peckham describes several dangers with this approach. Most importantly, he suggests that when applying the community model, eventually the usefulness of the canon comes into question.[14] This, as he explains, opens the canon up to a "new, supposedly better, collection."[15] The idea of "new" revelation seems to go against the teachings of Jesus when He declared in John 16:13, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own *authority*, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come (emphasis added)." Here is the word authority again. Jesus seems to be indicating that all that is needed will be revealed to the Apostles by the Spirit, who submits to the authority of God and does not speak for Himself. It seems that the community model places faith in a group of fallible humans rather than in the intrinsic merits that, as Peckham points out, flow out of divine authority.[16]

If one were to subscribe to the intrinsic model of canonization, it would be easy to see that the canon should be closed. In light of the passage in John, Peckham contends, "Because the revelation contained in the OT and NT contains all the necessary revelation of God's activity in the history of salvation, the canon is fittingly closed by the NT writings."[17] As indicated above, the authority of a document is inherent, and if all truth is contained in Scripture, then all

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[13] Wilber T. Dayton, "Factors Promoting the Formation of the New Testament Canon," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10, no. 1 (Wint 1967): 29, accessed April 10, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000694814&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[14] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 245.

[15] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 246.

[16] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 246.

[17] Ibid., 247.

Scripture testifies to Christ.[18] Therefore, because no Apostles still live for the Spirit to reveal new truth, it is essential to have a closed canon.

The Old Testament Canon

Formation

Just as there are two models of canonization, there are two viewpoints regarding the canonization of the Old Testament. Referencing D. G. Dunn, Lee McDonald points out that the Old Testament cannot function as canon for Christians the way it does for the Jews. He also suggests that the New Testament functions as a canon within a canon.[19] This last point is an outcome of the community model of canonization, and it would stand to reason that if a community compiled an anthology of documents, that some would be more applicable than others. While Dunn may be correct in the statement that the Old Testament functions differently for the Christian, it is a slippery slope to say it cannot function as canon, especially if one holds to the intrinsic model. To be sure, the events of the Old Testament span many thousands of years and the process of finally recognizing the Old Testament canon took a much longer time than that of the New Testament. N. L. deClaissé-Walford suggests that the process of canonization, "took place over a long period of time, the result of a long process of selection and repetition that shaped the stories and ideas of the ancient Israelite communities into the authoritative traditions of those communities."[20] Walford goes on to suggest that there was no indication that there was a

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[18] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 247.

[19] Lee M. McDonald, "The Integrity of the Biblical Canon in Light of Its Historical Development." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996): 101, accessed April 10, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001494000&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[20] N. L. deClaissé-Walford, "The Dromedary Saga : The Formation of the Canon of the Old Testament," *Review and Expositor* 95 no. 4 (1998): 494, , accessed April 10, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rvh&AN=NTA0000023759&site=ehost-live.

canon (sanctioned list) of authoritative scriptures in Judaism.[21] While there was no recorded official council (outside of Jamnia which will be discussed later) that presided over authenticating a list of authoritative documents, Eckhard Schnabel, who references R. T. Beckwith, suggests that there is evidence that the Old Testament canon was finalized even as early as the beginning of the second century B.C.[22] Some of this evidence is from the New Testament itself (Matthew 23:35 and Luke 11:51) where Jesus refers to events in the first book of the Jewish Scriptures (the murder of Abel in Genesis) and events in the last book (the murder of Zechariah in Chronicles).

Before looking at another piece of evidence from the Old Testament, it is interesting to note that there are scholars that hold that the Jewish Scriptures were passed down orally and then much later written down. Jackson Wu, right after discussing the influence of "the Bible's oral background"[23] remarks that, "Even while emphasizing the importance of orality, one must not forget that we now have a written Bible…a distinct collection of documents as divinely inspired and authoritative…"[24] The notion that there were no contemporary manuscripts that were recognized as Scripture in Judaism is refuted by a passage in Joshua 24:26-27:

> So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the LORD. And Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us. Therefore it

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[21] N. L. deClaissé-Walford, "The Dromedary Saga, 495.

[22] Eckhard J. Schnabel, "History, Theology and the Biblical Canon: An Introduction to Basic Issues," *Themelios* 20, no. 2 (January 1995): 17, accessed April 10, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000893513&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[23] Jackson. Wu, "The Doctrine of Scripture and Biblical Contextualization: Inspiration, Authority, Inerrancy, and the Canon," *Themelios* 44, no. 2 (August 2019): 320, accessed April 10, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiG0V190826000562&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[24] Ibid., 323.

shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God." So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance.

This text indicates that Joshua's words were written down and put with the written Law of Moses, showing that there existed a written copy and that it was acknowledged as authoritative Scripture contemporary to the time of writing. This supports the idea of an organic acceptance of canonical writing and the intrinsic authority of said writing. Steven M. Sheeley agrees when he suggests, "The Jewish community appears to have had a rather well-developed sense of 'Scripture,' the message of Yahweh revealed through the prophetic voice and inspired writings, but not a sense of 'canon.'"[25] While Sheeley distinguishes between "canon" and "Scripture," if, as previously suggested they are synonymous, there is evidence that this body of authoritative texts existed prior to the Church councils.

Divisions

Historically, the Jewish canon (Old Testament) is referred to with either three-fold or two-fold divisions. Today, it is normally divided into four sections. Much scholarship has been compiled around this topic and is slightly beyond the scope of this paper, but for completeness sake, a brief description of these divisions is in order.

The Two-Fold Division

R. T. Beckwith references John Barton who describes the Jewish Scriptures as only having two divisions, the Pentateuch and the Prophets. He goes on to relate that, "It has, of course, usually been recognized by scholars that in ancient Jewish and Christian literature the

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[25] S. M. Sheeley, "From 'Scripture' to 'Canon' : The Development of the New Testament Canon." *Review and Expositor* 95 no.4 (1998): 514, accessed April 10, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rvh&AN=NTA0000023763&site=ehost-live.

Old Testament is sometimes given twofold titles (or short descriptions) not threefold"[26] There

are also many references to a two-fold division called "The Law and the Prophets" throughout

the New Testament (Matthew 5:17, 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; Romans 3:21 to

name a few).

The Three-Fold Division

There is, however, evidence to support a three-fold division. Jesus refers to three parts of

the Old Testament Scripture (Luke 24:44) where He tells His disciples, "everything written about

me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Peckham points this

out as well as the Matthew 23 and Luke 11 passages discussed earlier.[27] There is also evidence

from 130 B.C. in the Greek translator's prologue to Ecclesiasticus that refers to a three-fold

division, "'the Law and the Prophets and the others that have followed in their steps', of 'the

Law and the Prophets and other ancestral Books, and of 'the Law and the Prophecies and the rest

of the Books.'"[28] While some (including Barton) would argue that the "other Books" refers to

literature in general, Beckwith suggests that it would not have made sense for the author to sub-

divide them in the way he did. It is also interesting that he did not put the book he was translating

in with the "other Books."[29]

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[26] R. T. Beckwith, "A Modern Theory of the Old Testament Canon." *Vetus Testamentum* 41, no. 4 (1991): 386, accessed April 10, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rvh&AN=NTA0000010165&site=ehost-live.

[27] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 238.

[28] Beckwith, "A Modern Theory of the Old Testament Canon," 388.

[29] Ibid.

The Four-Fold (Modern) Divisions

Today, the Old Testament is normally divided into four sections. The first five books (the Pentateuch) is synonymous with the Law as in the two and three-fold divisions. The same can be said for the Prophets. The difference lies in how to divide or group the remaining books. Where the three-fold division groups the poetry, wisdom and history books into one category (writings), modern division is a bit more granular only grouping the poetry and wisdom books together.

How Scripture is divided is an interesting academic exercise, and as previously stated beyond the scope of this paper. The only reason this was mentioned was to clearly show that the entirety of Jewish Scripture was seen as having divine authority from the beginning.

The Process

The process of canonization of the Old Testament is not as straightforward as the New Testament. Throughout history, there have been times that the Old Testament documents were affirmed as Scripture. Space and time only allow for mention of a few.

Contemporary Recognition

In Deuteronomy 31:9, it is recorded that Moses wrote down the entire body of instruction he had just given to the people of Israel. In Joshua 24, as previously mentioned, the writings of Moses were affirmed as Scripture as were the words of Joshua.

Around 445 B.C., Nehemiah went to Jerusalem and started rebuilding the wall. He also reinstated the Levite position in the temple.[30] Around fifty years later, Ezra arrived. In Ezra 7, he is described as one who, "had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel." Nehemiah 8:13-18, records that Ezra read the Law and the

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[30] N. L. deClaissé-Walford, "The Dromedary Saga," 496.

people and the people responded by observing the Feast of Tabernacles. This shows that the Law was regarded as having divine authority and seen as Scripture.

First Century and Beyond

As has already been mentioned, Jesus referred to the Law and the Prophets as well as the Psalms showing that these documents were seen as authoritative, but no written list was published until Josephus in the late first century, when he wrote *Against Apion.* In this document, he listed a threefold division of twenty-two books[31] which, while not a list exactly, is quite similar to the modern Jewish Scriptures.[32] It has been noted that Josephus was given to exaggeration, but even so, McDonald points out that even if allowances were made for this, "he [Josephus] could hardly lie about the extent or antiquity of the canon; any Roman reader could inquire of the nearest Jew and test the veracity of Josephus' statement."[33] In the early fourth century, Eusebius published his list in *Ecclesiastical History.* Eusebius writes of Melito's trip and discovery:

> "…Accordingly when I came to the East and reached the place where these things were preached and done, and learnt accurately the books of the Old Testament, I set down the facts and sent them to you. These are their names: five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy; Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kingdoms; two books of Chronicles, the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon and his Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Job, the Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Twelve in a single book, Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra. From these I have made extracts and compiled them in six books." Such are the facts about Melito.[34]

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[31] McDonald, "The Integrity of the Biblical Canon," 109.

[32] Edmon L. Gallagher, and John D. Meade. *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity : Texts and Analysis.* Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2017, xx-xxi.

[33] McDonald, "The Integrity of the Biblical Canon," 111.

[34] Eusebius of Caesarea (trans. Kirsopp Lake, D.E., D.Litt.), *Ecclesiastical History*, W. Heinemann, G.P. Putnam's sons in London, New York, 1926,

Athanasius in the middle of the fourth century in his Festal Letter also included a canonical list of both the Old and New Testaments.

The Council of Jamnia

There has been some discussion surrounding a council that supposedly met in around A.D. 90. This rabbinical council has been thought to have closed the Hebrew canon when they met in the town of Jamnia.[35] This idea of this council closing the canon seems to be misguided. Eckhard Schnabel suggests arguments against this traditional thought seemingly ruling out the notion that Jamnia closed the canon. The apocryphal books were not discussed, and discussions were confined to whether Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs "made the hands unclean" (a phrase that implied divine inspiration) but did not necessarily inform canonicity."[36] Josephus also gives evidence that the canon was already closed. In his book *Against Apion*, written in A. D. 94, he states, "For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, [as the Greeks 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…"[37] This indicates that the full Jewish canon was already recognized, and therefore, given the evidence discussed, it does not seem likely that canon closure could have taken place at Jamnia.

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[35] Stephen B. Chapman, "The Old Testament Canon and Its Authority for the Christian Church." *Ex Auditu* 19 (2003): 127, accessed April 10, 2020, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=oah&AN=OTA0000041173&site=ehost-live.

[36] Schnabel, "History, Theology and the Biblical Canon," 17.

[37] Flavius Josephus, "Against Apion," *Bible Hub,* accessed April 28, 2020, https://biblehub.com/library/josephus/against_apion/book_1.htm.

<div align="center">Possible Criteria</div>

This brings up the question of what criteria was used to recognize the authoritative books. For the Old Testament, there are no specific documented criteria. However, Peckham outlines some possible options, some of which are similar to those used for the New Testament.

Authored before 400 B.C.

Peckham suggested that, "For the OT, dating is quite important in relation to the view of the cessation of prophecy after the time of Artaxerxes (ca. 450 B.C.). Consequently, the prophetic voice for the canon was limited to books written before that time in the context of God's covenant with Israel."[38] Peckham notes in a footnote that Josephus in *Against Apion*, specifically limited the authoritative writings were "until the reign of Artaxerxes."[39] Artaxerxes ruled Persia from 465-424 B.C., and so this would limit the date of authorship to before this time.

Wide Acceptance and Usage

For this criterion, Peckham simply suggests that usage is of significance only to the community canon model.[40] For the intrinsic model of canonization, while usage is not a criterion, it will inform the historian about how and if a community recognized a document as canon. This has been shown in the references to Ezra and Joshua where the community organically recognized the authority of certain documents.

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[38] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 242.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., 244.

Consistent

This criterion is of major importance and is linked in a way with the final criterion.

Peckham puts this into perspective when he explains:

> The first recorded written canon was the law of God, of which the Decalogue was written by the very finger of God (Exod 31:18). From this point in the history of Israel, and later of the apostles, God's special revelation was encapsulated in writings by humans and inspired by God. A very important principle then would be that any "new" revelation agree with all previous revelation.[41]

This simply means that any new prophecy or writing, if truly authoritative, will not contradict established Scripture. This can be seen as a major point (along with authorship) when the church councils debated the Deuterocanonical books.

Authoritative Message

This is an especially important criterion. Peckham explains, "For a book to be canonical the author of the book must simply be a writer endowed with divine authority. However, it must be emphasized that God through divine commission (including revelation-inspiration), not the human author, is the source of the canonicity and authority of the writings. For the OT this requires propheticity."[42] This means that the author was writing under divine inspiration and authority. The text would have a "thus sayeth the Lord" quality, and would, according to Josephus, have a clear line of succession from Moses to the Prophets.[43]

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[41] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 242-243.

[42] Ibid., 240.

[43] Ibid.

New Testament Canonicity

Formation

Turning now to the New Testament, it is important to keep in mind that just as in the case of the Old Testament being contemporarily accepted as Scripture, so too the New Testament was contemporarily accepted. One specific reference supports this. In 2 Peter, the writings of Paul are put on equal footing and given the same authority as Scripture (3:16).

The common belief that the Bible was compiled by a politically motivated Council of Nicaea is misguided. The council of Nicaea never discussed canonicity. This council was convened mainly to discuss the nature of the Son and His relationship with the Father. This led to the development of the Nicene Creed which summarizes the council's consensus. While there were councils that discussed canonicity, the lists that came out of these councils are very close to the present canon. So, as Dayton points out, "it has never been proved that the early church at any time departed far from the present canon."[44] Truly, as has already been mentioned, the Church seemed to organically accept the present canon contemporarily. Other historians and writers attest to this as will be discussed.

In approximately 95 A. D., Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the Corinthians addressing the deposing of certain elders in the church. In this letter, Clement approved the message in the gospels as being from God. He writes, "The apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ [has done so] from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ."[45] In this letter, he quoted from Matthew and possibly Mark in 15:2,

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[44] Dayton, "Factors," 33.

[45] Clement of Rome, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians Chapter XLII," Bible Hub, Accessed April 28, 2020, https://biblehub.com/library/clement/the_first_epistle_of_clement_to_the_corinthians/chapter_xlii_the_order_of_ministers.htm.

"For [the Scripture] saith in a certain place, 'This people honoureth Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.'"[46] This indicates that Clement already considered the gospels as Scripture (or canon). Clement elsewhere quoted from Luke as well as Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians and Philippians and by way of paraphrase, possibly Hebrews. Of 1 Corinthians, Clement indicated that Paul wrote this letter, "in the spirit,"[47] thus declaring that it was inspired and from God.

Time and space only allow for a brief highlight of other early acknowledgements of canonicity. Agreeing with Clement, Ignatius, in 110 A. D. called the gospels Scripture, as seen in his letters.[48] In these letters, he quoted (and possibly paraphrased) from 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Romans, Philippians, and Galatians. This shows that These documents were already being used and seen as Scripture.

Also, in and around A. D. 110, Polycarp, a bishop of Smyrna, wrote a letter to Philippi. In chapter XII of this letter, he quoted Ephesians and called it, "Sacred Scriptures."[49] He quoted also from Matthew, Luke, Acts, 1 Peter, and 1 John, in much the same way other Scripture had been quoted.

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[46] Clement, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians, https://biblehub.com/library/clement/the_first_epistle_of_clement_to_the_corinthians/chapter_xv_we_must_adhere_to.htm

[47] Ibid., https://biblehub.com/library/clement/the_first_epistle_of_clement_to_the_corinthians/chapter_xlvii_your_recent_discord_is.htm.

[48] Ignatius, "Ignatius," *Bible Hub*, Accessed April 28, 2020, https://biblehub.com/authors/ignatius.htm.

[49] Polycarp, "The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians," *Bible Hub*, Accessed April 28, 2020, https://biblehub.com/library/polycarp/the_epistle_of_polycarp_to_the_philippians/chapter_xii_exhortation_to_various_graces.htm.

Papias is also important to this discussion, because in 125 A. D., he quoted from the apostle John in fragment VI "And the presbyter said this. Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered."[50] This connects Mark to Peter making his gospel apostolic.

Around 150 A. D., Justin Martyr wrote his *Dialogue with Trypho*, in which he referred to the gospels as "the memoirs [of the apostles]."[51] This phrase occurs thirteen times not including times he cited quotations with phrases like, "the Apostles of this our Christ Himself have written."[52] Charles Hoole points out that in his writings, Justin quoted all but 1 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and Jude,[53] thus showing that these documents were being seen as authoritative even before an actual list was created and compiled.

The first canon list can be found in the Muratorian Fragment. This incomplete fragment of a document was discovered by Ludovico Antonio Muratori and has been dated to around 170 A. D. It lists specifically all the books in the New Testament except Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter. It may also contain Matthew and Mark as well as 1, 2, & 3 John. The document specifically excludes the *Shepherd of Hermas* because it was written, "very recently, in our

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[50] Papias, "Fragments of Papias," *Bible Hub,* Accessed April 28, 2020, https://biblehub.com/library/papias/fragments_of_papias/fragment_vi.htm.

[51] Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho,* Trans. A. Lukyn Williams, D. D. (New York and Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1930) accessed April 28, 2020. https://earlychurch.org.uk/pdf/e-books/williams_a-lukyn/dialogue-with-trypho_williams.pdf, 188.

[52] Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho,* Trans. A. Lukyn Williams, D. D. (New York and Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1930) accessed April 28, 2020. https--earlychurch.org.uk-pdf-e-books-williams_a-lukyn-dialogue-with-trypho_williams.pdf, 221-222.

[53] Charles Holland Hoole, The Classical Element in the New Testament, Considered as Proof of Its Genuiness (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888), 100, accessed April 28, 2020, https://books.google.com/books?id=AWs_AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA100&lpg=PA100&dq=Justin+Martyr+list+of+N.+T.+quotations&source=bl&ots=GJ1ycoP1tO&sig=ACfU3U3B_H1FZ8SLPs1DWVbTrWePv2u8gQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwih3ae175PpAhXVLs0KHbUfDfMQ6AEwDXoECAsQAQ - v=onepage&q=Justin Martyr list of N. T. quotations&f=false.

times."[54] This indicates that the author believed that the canon should be closed and limited to apostolic writings only.

Irenaeus also suggested in *Against Heresies* in around 180 A. D. that the canon should be closed. In book 3, chapter 11, the title mentions, "the Gospels are Four in Number, Neither More nor Less,"[55] indicating a limitation of the documents that could be considered canon.

Skipping ahead in history, Athanasius, as briefly mentioned previously, wrote a Festal letter in 367 A. D. which included the Jewish Scriptures as well as the 27 books of the modern canon and then he adds the following admonition to the list: "In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to them, neither let him take ought from them."[56] This also shows that by and large the Church was viewing the modern canon as authoritative and also closed.

As can be seen, the canon of Scripture was already being recognized organically. No council had ordained specific books to be approved. During and after the 4th century, there were councils that met to discuss and formally approve the already accepted books. Unfortunately, space and time only allow for a brief look at two of these.

Council of Laodicea

The council of Laodicea which met between 343 and 381 was concerned with regulating the conduct of church members. Not until the last two sections (c59 and c60) was the subject of the canon of Scripture brought up. In c59 only one sentence is of import, "Psalms of private

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[54] "The Muratorian Fragment," *Bible Researcher,* accessed April 28, 2020, http://www.bible-researcher.com/muratorian.html.

[55] Iranaeus, "Against Heresies," *Bible Hub,* accessed August 28, 2020, https://biblehub.com/library/irenaeus/against_heresies/chapter_xiproofs_in_continuation_extracted.htm.

[56] Athenasius, *The Festal Epistles of Athanasius,* 1854, Accessed April 28, 2020, 138-139, https://ia802701.us.archive.org/30/items/FestalEpistlesOfStAthanasiusEnglishTranslation/The_festal_epistles_of_S_Athanasius_Engl-Transl_text.pdf.

origin, or books uncanonical are not to be sung in temples; but the canonical writings of the old and new testaments."[57] Then c60 lists the books:

> THESE are all the books of Old Testament appointed to be read: 1, Genesis of the world; 2, The Exodus from Egypt; 3, Leviticus; 4, Numbers; 5, Deuteronomy; 6, Joshua, the son of Nun; 7, Judges, Ruth; 8, Esther; 9, Of the Kings, First and Second; 10, Of the Kings, Third and Fourth; 11, Chronicles, First and Second; 12, Esdras, First and Second; 13, The Book of Psalms; 14, The Proverbs of Solomon; 15, Ecclesiastes; 16, The Song of Songs; 17, Job; 18, The Twelve Prophets; 19, Isaiah; 20, Jeremiah, and Baruch, the Lamentations, and the Epistle; 21, Ezekiel; 22, Daniel. And these are the books of the New Testament: Four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; The Acts of the Apostles; Seven Catholic Epistles, to wit, one of James, two of Peter, three of John, one of Jude; Fourteen Epistles of Paul, one to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, one to the Ephesians, one to the Philippians, one to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, one to the Hebrews, two to Timothy, one to Titus, and one to Philemon.[58]

It is interesting to note that c60 is omitted from many manuscripts, and so cannot be used as a basis for an authoritative list, however the list is almost identical to the present-day list.

Council of Carthage

In 397 A.D., the third council of Carthage convened. During this council, various ordinances were discussed as well as a summary of the Council of Hippo was read and approved. In c24, it was mentioned that only canonical scriptures (under the name of divine Scripture) are to be read, and then the following list was presented:

> Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, two books of Chronicles, Job, the Psalter, five books of Solomon, the books of the twelve prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel, Daniel, Tobit, Judith, Esther, two books of Esdras, two Books of the Maccabees. Of the New Testament: four books of the Gospels, one book of the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen Epistles of the Apostle Paul, one epistle of the same [writer] to the Hebrews, two Epistles

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[57] Philip Schaff, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, (2005) 228, accessed April 19, 2020, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.html.

[58] Ibid., 229.

of the Apostle Peter, three of John, one of James, one of Jude, one book of the Apocalypse of John.[59]

Of note is the fact that only in Dionysius Exiguus' copy are the two Maccabees books mentioned.[60] Also of interest is that the documents in this list are referred to as divine Scripture, and so seems to support the aforementioned synonymous nature of "canon" and "scripture."

Criteria

There seem to be four criteria used to recognize the authoritative nature of Scripture. A brief look at each of these is in order.

Consensus

This first criterion has been seen as an important measure—whether the document enjoyed continuous acceptance by the early Church. Given the description of the intrinsic model of canonicity, acceptance and usage are more of a result of the inherent authority of the document rather than a criterion.[61] If the document was seen as Scripture, it would naturally be widely used. That is where the other tests come into play.

Divine Inspiration

This criterion looks at the text and determines if it claims to be or if there is any evidence that it was divinely inspired. Scripture must be divinely inspired, but Bruce Metzger purports that the Fathers did not view this as grounds for the documents' uniqueness.[62] He cites various inscriptions and letters that were affirmed as being divinely inspired but were obviously not

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[59]Schaff, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 588.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 244-245.

[62] Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament : Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1997, 255, accessed March 30, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/reader.action?docID=5746787&ppg=48.

Scripture. One of these was the Council of Ephesus' epistle condemning Nestorius and another being the epitaph on the grave of Bishop Abercius.[63] So, while divine inspiration is an important piece of the puzzle, it is not the only criterion. Peckham also points out that there were documents that were considered inspired and even useful (the *Shepherd of Hermas* as an example) but did not meet other criteria[64] such as authorship.

Apostolicity

This test looks at the authorship of the document. For a document to be considered Scripture (or canonical), it must be written or linked to the Apostles. Metzger points out that, "the writer of the Muratorian Fragment declares against the admission of the *Shepherd of Hermas* into the canon, he does so on the ground that it is too recent, and that it cannot find a place 'among the prophets, whose number is complete, or among the apostles'. As 'the prophets' here stand for the Old Testament, so 'the apostles' are practically equivalent to the New."[65] The thinking here is that if the document was written by an Apostle, it gave a presumption of authority.[66]

Orthodoxy

Here, the documents are investigated for conformity to the "rule of faith" which was evidenced by the book's congruity with the basic recognized normative Christian Tradition. According to Peckham, it is in this test where most of the non-canonical literature fails.[67] This principle of non-contradiction is evidenced in passages from both the Old and the New

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[63] Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 256.

[64] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 243-244.

[65] Metzger, *The Canon of the NewTestament*, 253.

[66] Ibid., 253.

[67] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 243.

Testaments: Deuteronomy 13:1-3 (Test the prophecies of the prophets); Malachi 3:6 (The LORD does not change); Matthew 5:17-18(Jesus did not come to abolish the Law); 1 John 4:1 (Test the spirits).

Conclusion

While it would have been interesting to look at several books that were debated (some of which were accepted and others that were not), time and space simply did not allow for it. But by looking at the different models of canonicity (the community and the intrinsic), and by looking at the organic process of acceptance of a majority of the documents considered canon, it appears to be the case that "canon" and "Scripture" when describing the authoritative nature of the documents are synonymous. Also, from looking at the history of the listing of Scripture, it seems that the councils that compiled the lists only recognized the intrinsic authority the documents already possessed. The canon of Scripture, then, must be closed, and that the documents we have contain the full authoritative revelation of God to man. Peckham sums it up perfectly:

> The canon of Scripture is the *norma normans* (authoritative standard) which consists of books of divine revelation appointed by God to serve as an authoritative rule of faith and practice. It is also the *norma normata* (recognized standard) since these books are, afterward, recognized by the community to be prophetic or apostolic, of proper antiquity, having consistency, congruity, and continuity, and self-authenticating… As such, the canon of Scripture is the only authoritative and trustworthy foundation for theology.[68]

These conclusions can only bolster faith and place the reliability and authority on a firm foundation.

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[68] Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority," 249.

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