

Two Testaments and a Canon: the Scriptures of the Christian Churches

The “New Testament” – in the 2nd century, the Church develops the idea of a “New Testament”

- The authority of the books that become the NT comes from the apostles/eyewitnesses
- At first, most of these would not have been held as “Scripture”
 - Nor were they widely disseminated
 - Nor consistently read liturgically – e.g. Melito is reading Exodus on Pascha (c. 190)
- As the second century develops, there is a growing understanding that the Apostles’ writings were also “Scripture”
 - Around 140, the heretic Marcion declared that the Jewish Bible was evil and proposed a new set of Scriptures – a mutilated “Luke” and ten of Paul’s epistles
- By the 3rd century, the term “New Testament” emerges
 - The “New Testament” is the new “Scripture”
 - Like the Old Testament, it is divinely inspired
 - But it is actually more authoritative than the Old Testament
 - So it begins to liturgically displace the Old Testament
 - The New Testament has two general divisions – and they are also ranked:
 - The four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
 - Origen – “the gospels are the firstfruits of all Scripture”
 - Other apostolic/semiapostolic writings
 - The extent of these is not completely clear

Universal Agreement	Virtually Universal Agreement	Significant Debate or Sporadic Inclusion	Rare Inclusion
Matthew Mark Luke John	Acts Paul: Romans 1-2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1-2 Thessalonians 1-2 Timothy Titus Philemon 1 Peter 1 John James*	Hebrews 2 Peter 2-3 John Jude Revelation Apocalypse of Peter Epistle of Barnabas Shepherd of Hermas Didache 1-2 Clement	Acts of Paul and Thekla Wisdom of Solomon Sirach Psalms of Solomon Apostolic Constitutions

Canon (κανών) – is a Greek word meaning “rule” or “measuring stick”

- Initially, “κανών” was only used for the “rule of faith” – the sum of Christian doctrine
- By the fourth century, it acquires 2 new uses:
 - Rules laid down by synods of bishops which govern church life
 - The “Canon of Scripture” – a fixed set of books to be read as Scripture liturgically
 - Created as a defense against forgeries (especially heretical ones)
 - Understood as simply being the tradition handed down from the Apostles

- Not seen as a list of all divinely inspired or authoritative writings ever written
- There is overwhelming agreement as to the heart of the canons (both NT and OT)
 - Disagreement is really only on the periphery

Fourth Century Fathers and Councils

- Council of Laodicea (c. 363 AD) – modern NT canon, except Revelation
- Athanasius of Alexandria (367 AD) – modern NT canon
 - OT canon lacks Esther and most of Protestant “Apocrypha” – has Baruch and Ep. Jer.
- Gregory of Nazianzus – modern NT canon, except Revelation
- Amphilochius of Iconium – modern NT canon
 - Notes that some exclude Hebrews, 2-3 John, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation
 - Notes that those who reject Hebrews (Paul) and Revelation think them forgeries
- Council of Carthage (397 AD) – modern NT canon
 - OT canon lacks 3 Maccabees and may lack Baruch, Ep. Jeremiah, and Sirach
 - Scriptural canon ratified by the “Quinsext Council” at Trullo (692 AD)

Old Testament – is never as tightly fixed as the NT – there continues to be wiggle at the edges – less is at stake doctrinally – and its liturgical use as “featured text” is declining

Revelation – continues to be debated in the East for centuries – never liturgically incorporated

Jewish Canon – fixed finally by general consensus sometime in the second half of the 1st millenium

- Only books extant in Hebrew were included

Martin Luther (1534) – adopts Jewish canon as his OT; keeps the common Christian NT

- Classifies Tobit, Judith, Baruch (w/ Ep. Jer.), Sirach, Wisdom, and 1-2 Maccabees as “apocrypha” – which means “hidden” (i.e. not to be read as Scripture)
 - Still includes them in the codex of his Bible as a separate section
- Insists on using the Hebrew editions for his translations
 - This greatly affects Ezra, Esther, and Daniel
- Hates Esther, Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation
 - Finds them “graceless” and unchristian
 - But isn’t bold enough to remove them from his Bible altogether
- Luther’s Bible is adopted as the Bible of Protestantism
 - “Apocryphas” are gradually dropped from codices to make printing cheaper

Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1546) – reaffirms Carthage/Trullo

- Calls pieces Luther rejected the Old Testament’s “Deuterocanon”

Orthodox Synod of Jerusalem (1672) – adopts OT Canon similar to Carthage – same as RC list, but adds/clarifies Ps 151, 1 Esdras, 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, and the Prayer of Manasseh

- 4 Maccabees and the Prayer of Manasseh are usually included in printed codices, but are generally not held by the Orthodox to be Scripture

Some Other Important Changes – codices (probably beginning in 2nd century), word spacing and upper/lower cases (9th-10th centuries), chapters and verses (Stephen Langton, Paris, 1227), printing (Gutenberg, 1455), and scholarly critical translations (post 1550)