

The Councils

A Series on the Development of the Bible's Canon: Part 4

From the beginning, Christianity inherited some of the canonical confusion presented with the Septuagint: what books comprise the Old Testament canon? In 94 A.D., Jewish aristocrat Flavius Josephus, in his response to a criticism of Judaism by Apion, an Egyptian philosopher, alludes to this Greek issue and affirms the Jewish (Hebrew) Old Testament canon of twenty-two books.

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, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years; but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life. It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time; and how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it is become natural to all Jews immediately, and from their very birth, to esteem these books to contain Divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be willingly to die for them. (Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1:8)

As the gospel spread throughout the world, it by nature, challenged existing social beliefs and norms. By the second century, church Fathers like Polycarp (69-155) and Christian scholars like Justin Martyr (100-165) wrote in the defense of Christianity against competing heresy and contemporary philosophies.

With the passage of time, the contemporaries of Jesus Christ passed away, and the geographically expanding and diverse church needed a written record to supplant the oral tradition of teaching. By the second and third century, Christian scholars like Irenaeus (130-202), Tertullian (155-240), and Origen of Alexandria (182-254) wrote to define orthodoxy.

On the political front, the Roman emperor Constantine united the Roman empire (324) and officially stopped the persecution of Christians; however, there were growing theological divisions about the nature of Jesus Christ caused by the excommunicated priest Arias and encouraged by the bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia. Constantine, seeking to maintain the peace and unity of the Roman empire, hosted a conference of all bishops of the church at his summer retreat in Nicaea to resolve their differences. This marked the beginning of government control of the church and its use for political purposes.

Council of Nicaea (325)

The Council of Nicaea was not involved with the formal ecumenical recognition of what books comprised the Christian Canon. By this time, the list of inspired books was largely fixed. Constantine's intent for the meeting was to determine if Arias and three other excommunicated church leaders (i.e. Eusebius of Nicomedia) could be readmitted into the church, because of the theological division caused by their view of Jesus' divinity and oneness with God the Father.

While three of the excommunicated were restored back into the church at Constantine's urgings, Arias' presentation of his view of Jesus Christ was condemned, because he believed that Jesus Christ, begotten by God the Father had a beginning, was not eternal, distinct from God, and subordinate to His Father. Arias was not readmitted.

At the heart of the issue was how to explain the mystery of Jesus' nature and the concept of being the incarnation of God.

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At Constantine's insistence, the bishops in attendance developed a creed that would state the universal position of the church. The Nicene Creed formally recognized the unity of Jesus Christ and His Father as One eternal Being, and the creed would be used as the basis to validate orthodox churches; those who disagreed with the Nicene Creed were excommunicated and their banishment was enforced by Constantine. These formal meetings of bishops would be the means to standardize worship / church practices, doctrine, and canon.

In 331, Constantine I commissioned Eusebius the historian to prepare fifty copies of the Bible at imperial expense, and Eusebius records Constantine's request:

I have thought it expedient to instruct your Prudence to order fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures, the provision and use of which you know to be most needful for the instruction of the Church, to be written on prepared parchment in a legible manner, and in a convenient, portable form, by professional transcribers thoroughly practiced in their art. The catholicus of the diocese has also received instructions from our Clemency to be careful to furnish all things necessary for the preparation of such copies; and it will be for you to take special care that they are completed with as little delay as possible. (Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, IV, 36)

Although there is no original copy of Constantine's Bible in possession today, it appears that there was little disagreement about the Old and New Testament canon.

Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386)

Among the many bishops teaching, Cyril taught in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and his lectures were published from notes taken by the congregation. One lecture listed the Old Testament canon as twenty-two books, and the New Testament canon as twenty-six books with the exception of the book of Revelation.

Of these read the two and twenty books, but have nothing to do with the apocryphal writings. Study earnestly these only which we read openly in the Church. Far wiser and more pious than yourself were the Apostles, and the bishops of old time, the presidents of the Church who handed down these books. Being therefore a child of the Church, trench thou not upon its statutes. And of the Old Testament, as we have said, study the two and twenty books, which, if you are desirous of learning, strive to remember by name, as I recite them. For of the Law the books of Moses are the first five, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. And next, Joshua the son of Nave, and the book of Judges, including Ruth, counted as seventh. And of the other historical books, the first and second books of the Kings are among the Hebrews one book; also, the third and fourth one book. And in like manner, the first and second of Chronicles are with them one book; and the first and second of Esdras are counted one. Esther is the twelfth book; and these are the Historical writings. But those which are written in verses are five, Job, and the book of Psalms, and Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, which is the seventeenth book. And after these come the five Prophetic books: of the Twelve Prophets one book, of Isaiah one, of Jeremiah one, including Baruch and Lamentations and the Epistle; then Ezekiel, and the Book of Daniel, the twenty-second of the Old Testament. (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.35.)

Then of the New Testament there are the four Gospels only, for the rest have false titles and are mischievous. The Manichaeans also wrote a Gospel according to Thomas, which being tintured with the fragrance of the evangelic title corrupts the souls of the simple sort. Receive also the Acts of the Twelve Apostles; and in addition to these the seven Catholic Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude; and as a seal upon them all, and the last work of the disciples, the fourteen Epistles of Paul. But let all the rest be put aside in a secondary rank. And whatever books are not read in Churches, these read not even by yourself, as you have heard me say. Thus much of these subjects. (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.36.)

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Synod of Laodicea (363)

A meeting of bishops took place in Phrygia Pacatiana, which is the ancient region of modern central Turkey. In establishing church practices, the synod resulted in 60 Canons (or decrees). Canon 60, which named the twenty-two books of the Old Testament canon and the twenty-six books New Testament Canon with the exception of Revelation, is disputed, because it is not found in other translated copies of this synod's record.

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. (*The Canons of the Synod, Canon 60*)

Athanasius of Alexandria (297-373)

As bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius had the responsibility of circulating an annual letter commemorating Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the Magi. In his 39th Festal Letter (367), Athanasius is the first historical record listing the book of Revelation as the 27th book of the New Testament canon.

There are, then, of the Old Testament, twenty-two books in number; for, as I have heard, it is handed down that this is the number of the letters among the Hebrews; their respective order and names being as follows. The first is Genesis, then Exodus, next Leviticus, after that Numbers, and then Deuteronomy. Following these there is Joshua, the son of Nun, then Judges, then Ruth. And again, after these four books of Kings, the first and second being reckoned as one book, and so likewise the third and fourth as one book. And again, the first and second of the Chronicles are reckoned as one book. Again Ezra, the first and second are similarly one book. After these there is the book of Psalms, then the Proverbs, next Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Job follows, then the Prophets, the twelve being reckoned as one book. Then Isaiah, one book, then Jeremiah with Baruch, Lamentations, and the epistle, one book; afterwards, Ezekiel and Daniel, each one book. Thus far constitutes the Old Testament. (*Athanasius of Alexandria, 39th Festal Letter, 4.*)

Again it is not tedious to speak of the [books] of the New Testament. These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John. (*Athanasius of Alexandria, 39th Festal Letter, 5.*)

Synod of Hippo (393)

Meeting at Hippo Regius a city in northern Africa (modern day Algeria), Augustine of Hippo and a council of bishops approved a list of canonical works and resolved other church issues; however, the results of this synod were lost. What is known of this list comes from a brief summary of the acts which were accepted by the Third Synod of Carthage. According to the summary, the Synod of Hippo's canon xxxvi was their list of conical books.

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Synod of Carthage (397)

Taking place in Carthage, Africa, nine synods met during the third through the fifth century. Little is known about the purpose and acts of what German Catholic theologian Heinrich Denzinger (1819-1883) would call the third synod. The ancient document called the *Codex Canonum Ecclesiae Africanae*, the *Statuta Concilii Africani* authored by Dionysius Exiguus in 419, recorded the ordinances enacted by the various synods in Carthage during the fourth and fifth centuries. Within this codex at canon xxiv is a record of the 393 Synod of Hippo (canon xxxvi) listing the canon of the Bible.

It was also determined that besides the Canonical Scriptures nothing be read in the Church under the title of divine Scriptures. The Canonical Scriptures are these: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, two books of Paraleipomena, 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 of the Apostle Peter, three of John, one of James, one of Jude, one book of the Apocalypse of John.

So let the church over the sea be consulted to confirm this canon. Let it also be allowed that the Passions of Martyrs be read when their festivals are kept. Let this be made known also to our brother and fellow-priest Boniface, or to other bishops of those parts, for the purpose of confirming that Canon. Because we have received from our fathers that those books must be read in the Church. (*Dionysius, Statuta Concilii Africani, canon xxiv*)

Believed to be influenced by Augustine of Hippo, the list includes Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees. Additionally, the "five books of Solomon" are believed to represent Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus. The view of the Apocrypha as a part of canon is attributed to Augustine, because he includes this list as canonical in other writings, and these books were traditionally read in African churches.

Council of Trent (1545-1563)

In response to Luther and the Protestant Reformation, leaders of the Catholic Church met twenty-five times between December 1545 and December 1563 to issue key statements against the Reformation and clarify the Church's doctrine and canon.

And it has thought it meet that a list of the sacred books be inserted in this decree, lest a doubt may arise in any one's mind, which are the books that are received by this Synod. They are as set down here below: of the Old Testament: the five books of Moses, to wit, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; Josue, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, two of Paralipomenon, the first book of Esdras, and the second which is entitled Nehemias; Tobias, Judith, Esther, Job, the Davidical Psalter, consisting of a hundred and fifty psalms; the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Canticle of Canticles, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Isaias, Jeremias, with Baruch; Ezechiel, Daniel; the twelve minor prophets, to wit, Osee, Joel, Amos, Abdias, Jonas, Micheas, Nahum, Habacuc, Sophonias, Aggaeus, Zacharias, Malachias; two books of the Machabees, the first and the second.

Of the New Testament: the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles written by Luke the Evangelist; fourteen epistles of Paul the apostle, (one) to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, (one) to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, two to Timothy, (one) to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews; two of Peter the apostle, three of John the apostle, one of the apostle James, one of Jude the apostle, and the Apocalypse of John the apostle. But if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition; and knowingly and deliberately contemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema. (*Council of Trent, Session IV: CONCERNING THE CANONICAL SCRIPTURES, FIRST DECREE*)

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Historically church councils sought to define their canon and the basis for that determination. It defined the difference between Eastern and Western Catholic churches and later Protestant churches.

As culture and civilization progresses further from the time of Jesus Christ, questions and criticism of the Bible's canon will continue. In response, various church councils will continue to seek a role to influence these debates. In the face of growing rationalism that denies any possibility of the supernatural, it cannot be denied that something significant happened in the first century in the Person of Jesus Christ that convinced the early church of certain writings were indeed the word of God. These writings, both Old and New Testaments, were worth preserving, copying carefully, and teaching to others.

References:

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