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The Story of the Christian Canon

J. DAVID MILLER

A Baptist buys a Bible, oblivious to the rich history that makes such a purchase possible. A Catholic browses a Bible in her hotel room and senses something missing. A frantic freshman at a Christian college discovers hundreds of extra pages in the Bible required for class. A Jewish student, discussing the Bible with his Christian roommate, doesn't appreciate the implications of "Old Testament." Surely, canon questions frequently lurk behind the scenes.

This issue of *Leaven* bristles with insights into what it means—what it has, can, and should mean—to adhere to a religion that claims a canon. Some readers are ready for these insights. Others, however, will find a basic article on the nature and development of the Old and New Testament canons to be an eye-opening overture to the insights and challenges they will encounter in this issue of *Leaven*.

The word *canon* has both Hebrew and Greek ancestors.¹ These words first meant a reed or *cane*, such as a papyrus stalk in the Nile. Because a reed was often used to test straightness, the words acquired nonbotanical meanings—ruler, straight edge, level, etc. Even a cannon, though spelled differently, requires a *straight* barrel (Latin *canna*, "pipe, tube").

The next semantic step associated with being straight with being right or being a standard. In Alexandria, Egypt, for example, a canon of classical books was identified. Consider Paul's encouraging words, "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule (*kanōn*)" (Gal 6:16, NIV). And most students of Christian history will recall the *regula fidei*, or "*kanōn* of faith." Today, the Christian canon is that constant collection that cannot be expanded or diminished. Yet, Christians do not agree on the contents of their OT canon, an irony we must learn to live with.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Composing

Dating the origins of the Old Testament is at best difficult. No solution satisfies today's spectrum of scholars. Many conservatives, Jewish and Christian, consider Moses the earliest author (about 1450 BC) and date the last book (Nehemiah or Malachi) between 450 and 400 BC—hence about 1,000 years for the writing of the Old Testament.

Another widely held view posits a 700-year span, with 850 BC for the approximate and anonymous beginning of the Pentateuch and 165-150 BC for the book of Daniel. The books of the Apocrypha were largely composed during the first and second centuries BC.

Copying

Long before the later books were composed, the earlier books were being copied. History has hidden the early stages of the copying process. Scribal practices from the mid-second century BC until AD 68 are evident from the scriptorium at Qumran, the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls.²

We have much more knowledge about scribal activity in the Masoretic period, about AD 500-1000. The Masoretes (also spelled Massoretes) were scribes and members of an extended family. That they were careful copyists is an understatement. They also catalogued a copious amount of information about the text of the Hebrew Bible and developed systems for representing vowels on the pages of scripture (the Hebrew alphabet consists of consonants). Most information about the copying process, however, pertains more specifically to the text than the canon of the Old Testament.

Collecting

The Hebrew Bible's major divisions are *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Kethuvim*—“instruction,” “prophets,” and “writings,” respectively.³ These divisions, especially the generic writings category, betray an early tendency to gather documents into groups. Evidence of a tripartite Hebrew Bible is found in early Jewish and Christian sources. The prologue to *The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach* (Greek *Sirach*, Hebrew *Sira*) twice refers to “the Law and the Prophets and the other books.” The grandson of Ben Sira wrote this prologue around 130 BC.

Both Mishnah and Talmud use the acronym *TaNaK* (*Torah*, *Nevi'im*, *Kethuvim*). Josephus (*Against Apion* 1:8) refers to five books of Moses, thirteen of the prophets, and four others that “contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.” Whereas the gospels commonly refer simply to the law and prophets (Matthew 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45), Luke 24:44 implies a tripartite structure.

Hebrew tradition divides the eight *Nevi'im* into two subdivisions: four former prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings), which are often classified as “history” in Christian tradition, and four latter prophets (in Christian terminology, the major and minor prophets, minus Lamentations and Daniel). The minor prophets comprise one book—The Book of the Twelve. Every Hebrew manuscript of the minor prophets, including eight from the Dead Sea Scrolls, combines all twelve on one scroll.

The Christian categories of five major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel) and twelve minor prophets, are unsatisfactory for several reasons. Lamentations, for example, does not fit the genre; it is five chapters of Hebrew poetry associated with Jeremiah because of the tradition that he wrote the book. Lamentations, like Daniel, stands in the *Kethuvim* in the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, the term “minor” tends to diminish the importance of these books. In fact, the term refers only to their length.

Scholars may also mention literary or writing prophets (also called classical prophets) and nonliterary or non-writing prophets. The literary/writing prophets have a book named for them (e.g., Jeremiah and Jonah); the others do not (e.g., Elijah and Elisha). These designations are not satisfactory for at least three reasons. First, not all the literary prophets actually did the writing. Second, it is often unclear whether these titles refer to persons or to books. Third, the nonliterary category quickly becomes undefined because of the great number of people who may be considered prophets (e.g., Moses, Miriam, David).

Subdivisions are not limited to the *Nevi'im*. One group within the *Kethuvim* is the five *Megilloth*, or “scrolls.” Early in the Christian era, Jews began to consider these books together because of their relationships with festivals. During the Middle Ages there was no established order among the five; hence the differences in ordering Song of Songs/Ruth and Lamentations/Ecclesiastes between *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, following the Leningrad codex of AD 1008/09, and the modern *Tanakh*.⁴ Since the printing press (1454) the *Megilloth* have followed the chronology of the feasts: Passover (Song of Songs), Weeks (Ruth), Ninth of Av (Lamentations), Tabernacles (Ecclesiastes), and Purim (Esther).

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Canonizing

A chronological approach will help us move from smaller collections to a canon. The conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) widely spread the *koinē*—or “common” Greek language. Jews, especially those outside Palestine, were not immune to this linguistic revolution. As a result, beginning during the third century BC, a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures arose among the large Jewish community of Alexandria, Egypt. Both the name “Septuagint” (Latin *septuaginta*, “seventy”) and its abbreviation, “LXX,” reflect the legend found in the Letter of Aristeas that 72 elders, six from each tribe of Israel, created the translation.⁵

Christianity was born into this Hellenistic world. That all 27 books of the New Testament are Greek compositions is telling, and it is natural that the Septuagint quickly became the Old Testament of the church. Whereas there are known fragments of the Septuagint from the second century BC onward, the earliest substantial copies are three codices—Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus.⁶ The first two are from the fourth century AD (Vaticanus is probably the older of the two), and Alexandrinus is from the fifth century. Two striking facts about these manuscripts are that they are Christian productions and that they contain the Apocrypha.

At this point some definitions will be helpful. The Apocrypha are a collection of about 15 Jewish books and portions of books considered canonical by the Roman Catholic Church but not by Jews or Protestants.⁷

Jewish (24)	Protestant (39)	Roman Catholic (46)
Torah (Law, Instruction)	Law	Law
¹ Genesis, ² Exodus, ³ Leviticus, ⁴ Numbers, ⁵ Deuteronomy	¹ Genesis, ² Exodus, ³ Leviticus, ⁴ Numbers, ⁵ Deuteronomy	¹ Genesis, ² Exodus, ³ Leviticus, ⁴ Numbers, ⁵ Deuteronomy
Nevi'im (Prophets, History)	History	History
⁶ Joshua, ⁷ Judges, ⁸ Samuel, ⁹ Kings, ¹⁰ Isaiah, ¹¹ Jeremiah, ¹² Ezekiel, ¹³ The Book of the 12 (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)	⁶ Joshua, ⁷ Judges, ⁸ Ruth, ^{9&10} 1&2 Samuel, ^{10&11} 1&2 Kings, ^{13&14} 1&2 Chronicles, ¹⁵ Ezra, ¹⁶ Nehemiah, ¹⁷ Esther	⁶ Joshua, ⁷ Judges, ⁸ Ruth, ^{9&10} 1&2 Samuel, ^{10&11} 1&2 Kings, ^{13&14} 1&2 Chronicles, ¹⁵ Ezra, ¹⁶ Nehemiah, ¹⁷ Tobit, ¹⁸ Judith, ¹⁹ Esther, with additions, ^{20&21} 1&2 Maccabees
Kethuvim (Writings, Poetry)	Poetry	Poetry
¹⁴ Psalms, ¹⁵ Proverbs, ¹⁶ Job, <i>Megilloth</i> (5 “Scrolls”) ¹⁷ Song of Songs, ¹⁸ Ruth, ¹⁹ Lamentations, ²⁰ Ecclesiastes, ²¹ Esther, ²² Daniel, ²³ Ezra/Nehemiah, ²⁴ Chronicles	¹⁸ Job, ¹⁹ Psalms, ²⁰ Proverbs, ²¹ Ecclesiastes, ²² Song of Solomon	²² Job, ²³ Psalms, ²⁴ Proverbs, ²⁵ Qoheleth, ²⁶ Song of Songs, ²⁷ Wisdom of Solomon, ²⁸ Ecclasticus (Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach)
	Prophets	Prophets
	^{5 Major:} ²³ Isaiah, ²⁴ Jeremiah, ²⁵ Lamentations, ²⁶ Ezekiel, ²⁷ Daniel, ²⁸ ₃₉ 12 Minor (same as Jewish The Book of the 12)	^{6 Major:} ²⁹ Isaiah, ³⁰ Jeremiah, with additions, ³¹ Lamentations, ³² Baruch, with the Letter of Jeremiah, ³³ Ezekiel, ³⁴ Daniel, with additions, ³⁵⁻⁴⁶ 12 Minor (same as Jewish The Book of the 12)

The Apocrypha are nearly as diverse as the Hebrew Bible and include history, wisdom, psalms, short stories, an apocalypse, and an epistle (the prophetic genre is conspicuously absent). Some texts are complete works; others are expansions of books of the Hebrew Bible.

The terminology associated with the Apocrypha is quite complex. “Apocrypha” literally refers to “hidden” writings (Greek *apokryphos*, “hidden, secret, obscure”). Protestants use this term, while Roman Catholics prefer “deuterocanonical,” signifying books that were recognized as canonical later than the “protocanonical” books. The Hebrew designation for these documents is *hisoniyyim*, the “outside” books. Catholics may use “apocrypha” to refer to the pseudepigrapha, additional documents written between 200 BC and AD 200 that essentially no one considers canonical (e.g., *Jubilees*, *Psalms of Solomon*, *Enoch*). “Pseudepigrapha” means

“false writing” and refers to works attributed to a famous person. All this becomes quite confusing, for the Apocrypha are in no sense hidden, and the pseudepigrapha are not all pseudepigraphic! Furthermore, an altogether different topic is the “NT apocrypha” or “early Christian apocrypha” (e.g., *Gospel of Thomas*, *Epistle of Barnabas*).

Perhaps clarity will come with a visual comparison. The following chart gives the Hebrew Bible, the Protestant OT, and the Roman Catholic Latin Vulgate.⁸ The Apocrypha are underlined; other differences between the Protestant and Catholic columns are simply matters of nomenclature (namely, Ecclesiastes = Qoheleth, Song of Solomon = Song of Songs). The Hebrew Bible, of course, uses Hebrew titles (e.g., Chronicles = *Dibre Hayamim*), and the Vulgate uses Latin titles (e.g., Chronicles = *Paralipomenon*). However, such modern editions as the *Tanakh* and *The Catholic Study Bible* have conformed to traditional English titles.⁹

I should note that the Greek Orthodox Church includes not only those books in the Roman Catholic column, but also 1 Esdras, Psalm 151, the Prayer of Manasseh, 3 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees (in an appendix). The Russian Orthodox Church also goes beyond the deuterocanonical books, including 1 and 2 Esdras, Psalm 151 and 3 Maccabees.

Returning to our chronology, Judaism faced a number of crises in the first and second centuries AD. The most disastrous occurred in AD 70 when the Roman general Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, thus changing Judaism forever.

In the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem, a scholarly community formed at Jamnia (Hebrew *Yavneh* or *Jabneh*), near the Mediterranean coast, west and slightly north of Jerusalem.¹⁰ By AD 100 rabbis at Jamnia had discussed many topics, including the Hebrew canon of scripture. They were concerned to identify which books “defile the hands,” a phrase emphasizing the inspiration and resulting holiness of certain documents. The rabbis did not set out to create a canon. They recognized the status quo, deliberating only over Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), Song of Songs, and Esther. In short, they turned popular practice into official policy.

We have no records of debates over apocryphal books at Jamnia; the Septuagint was wholly disregarded. Debate over Esther, for example, asked only whether the book defiled the hands; it did not juxtapose the Hebrew against the expanded Greek version. Thus the gap between Jews and Christians widened. Jews embraced the Hebrew Bible, while Christians continued to use the Septuagint. The latter, including those books and portions of books now called the Apocrypha, became the Christian Old Testament.

At this time, we can cautiously speak of a Hebrew canon. Christians, however, had no official stance on such matters. The church began to affirm the Septuagint canon in local councils in the fourth century—Laodicea (343-381) in the east, and Rome (382), Hippo (393), and Carthage (397 and 419) in the west.

Also in the fourth century, Pope Damasus commissioned Jerome, sometimes called by his Latin name Hieronymous, to create a Latin Bible, which we now call the Latin Vulgate. Jerome chose to make a new translation, rather than to work from the chaos of existing Latin versions. Highly regarding the Hebrew canon, Jerome labeled those writings now known as the Apocrypha *libri ecclesiastici* and gave them a status secondary to the *libri canonici*, a distinction that was quickly abandoned.

Thus the Christian Old Testament included the Apocrypha until the reformers, led by Martin Luther, repudiated it. In 1534, Luther gathered the Apocrypha into an appendix between the testaments, prefaced with this heading: “Apocrypha—that is, books which are not held equal to the Holy Scriptures, and yet are profitable and good to read.”

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Reaction to the reformers was strong. In 1546, the Council of Trent announced an anathema upon those who would “not accept as sacred and canonical” any book of either testament “in their entirety and with all their parts.” Thus for the first time in 1,500 years, a general council of the church made a statement on the limits of the canon.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

We will now consider the NT canon under the same four categories: composing, copying, collecting, and canonizing.¹¹ This will be a less complicated topic. The New Testament is shorter; its 27 books are about one-third as long as the Protestant Old Testament and one-fourth as long as the Catholic Old Testament. Furthermore, essentially all Christian groups—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—claim the same NT canon. And finally, more is known about the development of this canon.

Composing

The books of the New Testament were largely composed between AD 50 and 100, with 1 Thessalonians—probably the oldest surviving Christian document—written in 50 or 51. The later boundary will fluctuate with one’s opinion of the authorship of a few NT letters, especially 2 Peter, which many scholars date as late as 130.

The language of the New Testament is Koine Greek, mentioned above in connection with the Septuagint. Spoken by the many peoples conquered by Alexander the Great and thus overwhelmed by Greek culture, this brand of Greek was more than a local dialect. It was not the language of scholarship or literature but of the common people. The Koine of the Septuagint and New Testament is rich with Semitic flavor. It ranges from the simple style of Mark and John to the polished prose of Luke and Hebrews.

Copying

The oldest known NT fragment, papyrus 52 (abbreviated P52), contains part of John 18. The importance of the early date of this papyrus scrap (about AD 125) far outweighs its unfortunately brief contents. P52’s

five verses represent the entire gospel of John, written only a few decades earlier. Kurt and Barbara Aland make this point colorfully, “There is no need to consume a whole jar of jelly to identify the quality of its contents—a spoonful or two is quite adequate!”¹²

Other manuscripts, either papyrus or parchment, abound. While only about ten are as early as the second century, the third and fourth centuries offer us more than 70. And this is only the beginning of

a tradition that has preserved approximately 5,500 second- to sixteenth-century Greek manuscripts. Add versions in several languages, and the number increases to well over 30,000! To ponder this puzzle here would be to leave the topic of canon and move into textual criticism.

Collecting

Gathering documents into collections began early. P46, the oldest copy of Paul’s writings (about AD 200), is a single codex that included ten letters (with Hebrews, without the pastoral epistles). P45, a bit later than P46, contained all four gospels and Acts. P72, from the third or fourth century, included Jude and both epistles of Peter.

Probably, collections were created as documents and were shared among individuals and congregations. Recall Col 4:16, “And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the

Surely the Christians at Colossae did not give away their original! Rather, they sent a copy, thus revealing to us a process that produced growing and circulating collections.

Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.” Surely the Christians at Colossae did not give away their original! Rather, they sent a copy, thus revealing to us a process that produced growing and circulating collections. See also, for example, 1 Pet 1.1 and Rev 1.11.

Canonizing

The shift from assorted collections to an official canon was long and gradual. Three canon lists can help us trace this shift.

Early Christian leaders and their movements, such as Valentinian gnosticism and Montanist apocalypticism, helped move the church toward an official canon. Prime among these was Marcion, an anti-Jewish Christian and son of the Bishop of Sinope on the Black Sea.

The church excommunicated Marcion in the mid-second century because he taught a brand of gnosticism that rejected the entire Old Testament as well as its influence in the New Testament. Marcion produced a two-part Bible. His *Evangelion* was the Gospel of Luke, and his *Apostolikon* included ten pauline letters (both Hebrews and the pastorals were excluded). Marcion edited all 11 documents, jettisoning Semitic influence such as the lukan birth narratives of John and Jesus and the mention of Abraham in Galatians.

Clearly Marcion’s canon has not held sway. He is important, however, because he unwittingly caused the church to consider its own canon. The gospels, for example, had become an unofficial yet commonly accepted subcanon. Marcion challenged the four-fold gospel and forced the question. Although Marcion is an important benchmark in the story of the canon, we should be careful not to overstate his role. He neither conceived the idea of a NT canon nor forced the church to create one.

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Moving ahead, the height of canon-creating activity is often associated with a second canon list, discovered in the early eighteenth century by an Italian named Muratori—the Muratorian Canon or Muratorian Fragment. More than a simple list, this Latin document preserves 85 lines describing several early Christian documents. In spite of a fragmentary opening, we can be confident that all four gospels were mentioned. All 13 pauline letters are included, and two pauline forgeries are labeled heretical (to the Laodiceans and the Alexandrians). Jude and at least two letters of John are favorably mentioned, as are three apocalypses (of John, of Peter, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*). Most surprising is the inclusion of the OT apocryphon, *Wisdom of Solomon*. The last few lines exclude several additional books. Not mentioned in the fragment are Hebrews, James, and the letters of Peter.

From this, we conclude that the NT canon was *mostly* formed by the date of the Muratorian Fragment. This date, however, eludes us. Majority opinion places the original document in Rome toward the end of the second century. The alternative is Syria/Palestine at about 325.¹³

Questions about the role of Marcion and the date of the Muratorian Fragment forbid certainty about early canon activity. One date, however, is certain. On Easter Sunday, AD 367, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt, listed in his Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter the 27 books now known as the New Testament, adding the caveat, “Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away from them.”

By the time of Athanasius’s ancient advice, the contours of the NT canon were mostly in place. Even after 367, the church disputed over a few books, such as Hebrews in the west and Revelation in the east. A Coptic canon list from about 380 includes two epistles of Clement.

A list from the close of the fourth century mentions that Hebrews and four of the Catholic Epistles were disputed by some, and Revelation by most. Gregory of Nazianzus (who died in 389) created a canon list without Revelation, a list ratified by a local synod as late as 692!

CONCLUSION

It is helpful to understand the process that allows us to claim a canon. Although one might expect a canon to provide clarity and unity, we must recognize that Christians through the centuries and across the globe have not shared a single canon. Other topics could have been included here, such as criteria for canonicity, additional canon lists, and differences between the churches of the east and west. These necessary shortcomings notwithstanding, you are invited to move from this basic article on the nature and development of the Old and New Testament canons into the insights and challenges in this issue of Leaven.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 An excellent summary can be found in Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 289-93.
- 2 Literature on the Dead Sea Scrolls abounds; browse BM 487 in the library. That Qumran had a scriptorium has been challenged see Magen Brosh, "Was Qumran, Indeed, a Monastery? The Consensus and its Challenges, an Archaeologist's View," in *Caves of Enlightenment*, ed. James Charlesworth (North Richland Hills, TX: Bibal, 1998), 19-37.
- 3 The apostrophe in *Nevi'im* signifies a Hebrew letter with no corresponding sound in English. *Nevi'im* and *Kethuvim* are often spelled *Nebi'im* and *Kethubim*.
- 4 Notice also the different ordering of Proverbs/Job, and see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 3-4.
- 5 The Septuagint is sometimes abbreviated with a Gothic "G" (for "Greek"), as in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* and *Novum Testamentum Graece*.
- 6 For descriptions of these manuscripts, see Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42-48; and Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 138-39.
- 7 Exceptions are the Anglican Church and Episcopalian Church, which do utilize the Apocrypha.
- 8 Compare the charts in Bernhard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 4-5; Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 80; and William LaSor, David Hubbard, and Frederic Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 24-25.
- 9 *Tanakh, a New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985); Donald Senior et al., eds., *The Catholic Study Bible: New American Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- 10 The role of Jamnia is debated; I present the majority view. See Jack Lewis, "What Do We Mean by Jabneh?" in *The Canon and Masorah of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Sid Leiman (New York: Ktav, 1974), 254-61.
- 11 For a thorough treatment of the NT canon, see Note 1. Recent creative approaches include John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), and Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
- 12 Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 58.
- 13 On the date of the Muratorian Fragment, see Albert Sundberg, "Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List," *HTR* 66 (1973), 1-41; Everett Ferguson, "Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance," *Studia Patristica* XVII (1982), 677-83; Geoffrey Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992). See also, Robert Hull, review of Muratorian Fragment, by Hahneman, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995): 89-91.

