

ON THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

Received, Not Chosen

How the Church Came to Confess Its Canon

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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You have probably heard some version of the story. Sometime in the fourth century, a room full of bishops (usually at Nicaea, usually under the thumb of the emperor Constantine) sat down with a pile of gospels and letters and voted. The books that served the interests of the powerful went in. The books that threatened them were burned, buried, or forgotten. The Bible you hold, the story goes, is the winners' anthology.

The story comes in a more respectable form as well. The church produced the canon, so the canon is a church product. For the skeptic, that makes the Bible a human artifact like any other. For Rome, it means the church stands above Scripture, since the authority that defines a thing outranks the thing defined.

Notice that the skeptic and the Roman apologist share a premise. Both assume the church *made* the canon. The confessional Lutheran answer is that the church did no such thing. The church *received* the canon. The councils that eventually wrote lists did not create the authority of those books; they bore witness to an authority the churches had already been living under for three centuries. The difference between making and receiving is the whole argument.

What Nicaea Did Not Do

Start with the most popular version of the myth, because it is the easiest to dispose of. The Council of Nicaea met in 325 to deal with Arius, who taught that the Son was a creature. It also addressed the date of Easter and a number of disciplinary matters. Its creed and its canons survive. None of them say a word about which books belong in the Bible.

The legend that Nicaea sorted the books comes from much later. A ninth-century Greek collection of council summaries tells a tale of the bishops placing the disputed books near the altar and praying, whereupon the false ones fell to the floor. Voltaire repeated the story in the eighteenth century to mock the church, and modern novels and documentaries have dressed it up again. It has no basis in any record from the council itself. Whatever one thinks of the canon, Nicaea had nothing to do with it.

The Books Were Read Before Anyone Listed Them

The more serious question is how the books came to be recognized at all. The answer begins inside the New Testament.

The apostolic letters were written to be read aloud in the assembly. Paul charges the Thessalonians under oath to have his letter read to all the brothers and sisters (1 Thess 5:27). He tells the Colossians, "And after you have read this letter, have it read to the church of Laodicea. In turn, read the letter from Laodicea as well" (Col 4:16). From the first generation, apostolic writings circulated from church to church and were read in worship alongside the Law and the Prophets.

The New Testament also already treats apostolic writing as Scripture. Peter speaks of Paul's letters, which "the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they also do to the rest of the scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16). *The rest of the scriptures*. Paul, writing to Timothy, introduces two quotations with "the scripture says": one from Deuteronomy 25:4 and the other, "The worker deserves his pay," which is the Lord's word as recorded in Luke 10:7 (1 Tim 5:18).

And the problem of forgery was already present. Paul warns the Thessalonians not to be shaken by a letter falsely claiming to come from him (2 Thess 2:2), and he closes the same letter with a safeguard: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, which is how I write in every letter" (2 Thess 3:17). Notice what this means. From the very beginning the question was never "Do we like this book?" The question was "Did this come from the apostles?" That is a question of history and testimony, not of taste or politics.

Marcion, and the Church Naming What It Already Had

The first person to publish a fixed list of Christian Scriptures was not a bishop of the catholic church. It was a heretic. Around 144, Marcion of Sinope rejected the God of the Old Testament as a lesser deity and produced his own Bible: a trimmed version of Luke and ten letters of Paul, edited to remove whatever sounded too Jewish.

The church's response to Marcion is instructive. It did not convene a committee to invent a rival list. It pointed to the books it had always used. By about 180, Irenaeus of Lyons treats the four Gospels as so settled that he can argue there could no more be three or five of them than there could be three or five winds or corners of the earth (*Against Heresies* 3.11.8). His argument is decorative, but the fact behind it is not. A man raised in Smyrna, who had sat under Polycarp, who had sat under John, assumed four Gospels as a given.

The Muratorian Fragment, a list usually dated to the late second century (some scholars argue for later), shows the same instinct at work. It receives the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, and most of the general epistles. It rejects letters to the Laodiceans and Alexandrians forged in Paul's name to support Marcion. And it gives a telling reason for keeping the popular *Shepherd of Hermas* out of public reading: it was written recently, in the writer's own time, by the brother of a bishop of Rome. It may be read privately, the fragment says, but it does not belong with the prophets or the apostles. The test was not whether a book was edifying. *Hermas* was edifying. The test was whether it came from the apostolic foundation.

A similar episode is recorded of Serapion, bishop of Antioch around 200. A congregation under his care at Rhossus was reading a *Gospel of Peter*. Serapion at first allowed it without examining it. When he finally read it and found it teaching that Christ only seemed to suffer, he reversed himself. A book that bore an apostle's name but contradicted the apostolic faith gave itself away.

How the Churches Knew: The Receiving Churches

Here is where the question you may have heard (whether regional churches vouched for books connected to their own region) turns out to be on the right track, though the emphasis needs a small adjustment. What counted was not mainly where an author lived. What counted was which churches had *received* a writing firsthand, and could therefore testify to where it came from.

Tertullian, writing around 200 from North Africa, makes the point directly. Anyone who wants to know what the apostles taught, he says, should go to the churches the apostles founded, where their authentic letters are still read: to Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Rome (*Prescription Against Heretics* 36). The congregation that received Paul's letter from the hand of his courier was the best witness that Paul had written it. Letters were copied and shared outward from those churches, and the testimony traveled with them.

The same principle explains why two Gospels written by men who were not apostles were received without controversy. Mark was known from the earliest testimony as the interpreter of Peter, writing down what Peter preached (Papias, as preserved in Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39.15). Luke was Paul's traveling companion. Their books carried apostolic testimony even though the apostles did not hold the pen.

The principle cut the other way too. Tertullian reports that a presbyter in Asia composed the *Acts of Paul* out of admiration for the apostle, was found out, confessed, and was removed from office (*On Baptism* 17). The churches nearest to the source knew it was not apostolic, and their testimony settled the matter.

Revelation offers a clear case of regional reception. It was addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (Rev 1:4, 11). It was in exactly that region, and among teachers trained there, that it was received earliest and most firmly. Justin Martyr, who spent time in Ephesus, names John the apostle as its author in the mid-second century. Irenaeus, raised in Smyrna, one of the seven churches, quotes it as Scripture and carried that conviction with him to Gaul.

The Edge Cases: Where the Regions Differed

Not every book was received everywhere at the same speed, and honesty requires saying so. In the early fourth century the historian Eusebius sorted the books into categories (*Church History* 3.25). The *homologoumena* ("acknowledged") were received by all: the four Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul, 1 John, and 1 Peter. The *antilegomena* ("spoken against" or "disputed") were known to most but doubted by some: James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. A third group, including the *Shepherd*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Didache*, he classed as not genuine Scripture, however useful. Revelation he placed awkwardly in two categories at once, because opinion on it was divided by region.

That regional divide is the heart of the edge cases, and it ran in two directions.

Hebrews was received early and firmly in the East, especially at Alexandria, where teachers from Pantaenus to Clement to Origen connected it with Paul. Origen was candid that the Greek style was not Paul's own and that only God knows who actually wrote it out, but he held that the thoughts were the apostle's (Eusebius, *Church History* 6.25). In the West the letter was well known (Clement of Rome draws on it heavily around 96) but it was long hesitated over, chiefly because its authorship was uncertain and Rome did not count it among Paul's letters.

Revelation was the mirror image. The West and the churches of Asia received it early. In the East, doubts grew. Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century did not reject it as inspired, but he argued from its Greek that the apostle John could not have written it. Cyril of Jerusalem omits it from his list around 350. The Syriac-speaking churches were slower still: their standard Bible, the Peshitta, lacked Revelation along with 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude.

Around 414, Jerome summed up the situation in a letter to a Gallic official named Dardanus. The Latins, he wrote, did not generally receive Hebrews, and the Greek churches did not receive Revelation, but he accepted both, following the ancient writers who quoted them as Scripture (*Letter* 129).

This is how the edge cases were resolved. Not by a vote that overrode the evidence, but by the churches comparing their witness. Alexandria's confidence in Hebrews filled in for Rome's hesitation. Asia's and the West's confidence in Revelation filled in for the East's hesitation. Each region's testimony supplied what another lacked, and over time a single catholic consensus emerged from the pooled memory of the churches. That is slow, messy, and thoroughly human. It is also the opposite of arbitrary.

Athanasius and the African Synods

The first surviving list that names exactly our twenty-seven books comes from Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in his Easter letter of 367. Athanasius calls these books the springs of salvation and warns that no one should add to them or take from them. He mentions the *Didache* and the *Shepherd* as useful for instructing new converts, but plainly not as canonical. His letter does not decree anything new. It writes down, for the guidance of his churches, what he believed had been handed down.

The North African synods at Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 then published a list of their own. These were regional gatherings, not ecumenical councils, and they bound no one outside their own province. Their wording is revealing. They list "thirteen" letters of the apostle Paul and then, separately, "one" to the Hebrews of the same apostle, preserving in the very form of the list the memory of the old Western hesitation. They also expressed the wish to confirm their list with the church across the sea. A body that thinks it is inventing the canon does not ask for confirmation from elsewhere. A body that thinks it is bearing witness to a received canon does.

A word of honesty is needed here as well. The African lists also included several Old Testament books that the Hebrew Bible did not contain: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, and Maccabees. Jerome, the finest Hebrew scholar of the age, dissented and distinguished those books from the Hebrew canon. That disagreement over the Old Testament remained open in the West for more than a thousand years.

Which brings out the most striking fact of all. The Roman church did not dogmatically define the canon, as an article binding on the conscience, until the Council of Trent in 1546. That is, the claim that “a council decided the canon” describes the sixteenth century, after the Reformation, not the fourth. For fifteen centuries the church lived with the Scriptures it had received, without a universal conciliar decree, and was not left without the Word.

Recognition, Not Authorization

Historians commonly describe three tests the early church applied, whether consciously or not: apostolic origin, agreement with the faith handed down from the apostles, and long and widespread use in the churches. Every one of these is a test of *origin* and *witness*. None of them is a test of preference. The church was not asking, “Which books shall we make authoritative?” It was asking, “Which books came to us from the apostles and prophets, on whose foundation we have been built?” (Eph 2:20).

Jesus gives us the theological grammar for this: “My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). The flock does not authorize the Shepherd’s voice. The flock recognizes it. The councils that eventually wrote lists were like sheep saying out loud, at last, which voice they had been following all along.

Rome likes to quote Augustine’s remark that he would not have believed the Gospel had the authority of the catholic church not moved him. There is a true sense in which that is so, and the Gospel itself shows it. The Samaritans of Sychar first came to Jesus because of the woman’s testimony. Then they heard him for themselves and said to her, “No longer do we believe because of your words, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this one really is the Savior of the world” (John 4:42). The church is that woman. Her witness brings people to the Word. But once they hear the Word, their faith rests on the Word, not on the witness. She pointed. She did not create the one to whom she pointed, and she did not stand above him.

The Lutheran Confession

This is why the Lutheran Confessions, strikingly, contain no list of canonical books. What they confess is the authority of Scripture, not the authority of a decree about Scripture. The Formula of Concord states that the only rule and guiding principle by which all teachings and teachers are to be judged “are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone” (FC Ep, Rule and Norm 1; Kolb-Wengert, 486). The Solid Declaration calls Holy Scripture the pure, clear fountain of Israel (FC SD, Rule and Norm 3; Kolb-

Wengert, 527). Luther, in the Smalcald Articles, puts the principle bluntly: “the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel” (SA II.ii.15; Kolb-Wengert, 304).

Notice the phrase “prophetic and apostolic.” That is the ancient criterion. The Confessions do not say “the writings approved by such-and-such a council.” They say the writings of the prophets and apostles, which is exactly what the early churches were trying to identify.

Luther is often caricatured on this point, as though he wanted to tear James and Revelation out of the Bible. What he actually did in his 1522 New Testament was place Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation at the end, outside the numbered list, and write prefaces explaining his reservations. Some of his reasoning was his own, notably his test of whether a book “promotes Christ.” But the shape of what he did was the recovery of the ancient distinction between the acknowledged and the disputed books, a distinction Rome had flattened. He was not inventing doubt; he was refusing to pretend the early church had none.

Martin Chemnitz, the chief author of the Formula of Concord, took the matter up carefully in his *Examination of the Council of Trent*. He argued that the church does not give Scripture its authority but receives it on the testimony of the primitive church, which had it from the apostles. He maintained the old distinction and held that no article of faith should be built on a disputed book alone. Confessional Lutherans today receive and read all twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and the distinction does not leave the believer uncertain of anything that matters. Every article of the faith, every word of Law and Gospel, every promise attached to Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper, stands on the acknowledged books that the whole church received from the beginning.

What Rome and the East Receive Today

All three traditions (Roman, Eastern Orthodox, and Lutheran) receive the same twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Where they part ways is the Old Testament.

Rome’s canon, as defined at Trent, contains seventy-three books. Beyond the Hebrew Scriptures it includes Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and the Greek additions to Esther and Daniel. Rome calls these “deuterocanonical,” a term coined by Sixtus of Siena in 1566. It means received into the canon later, not of lesser rank. Even so, Trent drew lines of its own. It left out 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh, which medieval Latin Bibles had carried, and the official Clementine Vulgate printed them in an appendix. Before Trent, Rome’s own scholars had not spoken with one voice. Cardinal Cajetan, the man who interviewed Luther at Augsburg in 1518, followed Jerome in treating these books as useful for edification but not for establishing doctrine. The distinction the Reformers kept was not a Protestant invention.

The Eastern Orthodox churches have no single conciliar list binding the whole communion. Their Bibles follow the Greek Septuagint and are broader still, adding 1 Esdras, 3 Maccabees, the Prayer of Manasseh, and Psalm 151, with 4 Maccabees often in an appendix. Orthodox thinking about the status of these books is divided. The Synod of Jerusalem in 1672 declared books such as Wisdom, Tobit, and Maccabees to be genuine Scripture, largely in reaction to a Calvinist-leaning confession circulating under the name of Patriarch Cyril Lucaris. Yet many Orthodox theologians, especially in the Russian tradition, have followed Athanasius instead. They call these books *anagignoskomena*, “the readable books,” profitable to read but not on the level of the Hebrew canon. That view sits remarkably close to Luther’s.

The East preserves a living echo of the old regional hesitations as well. Orthodox churches receive Revelation as Scripture, yet it is never read in the Divine Liturgy. And the churches outside the Byzantine world kept their own inheritances for centuries. The Syriac Church of the East long used a New Testament of twenty-two books, without 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, or Revelation. The Ethiopian church, at the other extreme, preserved 1 Enoch and Jubilees in a canon broader than anyone else’s.

None of this unsettles the argument; it confirms it. Long after the fourth century, churches that held councils and had bishops in abundance still kept slightly different Old Testaments, because each was guarding what it had received. Councils did not manufacture agreement where testimony differed. Where every church had received the same books from the beginning, as with the Gospels and Paul’s letters, there was never any question at all.

A Brief Word on the Old Testament

The same principle governs the Old Testament, though the path is different. The church did not have to discover Israel’s Scriptures; it inherited them. To Israel were “entrusted the oracles of God” (Rom 3:2), and the risen Christ opened his disciples’ minds to what was written about him “in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms” (Luke 24:44). Lutherans have followed Jerome in receiving the Hebrew canon as Scripture. Luther’s 1534 Bible printed the apocryphal books in a separate section between the testaments, describing them as books not equal to Holy Scripture but useful and good to read. That is a judgment about testimony and origin, not about piety or usefulness.

The Voice That Was Already Speaking

The councils did not choose the canon. They confessed it, the way the Nicene Creed confessed the faith the church already held about the Son. Nicaea did not make Christ divine; it said out loud what the church had always worshiped. In the same way, Athanasius and the African bishops did not make Paul’s letters Scripture; they said out loud what the churches had been reading in worship since Paul’s couriers first unrolled them.

The process was human, slow, and sometimes uneven from one region to another. That should not trouble us. God has always worked through ordinary means: through prophets with accents, apostles with handwriting, couriers on Roman roads, congregations that kept their mail and knew where it came from. The same Shepherd whose voice the early churches recognized in those writings still speaks through them today, wherever the Word is preached and the sacraments are given. The sheep did not invent that voice. They heard it, and they followed.

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