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The biblical canon:
Do we have the right Bible?

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Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* became famous or infamous for suggesting a romantic relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. A lesser known charge of this work however, is its frequent assertion that the biblical canon was arbitrarily imposed by church authorities in the fourth century A.D. and has little or no inherent authority. Brown also suggests that there were other sacred books with equal, or even greater, validity than the Bible. It is widely recognized that Brown's fictional retelling of history includes glaring inaccuracies at nearly every turn. Even though a brief survey of history would easily discredit Brown's fanciful and fictional hypotheses, the question of canonicity deserves a careful study. In fact, the essential root of the question is even now under heavy discussion in scholarship. This central issue pertaining to biblical canon may be summarized in two closely related questions: Is the origin of the canon divine or human? What or who determined the contents and authority of the canon? The answers to these questions ground the conception of the nature and authority of the Bible.

Presuppositions and definitions

Diverse and competing definitions and interpretations regarding the canon exist in scholarship. What is the reason for such diverse interpretation? Presuppositions may be identified as major factors. In matters of history, it is important to recognize that statements presented as fact contain not only the transmission of objective data, but also the interpretation of that data. Indeed, it is impossible to communicate history without the inclusion of interpretation. Such interpretations, however, may or may not be accurate. This becomes a special problem when the conclusions communicated by the historian or scholar are uncritically received as correct, without recognition that the presentation includes interpretation impacted by presuppositions of the author.

Thus, definitions of canonicity are greatly impacted at the level of presuppositions, whether these presuppositions are expressed or implied. The crucial presupposition regards the *origin* of the biblical books. In particular, a major driving force of the diversity of canon definitions is the preconception regarding the possibility or impossibility of divine revelation. Is the canon determined by humans or by God? If one rules out the possibility that God has communicated about Himself to humans, one will also rule out the divine appointment of the canon. On the other hand, faith in divine self-revelation would permit a definition which views the canon as a divinely appointed standard.

Two major definitions of canon

For the sake of this discussion, let us consider two main definitions of canonicity which flow from these positions. The first, *community canon,* views the canon as "something officially or authoritatively imposed upon certain literature."[1] Here the canon is defined as a set of writings selected by the community as a standard. Accordingly, canonicity is viewed as imposed upon the writings that do not necessarily merit canonicity. Thus, the contents of that canon may be flexible, and the authority resides in the community to select the writings in the canon used for theology.

The second definition, *intrinsic canon,* holds that the canon was *determined* by God, and *recognized* (not *determined*) by humans.[2] Here, the books of Scripture are intrinsically canonical due to their divine origin. This inherent canonical authority is bestowed by divine authority, independent of human recognition for its inherent authority. Only the divine origin gives the books their authority; the recognition of that divine origin leads to the proper function of the canon in the lives of individuals and believers.

Thus, the formative factor of the possibility of divine revelation often leads to the difference between the position that the community *determines* the canon and the position that God

determines the canon, with the community *recognizing* the canon. In the former, the books are granted their place in the canon by humans, while in the latter, God grants the placement in the canon. This difference is crucial to the nature of the canon. If one states that the community makes such determination, then the focus will be placed on the history of that determination and the possibility of contemporary changes in the scope of that canon. If one, on the other hand, believes that God determines the canon, the central question is how the community should recognize the scope of that canon.

Implications of the definitions

According to the community-canon definition, any data that does not include specified lists of canonical books is dismissed as lacking relevance. Notably, in this view the quotations and usage of the canonical books in early church ages, the first to fourth century, are not evidence of an authoritative canon since they are not canon lists, and thus do not meet the requirements of this definition. Rather, the data deemed conclusive for the history of the formation of the canon is restricted to the sample of extant lists of books that have come down to us through history. This will then lead to a fourth century A.D. dating, based on the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397, or later, for the formation of the canon since lists from before this time are few and deemed inconclusive.[3] Admittedly, this is an argument from silence, since we only have what has come down to us through history.

However, if the canon is approached from a different definition, the history then is interpreted much differently. The history of canon lists is a valid endeavor of study in its own right. However, if one applies the intrinsic-canon definition, then such history should not be taken to provide conclusive answers regarding the rightful scope or authority of the canon. It may provide information about the books accepted by the author of a given document and perhaps to a specific community, but it does not provide much information beyond that which reaches to the level of the merits of the canonical books, or intrinsic canonicity. Thus, the intrinsic-canon approach will apply criteria to identify the books that God determined and intended to be a part of the canon.

Furthermore, this intrinsic-canon approach values the internal data of Scripture that supports the crucial need to correctly identify the divinely intended canon. The Old Testament (OT) explicitly mentions divine revelation and the intentional preservation of that revelation as an authority for the community.[4] The New Testament (NT) records abundant evidence that supports the existence of an OT canon and its acceptance by Jesus who passed it on to His followers.[5] The NT is also clear about its own authority as the Word of God.[6] Thus, it seems that internally, the biblical writers suppose an authoritative collection of OT and NT books, in other words, a canon. Also of interest, although not conclusive, is the early record of the usage by the church documented in the writings of the early church fathers.[7] I suggest that if we accept the reality of divine revelation to humans, then we should adopt the intrinsic-canon definition and focus on the correct identification of the books themselves based on criteria that identify the books as sound, reliable conduits of divine revelation.

Suggested criteria for the recognition of the divinely determined canon

The main criteria that aid in the recognition of the divinely appointed canon include: (1) divinely commissioned authorship, (2) consistency with other revelation, and (3) self-authentication of divine purpose. Divinely commissioned authorship simply means that the author has divine authority to transmit revelation with such divine commission seen in the work of prophets throughout the OT. In the NT, this commission is seen in the work of apostles and first generation Christians who were directly connected to the apostles and thus had apostolic guidance available.[8] This, of course, requires that the books be written during the time of the prophets and apostles, respectively. The second criterion, consistency with other revelation, requires that the contents of the books must not contradict, but be in accord with all past revelation (Deut. 13:1–3; Mal. 3:6; Isa. 8:20; Matt. 5:17, 18; Matt. 24:35).[9] The last criterion, self-authentication of divine purpose, is perhaps the most important but also the most difficult to identify objectively. It means that true canonical merit lies in the action of God in the revelation, inspiration, and preservation of the books and may be recognized in the contents of the books.[10]

It should be noted, however, that this presentation of the criteria and application is necessarily oversimplified. I am not suggesting that the mere presentation of these criteria lays to rest the questions about canonicity. However, it does move the question from the history of canon lists to the question of the rightful, intrinsic place in the canon of the books themselves. It would be naïve to believe that the debate would be quieted based on this perspective. However, it seems quite valid to move from this definition of canon to an investigation of the books themselves to a decision based on their merits as canonical. I have personally conducted just such an investigation and am satisfied that the 39 books of the OT and the 27 books of the NT do in fact meet all criteria of canonicity and are thus worthy of acceptance as the divinely commissioned word of God, authoritative for all faith and practice.[11] Moreover, I have found no other books that can meet these criteria.[12] Therefore, I have concluded that the 66-book canon is the correctly recognized revelation of God.

At this point, the issue of the closing of the canon must be briefly addressed. Because the revelations contained in the OT and NT contain all the necessary revelations of God's activity in the history of salvation, the canon is fittingly closed by the NT writings. The canonical books contain purposely selected information that make up the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The NT teaches that Christ fulfilled the entire OT as the complete revelation of God (Matt. 5:17). Moreover, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into "all truth" (John 16:13). If we have the authentic, divinely commissioned apostolic writings

along with the OT, we have all canonical revelation and no need exists for further covenant revelation. This, however, does not mean that the Holy Spirit no longer bestows the prophetic gift; but, it does mean that no postapostolic prophet will be canonical.

Summary and conclusions

It is no coincidence that these criteria lead to the recognition of the 66-book canon. These books were providentially preserved through the agency of the church, and further proof that God has aided in the recognition of these books. However, without supposing this as fact, one may still come to recognize this same collection of books through the application of criteria such as those suggested in this article. One who does not already believe that God has communicated revelation to humanity may suspend judgment and proceed to engage the Bible on its own terms. The awareness of such presuppositions, then, may allow movement past the a priori dismissal of revelation to the matter of how one might recognize such revelation if it existed.

The church, on the other hand, operates in the arena of faith and cannot operate within the framework of secular presuppositions. To be sure, there is room for patient dialogue, but the pressure to adopt common presuppositions would drastically impact the church. Frankly, the believer has the same right to their presuppositions or worldview as any others. The believer who affirms faith in the possibility or actuality of divine revelation will be able to employ these standards in recognizing the divine merits of the canon without accepting that the canon is determined by a community or tradition. Such an approach may aid believers to further ground their faith in the Bible and may also facilitate an unbeliever's ability to honestly engage the issue of the scope of the canonical books, sift through interpretations, and potentially come to faith in the Bible as the recognized revelation of God. Concurrently, the church can continue to testify of the life-changing power of the Bible through the Holy Spirit and confidently utilize it as the authoritative rule of faith and practice.

In summary, then, the canon of Scripture consists of books of divine revelation appointed by God to serve as an authoritative rule of faith and practice. These books are, afterward, recognized by the community to be divinely commissioned, whether prophetic or apostolic, of proper antiquity, consistent with previous revelation, and self-authenticating. On the basis of its intrinsic canonicity, Scripture is accepted and used as the revelation of God. I propose that all 66 books of the Protestant canon belong to the divinely inspired, preserved, and intended canon of Scripture, to which no books may be removed or added. As such, the canon of Scripture is the only authoritative and trustworthy foundation for theology and practice. M

1 James A. Sanders, "The Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process," in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 252.

2 "By virtue of their inspiration, and its resultant internal self-authentification and self-validation, biblical books were 'recognized' as canonical." Gerhard F. Hasel, "Divine Inspiration and the Canon of the Bible," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 5/1 (1994): 69.

3 It should be noted that there is an abundance of data open to interpretation. Much of the interpretation, as noted previously, is directly tied to the pre-existent definition of what constitutes canonicity.

4 God commanded Moses that His revelation be written, preserved, and passed on (Exod. 17:14; 24:4; 31:18; 34:27; Deut. 10:5; 31:9, 25, 26). After Moses, other inspired writers such as Joshua, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, just to name a few, carried on the recording of revelation (Josh. 24:26; 1 Sam. 10:25; Isa. 30:8; Jer. 30:2). Later writers referred to and revered earlier Scriptures (1 Kings 2:3; Ezra 3:2; Jer. 26:18; Ezek. 14:14, 20; Dan. 9:2; Mic. 4:1–3, etc.).

5 Jesus is clear about the authority of the OT (Matt. 21:42; 22:29; 26:54, 56; Luke 24:44, 45; John 2:22; 5:39; 10:35; 17:12). The rest of the NT testifies to the OT writings as authoritative Scripture (Acts 17:2; 18:28; Rom. 1:2; 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; 1 Cor. 15:3, 4; Gal. 3:8; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20, 21).

6 1 Tim. 5:18 quotes directly from Luke 10:7. Peter declares the writings of Paul to be Scripture along with the OT and collects them (2 Pet. 3:15, 16). Moreover, the gospel is regarded as the very word of God (Acts 8:14; 11:1; 12:24; 13:46; 17:13; 18:11; 19:20). Paul is clear that he does not speak on his own authority but by that of God (Rom. 15:15; 1 Cor. 2:13; Gal. 1:12; Eph. 3:5; 1 Thess. 2:13) and commands his letters to be read (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27). Finally, Revelation testifies of itself as direct revelation from God and adds that no one should change its words (Rev. 1:1; 22:18, 19).

7 For instance, the NT canonical books were so widely used that the entire NT except 11 verses could be reconstructed from the church fathers of the second to fourth centuries. For a full tabulation see Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 419–433.

8 In *Against Apion 1.8*, Josephus points out a clear succession from Moses to the prophets who testified with "an exact succession of prophets." He also suggests a closed OT canon at his time (ca. A.D. 70) since he states "no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them [the OT], to take anything from them, or to make any change in them." An example of the importance of authorship in the NT is Paul's emphasis of his handwriting that marked the letter as truly from him (1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; Philem. 19).

9 An important historical example of this criterion was the case of Serapion at Rhossus, who originally allowed usage of the so-called *Gospel of Peter* but later rejected it altogether because it implied docetism. Eusebius, 216. *H.E.* 6.12.3.

10 It should be noted that inspiration alone does not equal canonicity. It is true that in numerous places the Bible records prophetic books that are not part of the canon. Other books, such as *Shepherd of Hermas*, were considered by some to be inspired but were not recognized as canonical because they did not meet the other criteria, such as apostolicity. Inspiration is thus required, but is not the only indication of a canonical book.

11 Of course, the primary objection that might be leveled against this claim is the questions of dating and authorship that are popular in historical critical approaches to the Bible. I would contend that the conclusions that contradict the internal testimony of the books are speculative, inconclusive, and contested. There is a great deal of data that may support the prophetic and apostolic authorship of the OT and NT respectively. Some data that supports such a position is laid out in studies such as Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), and D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992). For an investigation of the history, consult F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), and Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).

12 The OT Apocrypha are ruled out by the Jews' self-testimony regarding the cessation of prophecy after the time of Artaxerxes (ca. 450 B.C.). Josephus, *Against Apion 1.8*, clearly specifies that the authoritative prophets were only "till the reign of Artaxerxes" (Cf. 1 Macc. 9:27), Regarding the NT, the *Shepherd of Hermas* might be the closest book but was ruled out because, according to the Muratorian Fragment, it was written in the mid-second century and thus not by an apostle. Recently touted, so-called gnostic books, such as the *Gospel of Thomas,* fail all the criteria with pseudonymous authorship, contradiction to previous revelation, and a total lack of evidence of divine origin or appointment.

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