

# Canonicity: Why These 66 Books?

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Have you ever looked at your Bible and wondered, “How do we know that these 66 books, and no others, comprise the inspired Word of God?”

That is a critically important question, since there are many today who would deny that these 66 books truly make up the complete canon of Scripture.

The Roman Catholic Church, for example, claims that the Apocryphal books which were written during the inter-testamental period (between the Old and New Testaments) ought to be included in the Bible. Cult groups like the Mormons want to add their own books to the Bible—things like the *Book of Mormon*, *The Doctrines and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. And then there are popular books and movies, like *The Da Vinci Code* from several years back, that claim later Christians (like Constantine) determined what was in the Bible centuries after these books were written.

So, how do we know that “all Scripture” consists of these 66 books? How do we know that the Bible we hold in our hands is the complete Word of God?

There are a number of ways we could answer such questions; in fact, we could spend weeks studying the doctrine of canonicity, carefully walking through all of the relevant biblical and historical details. And there are many wonderful books available that can guide you through that wealth of information.

But in this article, I would like to offer a simple answer that I hope will be helpful – because it gets to the heart of the whole matter.

It is this:

**We believe in the 39 books of the Old Testament, because the Lord Jesus Christ *affirmed* the Old Testament. And we believe in the 27 books of the New Testament, because the Lord Jesus Christ *authorized* His apostles to write the New Testament.**

The doctrine of canonicity ultimately comes back to the lordship of Jesus Christ. If we believe in Him and submit to His authority, then we will simultaneously believe in and submit to His Word. Because He affirmed the Old Testament canon, we also affirm it. Because He authorized His apostles to write the New Testament, we likewise embrace it as well.

It was not the Catholic church that determined the canon. Constantine did not determine the canon. Joseph Smith certainly did not determine the canon. No, it is the authority of Christ Himself, the Lord of the church and the incarnate Son of God, on which the canon of Scripture rests.

## **The Old Testament Canon**

When it comes to the Old Testament, Jesus Christ affirmed the Jewish canon of His day—consisting of the very same content that is in our Old Testaments today.

A study of the gospels shows that, throughout His ministry, Jesus affirmed the Old Testament in its entirety ([Matt. 5:17–18](#))—including its historical reliability (cf. [Matt. 10:15](#); [19:3–5](#); [12:40](#); [24:38–39](#)), prophetic

accuracy (Matt. 26:54), sufficiency (Luke 16:31), unity (Luke 24:27, 44), inerrancy (Matt. 22:29; John 17:17), infallibility (John 10:35), and authority (Matt. 21:13, 16, 42).

He affirmed the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets and all that was written in them; clearly seeing the Old Testament Scriptures as the Word of God (Matt. 15:16; Mark 7:13; Luke 3:2; 5:1; etc.).

Significantly, the first century Jews did not consider the Apocryphal books to be canonical. And neither did Jesus. He accepted the canon of the Jews as being the complete Old Testament. He never affirmed or cited the Apocryphal books – and neither do any of the other writers of the New Testament.

(At this point, some may be wondering about Jude’s reference to the Book of Enoch. But the Book of Enoch is not part of the Roman Catholic Apocrypha. It was simply a well-known piece of Jewish literature at that time period, which Jude cited for the purpose of giving an illustration, much like Paul did when he quoted pagan poets on Mars Hill in Acts 17.)

For those who might wonder, “Why don’t Protestants accept the Apocrypha?” the ultimate answer is that Jesus never affirmed it as being part of Scripture. And neither did the apostles.

Many of the early church fathers did not regard the Apocryphal books as being canonical either. They considered them to be helpful for the *edification* of the church, but they did not see them as *authoritative*. Even the fifth-century scholar Jerome (who translated the Latin *Vulgate* — which became the standard Roman Catholic version of the Middle Ages) acknowledged that the Apocryphal books were not to be regarded as either authoritative or canonical.

So we accept the canonicity of the Old Testament on the basis of our Lord’s authoritative affirmation of it. And we reject the canonicity of the Apocryphal books based on the absence of His affirmation of those inter-testamental writings.

### **The New Testament Canon**

The same principle applies to the New Testament canon. Our Lord not only affirmed the Jewish canon of the Old Testament, He also promised that He would give additional revelation to His church through His authorized representatives—namely, the apostles.

Jesus made this point explicit in John 14–16. On the night before his death, Jesus said to His disciples:

**John 14:25–26** – “These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”

That last line is especially significant for the doctrine of canonicity. Jesus promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would help them remember all the things that He had said to them.

That is an amazing promise, the fulfillment of which is found in the four gospel accounts—where the things that our Lord did and said are perfectly recorded for us.

Two chapters later, in the same context, the Lord promised the apostles that He would give them additional revelation through the Holy Spirit:

**John 16:12–15** – “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak of His own initiative, but

whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you.”

Where is that additional revelation found? It is found in the New Testament epistles, wherein the Spirit of Christ guided the apostles to provide the church with inspired truth.

The New Testament, then, was pre-authenticated by Christ Himself, as He authorized the apostles to be His witnesses in the world ([Matt. 28:18–19](#); [Acts 1:8](#)). We embrace and submit to the New Testament writings because they were penned by Christ’s authorized representatives, being inspired by the Holy Spirit in the same way as the Old Testament prophets (cf. [2 Pet. 3:19–21](#)).

With that in mind we could go book-by-book through the New Testament, and we will find that it meets this criteria.

- The Gospels of **Matthew & John** were both written by apostles.
- The Gospel of **Mark** is a record of the memoirs of the Apostle Peter, written by Mark under Peter’s apostolic authority.
- The Gospel of **Luke** (and the book of **Acts**) were both the product of a careful investigation and eyewitness testimony ([Luke 1:2](#)), research that would have included apostolic sources. Moreover, as the companion of the Apostle Paul, Luke wrote under Paul’s apostolic oversight. (For instance, Paul affirmed [Luke 10:7](#) as being part of the Scripture in [1 Tim. 5:18](#).)
- The **Pauline Epistles** (Romans–Philemon) were all written by the Apostle Paul.
- The authorship of **Hebrews** is unknown, but many in church history believed it to have been also written by Paul. If not penned by Paul himself, it was clearly written by someone closely associated with Paul’s ministry—and therefore, by extension, under his apostolic authority.
- The **General Epistles** (the letters of James, Peter, and John) were written by apostles. Peter also acknowledged Paul’s writings as being Scripture in [2 Peter 3:15–16](#).
- The epistle of **Jude** was written by the half-brother of Jesus ([Matthew 13:55](#); [Mark 6:3](#)) who operated under the apostolic oversight of his brother James (cf. Jude 1).
- And finally, the book of **Revelation** was written by the Apostle John.

Every book of the New Testament was written under apostolic authority—either by an apostle or someone closely linked to their apostolic ministry. Thus, we submit to these books because they come from Christ’s authorized representatives. In submitting to them, we are submitting to the Lord Himself.

The reason the canon is closed is because there are no longer any apostles in the church today, and have not been since the end of the first century, when the foundation age of the church ended (cf. [Eph. 2:20](#)).

**So ... why these 66 books?** Because God inspired them! They are His divine revelation. And Christ confirmed that fact. He **affirmed** the Old Testament canon, and He **authorized** the New Testament canon (cf. [Heb. 1:1–2](#)).

The authority of the Lord Jesus Himself, then, is the basis for our confidence in the fact that the Bible we hold in our hands is indeed “All Scripture.”