

BIBLE CANON: Can Scripture solve the problem?

Christians sometimes argue about Canonicity, ie which books should be in the bible. (See [Bible Canon: what is the Problem?](#)). One potential solution is to appeal to Scripture

1. Appealing to Scripture

In 1562 the Church of England said:

‘HOLY Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man...’ ([39 Articles, #6](#))

If Scripture is to solve the question of canonicity, then the contents of the biblical canon must be ‘read therein’ or ‘proved thereby.’

Christians agree that Scripture contains no contents list. Physical bibles often contain a contents page, but that is an editorial aid, provided by bible publishers. It is not part of Scripture itself. This means that the biblical canon cannot be ‘read therein,’ in Scripture.

If Scripture is to resolve the question of the biblical canon, then it needs to provide a principle (ie a premise) which enables a particular canon to be argued and ‘proved thereby’ from Scripture.

2. Appeal to Judaism

One Scriptural principle for deriving an Old Testament canon from Scripture arises from St Paul’s claim that:

‘they (the Jews) were entrusted with the utterances of God.’ ([Romans 3, 2](#))

This led [Andreas Karlstadt](#) (d.1541) to argue that:

‘... the books which the Church, but not the Jews hold to be canonical, are doubtful (dubiosum)’ ([De Canonicis Scripturis](#), 1520, Secundus Ordo, page E2b)

Since the time of [Josephus](#) ([Against Apion 1, 38](#)) Judaism has seemed to only accept the [39 Protocanonical books](#) as Scripture (See [Hebrew Bible](#)). So, an appeal to Judaism can seem to settle the canon of (Old Testament) Scripture.

But, unbeknown to sixteenth century European thinkers, there are Jews who take a different approach to Canonicity. For example, [Beta Israel](#) (Ethiopian Judaism) accepts Deuterocanonical books such as Sirach, Judith and Tobit as Scripture. (See [Beta Israel Scriptures](#)).

Even in Jesus’ day there are hints that matters were not quite as settled as Josephus implies. The absence of the [Book of Esther](#) at [Qumran](#), and the more visible presence of [1 Enoch](#) and [Jubilees](#) points to possible differences of opinion about texts. We also know that there were First Century debates within Judaism, about the canonical status of Esther, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. (See [Mishna, Yadaim, III, 5](#); [Talmud Megilla 7a7](#)).

Claiming that there was a settled Jewish canon of Scripture at the time of Jesus, is beginning to seem implausible. It may even be an example of the fallacious reasoning of [survivorship bias](#), which occurs when people read back into antiquity, what happens to have merely survived to a later date.

These considerations suggest that the canon of the Old Testament cannot be settled by simply appealing to Judaism.

3. Appeal to Hebrew

A slightly different version of the appeal to Judaism is to appeal to the language of the Jewish Scriptures, ie Hebrew. We can see this in a 1647 document which stated:

‘The Old Testament in Hebrew..., being immediately inspired by God, and by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical...’ ([Westminster Confession 1, #8](#))

Appealing to Hebrew as a criterion for canonicity is problematic. We know that the [book of Daniel](#) originally circulated with sections in Aramaic. (See [Manuscripts of Daniel](#)). So, insisting upon Hebrew would rule out books which are already accepted as Canonical.

It would also admit to canonicity [Deuterocanonical](#) books, such as [Sirach](#), which we can see existed in Hebrew at Qumran (See [photo of 2Q18](#), and [Photo of 11QPs](#)). It would also admit books which are generally accepted by most Christians as Apocryphal, such as the [Book of Jubilees](#). (See [Manuscripts](#)).

This means that Hebrew cannot be a criterion for determining Old Testament canonicity.

4. Appeal to Authorship

Another Scriptural principle used for arguing canonicity arises from the claim that:

‘(the Church is)... built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets...’ ([Ephesians 2, 20](#))

This claim can lead to the view that New Testament books must be produced by an Apostle, and Old Testament books must be produced by a prophet.

We can see this criterion possibly being used in the [Muratorian Fragment](#) (c.170), which rejects the canonical status of the (apocryphal) [Shepherd of Hermas](#) because

‘... it cannot be read publicly... either among the prophets whose number is complete or among the Apostles, for it is after their time.’ (See [Fragment](#)).

But the principle is problematic, as we do not know who wrote the canonical books of [Esther](#) or the [Song of Songs](#). So, there is no evidence that they were written by a Prophet. If we appeal to internal evidence in books themselves, then a case can be made that Deuterocanonical books, such as the [book of Wisdom](#) contain prophecy (eg [Wisdom 2, 12ff](#)). And there are Apocryphal books, like the book of Enoch, which explicitly claim to be Prophetic. (See [1 Enoch 10, 1](#)).

This criterion is also problematic in the New Testament, as the [Authorship of Hebrews](#) is not clearly by an Apostle. There are also queries about the [authorship of some Pauline Epistles](#), as well as questions about the authenticity of specific passages, such as the [end of Mark's Gospel](#).

These kinds of considerations suggest that canonicity cannot be determined by simply appealing to the authorship of ‘prophets’ and ‘apostles,’ especially when there are so many uncertainties about the authorship of ancient documents.

5. Appeal to Date

This argument is an alternative version of the appeal to authorship (see previous section) as it essentially tries to provide a date to determine when prophecy ended in the Old Testament.

[Josephus](#) (c. AD 100) said:

‘...since Artaxerxes... there has not been an exact succession of prophets...’ ([Against Apion, 1, 38](#))

King [Artaxerxes](#) existed at the time of the biblical figures of [Ezra](#) and [Malachi](#), around 440 BC. So, the appeal to date is a claim that canonical (Old Testament) books cannot have been written after 440BC, as there were no prophets after that time to write Scripture.

This approach can be seen in modern statements, such as:

‘When the canon closed on the Old Testament after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, there followed four hundred "silent years" when no prophet spoke God's revelation in any form.’ (See [Prophecy and the Closed Canon](#)).

But this is a problematic view because some Canonical books, such as the [Book of Daniel](#), may have been written as late as the Second Century BC. (See [Dating of Daniel](#)).

Ultimately, arguments which appeal to a specific date as the end of prophecy, commit the [fallacy of assertion](#). Josephus may have believed there were no prophets after 440BC, but that was just his fallible opinion. To take that opinion and assert it as a truth, without appropriate evidence for doing so (Scriptural or otherwise), is to argue fallaciously to an unsafe conclusion.

6. Appeal to Usefulness

Another principle from Scripture reads:

‘All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness,’ ([2 Timothy, 3, 16](#))

This can lead to a claim that if all Scripture is ‘useful’ then we should see genuine canonical Old Testament Scripture being used in the New Testament. (See [Baptist Bible College: why we reject the Apocrypha](#)).

Some Old Testament documents are indeed quoted in the New Testament. Jesus cites Isaiah ([Luke 4, 17-18](#)). But canonical books, such as [Esther](#), the [Song of Songs](#) and [Ecclesiastes](#) are not clearly cited or referenced by the New Testament. So appealing to usefulness risks ruling out books which are already accepted as canonical.

In the case of the Deuterocanonical books it is genuinely unclear whether the New Testament makes reference to them. (See [Did the Deuterocanonical Books influence the New Testament?](#)). So, the appeal to usefulness is too vague to settle questions of their Canonicity.

There are also some documents explicitly cited in the New Testament which are not canonical. For example, the apocryphal [book of Enoch](#) is cited by the [Epistle of Jude](#) ([Jude 1, 14](#) quotes [1 Enoch 1.9, cited as 2.1](#)). So an appeal to usefulness would mistakenly attribute canonicity to books which are not thought to be canonical

These considerations suggest that an appeal to ‘usefulness’ cannot constitute an argument for canonicity.

7. Appeal to Character

Appealing to the same Scriptural verse as the previous section, if 'all Scriptures is inspired by God' then the canonical Scriptures might be thought to have a special character by which they can be recognised. Thus, Martin Luther (1542) wrote:

'...All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach Christ... That is the true test by which to judge all books... ([Preface to the Epistles of James and Jude](#))

Sometimes this special character is described as an internal sense. Thus, [Emanuel Swedenborg](#) (d.1772) stated:

The books of the Word are all those which have an internal sense; and those which have not an internal sense are not the Word. ([Heavenly Arcana #10325](#))

But there is a potential logical trap buried in the appeal to Character, especially when the character of a book is a feature of its theological content. If Scripture is supposed to determine theology, then how can theology also determine Scripture? For example, the book of Maccabees is sometimes said to be non-canonical because [2 Maccabees 12, 46](#) approves of praying for the dead (See: [The Non-biblical Doctrine Of Purgatory Is Taught In The Apocrypha](#)). But how can we know that praying for the dead is wrong, unless we first assume the point which is at dispute, ie the non-canonicity of Maccabees. Appealing to theological content to judge Scripture commits the logical fallacy of '[begging the question](#)'.

When the ethical character of books is cited as part of their character, the fallacy of '[double standards](#)' (or [Special Pleading](#)) also tends to arise. For example, some books are rejected as non-canonical because they contain unethical lying or magic. (See [Why we reject the Apocrypha](#)). But the canonical scriptures also contain lying, as Abraham lies to Pharaoh to save his own life ([Genesis 12, 13](#)). We also see Saul consulting the [witch of Endor](#) to magically talk to the dead ([1 Sam 28, 7ff](#)). And if any book has dubious ethics, surely it is the canonical book in which Lot volunteers his daughters to be gang raped (See [Genesis 19, 8](#)).

This means that appeals to a special Scriptural character cannot give clear or unambiguous criteria to constitute an argument for canonicity.

8. Appeal to Reception

Another Scriptural verse which is sometimes cited in discussions of canonicity is:

'My sheep hear my voice...' ([John 10,27](#))

This leads to an 'appeal to Reception,' as people claim to receive information directly from God. The [Westminster Confession](#) (1647) puts it:

The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined... can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.' ([Chapter 1, #10](#))

So, when it comes to knowing the biblical canon, genuine Christians can tell the authentic Scriptures, because the Holy Spirit directly tells (or shows) them the answer. (See also [Michael Kruger, \(Canon Revisited\)](#)).

A problem with this kind of reasoning is that it can lead to contradiction. Any Christian can claim any opinion as information received from the Holy Spirit. Arguments that lead to contradictory conclusions are fallacious arguments.

Sometimes Christians try to escape the contradiction by insisting that only specific kinds of Christians can receive information from God. Those kinds of arguments tend to fall into the [fallacy of circularity](#). Thus: *Genuine Christians* are defined by their acceptance of *authentic Scripture*, and then the *authenticity of Scripture* is defined by what *Genuine Christians* say it is. (For more details see [Book Review of Kruger, Canon Revisited](#)).

A more subtle fallacy which tends to occur in appeals to reception is the fallacy of [affirming the consequent](#). This occurs when people reason from: if p then q. Then they affirm q, and fallaciously assume p. For example, take the claim that: 'if it rains then the grass will get wet.' It would be a fallacy to argue backwards from wet grass to rain, because the grass could be wet due to some other factor, such as a gardener.

Similarly, even if it is true that 'If God speaks to me, then I have ideas in my mind' people cannot argue backwards from 'I have ideas in my mind' to insist that God must have spoke to put the ideas there. Thus, just because people happen to have a certain biblical canon in their mind, the appeal to reception does not allow a non-fallacious argument to prove that God put the idea there.

9. What does it all mean?

By now it should be clear that it is difficult (if not impossible) to provide a valid logical argument from Scripture, to prove a particular biblical canon. This means that it is implausible to think that the canon of Scripture can be 'read therein' or 'proved thereby' from Scripture.

In Reformation debates, this realisation sometimes led Catholic polemicists to jump to the conclusion that Protestantism itself was thereby disproved. However, it should be noted that some Protestants accepted that Scripture cannot prove a biblical canon. For example, in 1687 [William Chillingworth](#) (1687) wrote:

'...that these questions touching (the Canon of) Scripture are not decidable by Scripture, ... is evident of itself and I grant it without more ado.... (Canonicity) may be decided... by the testimonies of the ancient Churches ...' ([Religion of Protestants](#), Chapter 2, XXVII p.104-5).

Chillingworth is mistaken to think that Church History will solve the issue of Canonicity. (See [Bible Canon: what is the Early Church Evidence?](#)). However, the significance of his comment, in the current context, is that it constitutes a warning about jumping to conclusions. All that the sections above have shown is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to produce an argument so that a biblical Canon can be 'proved thereby' from Scripture.