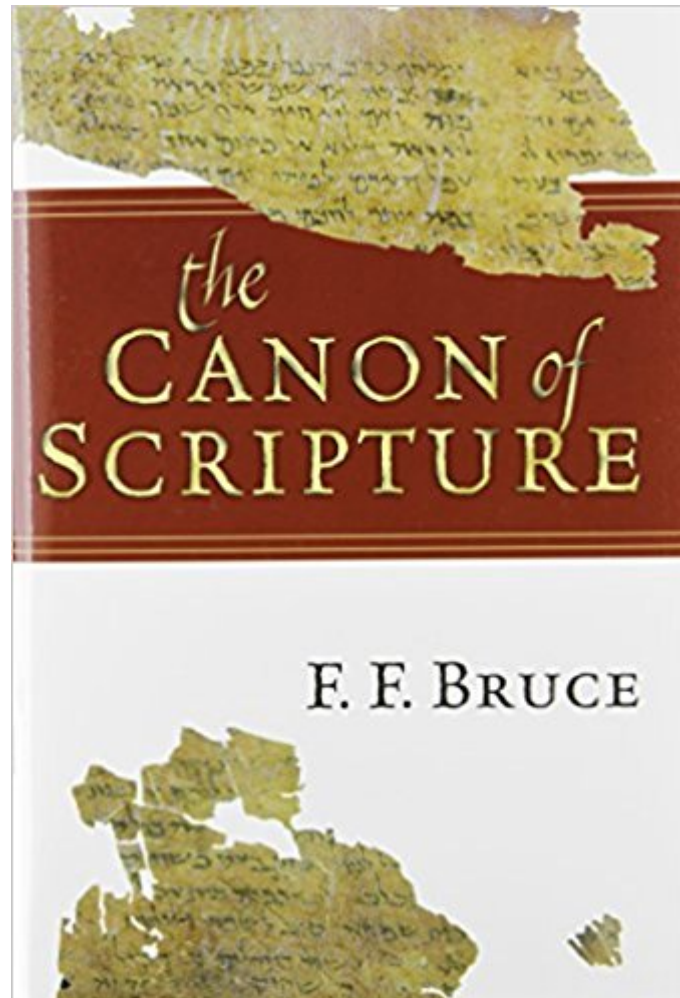




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# The Canon Of Scripture



## Synopsis

Winner of two 1990 Christianity Today Awards: Readers' Choice (1st place; theology & doctrine) and Critics' Choice (1st place; theology & doctrine). A 1989 ECPA Gold Medallion Award winner!

How did the books of the Bible come to be recognized as Holy Scripture? Who decided what shape the canon should take? What criteria influenced these decisions? After nearly nineteen centuries the canon of Scripture still remains an issue of debate. Protestants, Catholics and the Orthodox all have slightly differing collections of documents in their Bibles. Martin Luther, one of the early leaders of the Reformation, questioned the inclusion of the book of James in the canon. And many Christians today, while confessing the authority of all of Scripture, tend to rely on only a few books and particular themes while ignoring the rest. Scholars have raised many other questions as well. Research into second-century Gnostic texts have led some to argue that politics played a significant role in the formation of the Christian canon. Assessing the influence of ancient communities and a variety of disputes on the final shaping of the canon call for ongoing study. In this significant historical study, F. F. Bruce brings the wisdom of a lifetime of reflection and biblical interpretation to bear in answering the questions and clearing away the confusion surrounding the Christian canon of Scripture. Adept in both Old and New Testament studies, he brings a rare comprehensive perspective to his task. Though some issues have shifted since the original publication of this book, it still remains a significant landmark and touchstone for further studies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This book is at once learned and readable, and takes account of the most recent discoveries and literature. It is the most comprehensive account of the canon since Bishop Westcott's *The Bible in the Church* (1864)." (Roger Beckwith, Latimer House, Oxford)

F. F. Bruce (1910–1990) was Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester in England. During his distinguished career, he wrote more than forty bestselling commentaries and books, including *A Mind for What Matters* and *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. He also served as general editor of *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*.

This book was a great read from cover to cover. It overviews both the Old Testament and New Testament books forming into what we now know as the canon. The first section on the OT is shorter, mainly because Bruce wants to focus more on the NT, not because there is less to say. Bruce gives a very general description of how the OT formed in the first 100 pages of the book (as well as a very interesting section on the Apocrypha), but it's really when he gets into the NT that this book gets interesting. He talks about the very first collections of the biblical books (by heretics) and how they forced the proto-orthodox churches to gather their own canons, as well as going into all the early church canon lists we know of in both the east and latin west. The conclusion is my favorite part. Bruce discusses the criteria needed for canonical books, the "canon within the canon," and the interpretation of the canon. Overall, I found this book to be amazing. Anyone interested in this topic should pick up a copy and read it!

This book is extremely informative. The author comes from a viewpoint that is slightly less conservative than my own, but he is fair and balanced in his treatment, and extremely knowledgeable. Every pastor should read this book if, for no other reason, to be able to answer their congregants' questions.

As a believer for 25 years, I always assumed the Bible was the written word of God, inspired. Yet I hear many critics concerning these ancient works. This book reveals much about the origins of our scriptures, why the books of the Apocrypha are there, why each book is included as well as the various opinions of the early church fathers. Worthwhile to any Christian to confirm the authenticity of what we call the Bible.

The book is easily organized into four parts: the introduction, the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the conclusion. Bruce's book concludes with two appendixes, and also includes an extensive bibliography and index arranged alphabetically. Although, the main body of the book is divided into the Old and New Testaments, it is further subdivided into the history concerning each of those areas of Scripture. For example, the very first topic concerning the Old Testament canon describes Jesus' appeal to the Hebrew Scriptures (a very early scriptural support), and the author ends the section describing what order the books were collected during the 17th and 18th century. He also expounds upon how the apocrypha was either added to or taken away from the canon. In order to describe the canon and how it was compiled in history, the author uses a historical chronology. He asks such questions as: How did the biblical characters and the books themselves shed light on their contents and importance? Did Josephus, a Jewish historian, mention the contents and was the "classification of the books" his own (33)? Because of the great length of history that comprises the Old Testament, the question is asked, "Was the canon developed in three stages?" .... which are "corresponding to the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible (36)." He also mentions the so-called 'Dead Sea Scrolls,' which represent all of the Hebrew Scriptures, except the book of Esther. The writer always indicates that differences of opinion existed between groups. For instance, the Sadducees may not agree with the Pharisees in acknowledging Daniel's "most explicit statement of the resurrection hope in the whole of the Old Testament (41)." But, when "we think of Jesus and his Palestinian apostles,....we may be confident that they agreed with contemporary leaders in Israel about the contents of the canon. .... when in debate with Jewish theologians Jesus and the apostles appealed to 'the scriptures', they appealed to an authority which was equally acknowledged by their opponents. .... it is probable that, when the canon was 'closed' in due course by competent authority, this simply meant that official recognition was given to the situation already obtaining in the practice of the worshipping community (41-42)". So in clarification of these comments by the author, there has always been a body of collected writings that had authority. After writing about the particular aspects related to the original Hebrew writings, the author discusses how the Greek Old Testament arose, the order of the books, thoughts concerning its translation, and how it was used in the church. The author stated that "the Jews of Alexandria gave up using the language their ancestors had spoken in Palestine and spoke Greek only (43)". So, my first question was whether or not Jesus actually used the Hebrew Scriptures, or was he using a Greek translation? I then discovered that when Jesus read the scroll of the Isaiah in the temple, which is recorded in the Book of Luke (4:17), that "it was most probably a Hebrew scroll that he received. But even in Palestine, and not the least in Jerusalem itself, there were many Greek-speaking Jews,

Hellenists, and there were synagogues where they might go to hear the scriptures read and prayers recited in Greek (49)". The author also discusses some differences in Hebrew and Greek translations, and even later discusses in detail, how different personalities in church history viewed the two translations. For instance, Justin Martyr "evidently regards the Septuagint version as the only reliable text .... as read and interpreted by the Jews, the Jews (he says) have corrupted the text so as to obscure the scriptures' plain prophetic testimony to Jesus as the Christ (70)". The author writes further how the Old Testament is fulfilled in its witness to Jesus and how the New Testament supports the authority the Old.... although they were not yet known specifically as Old and New Testament. He states, "Jesus is the central subject of the Old Testament revelation; it is to him that witness is borne throughout (60)". Concerning the Old Testament canon, Bruce finally makes three geographical and historical distinctions; the Eastern Church, the Western Church, and the Reformed Church. He begins the discussion of the early church with the uncial codices Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and Alexandrinus; and then continues with a description of the early fathers Justin Martyr, Melito, Origen, and Athanasius. In the West, the largest discussion involves the translation of the scripture into Latin. This was helpful in my later study of the Council of Nicea, that some of the attendees had disagreement or further discussed issues because of words being in both Latin and Greek. The Latin, in this case, did not have an all-encompassing word for the two Greek words being discussed: *homousios* (being) and *hypostasis* (substance). Anyway, until "Jerome produced a new translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew text at the end of the fourth century, the Latin Old Testament was a rendering of the Septuagint, .... (83)". The author also mentions Tertullian and Jerome leading up to the Reformation. In the discussion of the Reformation period he mentions, the impetus of 'sola scriptura' or scripture alone. He also mentions the Council of Trent, the Elizabethan Settlement, and different compilations of the scripture. The section concerning the New Testament begins with a discussion about early evidence and confession of the canon. There is an emphasis on the Gospels and Pauline corpus being accepted rather quickly, and Acts following closely behind to make a connection between the two bodies of scripture. "The gospel collection was authoritative because it preserved the words of Jesus, .... the church knew no higher authority. The Pauline collection was authoritative because it preserved the teaching of one whose authority as the apostle of Jesus Christ of the Gentiles was acknowledged .... The bringing together of these two collections into something approximating the New Testament as we know it was facilitated by another document which linked the one to the other. This document was Acts of the Apostles .... (132-133)." The author talks about the movements led by Marcion and Valentinus before discussing the Catholic response concerning these heresies, and consequently, what should be included in the canon. At

this point in the book, the writer mentions the Muratorian Fragment, which appears to come from the end of the second century. In discussing the fragment, mention is made of the authority concerning the compiling of this canon list. Concerning the book of Luke, Bruce says, "based on eyewitness testimony and on his own participation in the course of the events which he narrates (Luke 1:1-4). The patristic idea that his gospel owes something to the apostolic authority of Paul is quite unfounded (266-267)." This point is interesting because of a discussion concerning apostolic authority. The Muratorian Fragment lists "Acts as 'the Acts of all the apostles'. .... What was the reason for the Muratorian exaggeration? Possibly it marks a reaction against Marcion: Marcion claimed that Paul was the only faithful apostle of Jesus, but the compiler of our list implies, in accordance with the judgment of the catholic church, 'We acknowledge all the apostles, and not Paul only; here is an authoritative document, which records their acts and not only Paul's (162-163)." "The apostolic authorship of Matthew and John was well-established in tradition. But what of Mark and Luke? Their authorship was also well-established in tradition, but it was felt desirable to buttress the authority of tradition with arguments which gave those two Gospels a measure of apostolic validation (257)." The book makes clear that the disagreements between the church and various heretical movements led to a discussion of what should be included in the canon. The Muratorian list also mentioned two letters which were said to be Marcionite forgeries (166). Even another development was the leader Montanus, "who launched a new charismatic movement. .... he claimed that the age of the Paraclete, foretold by Jesus, had now arrived, and that he was the mouthpiece of the Paraclete. .... their utterances presented a challenge to the catholic view of the faith as something 'once for all delivered' (Jude 3) (168)." A large number of personalities are listed in the main body of the book, along with the details of what they considered to be issues surrounding the canon. The list contains Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Novatian, Tertullian, Cyprian, Clement, Origen, Dionysius, Eusebius, Constantine, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Jerome, and many others. There is a chapter on Augustine and a large section on Luther, which further discusses Tyndale's New Testament, Calvin, the Thirty-Nine Articles, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. Before continuing into the concluding chapters of the book, there is a section entitled, "a fixed canon." The statement is made, "the New Testament consists of the twenty-seven books which have been recognized as belonging to it since the fourth century is not a value judgment; it is a statement of fact (250)." The introduction and closing sections bring all of the historical information written in the body of the book together by explaining the importance of the canon, not only for modern scholarship, but for the believer. Bruce admits in the closing, that the theological aspect of canonization was not the subject of the book, but rather historical aspects

(281). But, this does not prevent the author from discussing such topics as inspiration. "In the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that the Spirit would be the disciples' teacher and bring his own words (with their significance) to their remembrance, the scriptures have been, and continue to be, one of the chief instruments, which the Spirit uses (281)". The closing sections also mention apostolic authority, antiquity, orthodoxy, tradition, and other issues. The author spends a good deal of time dealing with canonical criticism .... concerning which text is canonical; and also, which criteria are acceptable for determining canonicity today. Some scholars want to argue, "that those who accept the traditional canon of scripture today cannot legitimately defend it with arguments which played no part in its formation (275)." He also makes the point that those who are "interested in the Bible chiefly as historians of religious literature have naturally little use for the concept of a canon. Old Testament apocrypha and pseudepigrapha are as relevant to their studies as the contents of the Hebrew Bible; for them, there is no distinction in principle between the New Testament writings and other early Christian literature from (say) Clement of Rome to Clement of Alexandria. But for theologians and indeed for members of Christian churches in general, the principle of the canon is one of abiding importance (276)." I found Bruce's comment especially ironic and extremely factual, predominantly because of what Clement of Alexandria wrote on using the scriptures in response to heresy. I recently have been reading some of his material. Clement said, "we overturn their teachings by clearly showing that their doctrines contradict the scriptures." Overall, I found Bruce's book to be extremely detailed historically, highly informative, and furthermore, even interesting for the average Bible student. This book can surely also be used as a reference work because of its historical detail. For many of the personalities that I mentioned above, he goes into much detail about what they considered to be the canon, so historically accurate that he lists the books to be included for each. In that, it includes tedious, but helpful information!

I've read part or all of this book several times, as the multiple highlightings & margin notes in my treasured copy attest. It is readable and accessible to the reader just beginning to learn about how we received our Christian canon of Scripture, while it is not the least beneath the intelligence of the advanced student of the Bible. I've used it in teaching Bible Classes on the canon at our Lutheran church & have seen its appeal to those making honest inquiry at all levels of familiarity. Bruce is unapologetic and effective in his "conservative" approach, & makes his case convincingly. I've been impressed at how even "liberal" commentators who arrive at different conclusions nevertheless feel compelled to quote him -- with respect -- as THE authority of the counterpoint to their position. If you read only one book on the formation of the Christian Biblical canon, THIS is the one I MUST

recommend. It is scholarly but not in the least arrogant. While Bruce is confident in his orthodoxy, he is also completely intellectually honest and is unafraid in appreciating the most probing, critical inquiry. This book has my highest recommendation.

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