

Κανών *kān-ōn* – Literally, a wooden measurement rod. In theology, the standard by which Biblical books are accepted as “inspired.”

OLD TESTAMENT “CANON”

Jesus identified the three sections of the “Jewish canon” when he said, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in **the Law** of Moses and **the Prophets** and **the Psalms** must be fulfilled.” (Luke 24:44, NASB95)

Josephus (a 1st Century Jew, a Pharisee & a priest) testified about these same three section in Against Apion, Book 1, Chapter 8. I’ve inserted [**bold bracket comments**] to help explain his count.

“For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another [as the Greeks have], but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine;¹ and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. [**i.e., “The Law”**] This interval of time was little short of three thousand years; but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books [**i.e., “The Prophets” = (1) Joshua, (2) Judges & Ruth together, (3) the Samuels, (4) the Kings, (5) the Chronicles, (6) Ezra & Nehemiah together, (7) Esther, (8) Isaiah, (9) Jeremiah & Lamentations (10) Ezekiel, (11) Daniel, [12] Job and (13) The Twelve “Minor” Prophets**] The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life. [**i.e., “The Psalms” = Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs**].

“It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time; and how firmly we have given credit to those books of our own nation, is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it becomes natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them.² For it is no new thing for our captives, many of them in number, and frequently in time, to be seen to endure racks and deaths of all kinds upon the theatres, that they may not be obliged to say one word against our laws and the records that contain them; whereas there are none at all among the Greeks who would undergo the least harm on that account, no, nor in case all the writings that are among them were to be destroyed; for they take them to be such discourses as are famed agreeably to the inclinations of those that write them; and they have justly the same opinion of the ancient writers, since they see some of the present generation bold enough to write about such affairs, wherein they were not present, nor had concern enough to inform themselves about them from those that knew them: examples of which may be had in this late war of ours, where some persons have written histories, and published them, without having been in the places concerned, or having been near them when the actions were done; but these men put a few things together by hearsay, and insolently abuse the world, and call these writings by the name of Histories.”

Josephus also testifies to the existence of the Septuagint

¹ By this (“believed to be divine”) Josephus meant the same thing that modern Christians mean by the phrase “inspired by God.”

² Here then is the very clear conviction of the Pharisees that the “Jewish canon” was closed in the late 5th century B.C. with no more inspired books being added afterward, although Josephus freely acknowledges that certain uninspired books of historical importance were written during that later period (i.e., Maccabees, etc.).

Melito, Bishop of Sardis (around 180)

As recorded in Eusebius' Church History, Book 4, Chapter 26

“14. ‘Accordingly when I went East and came to the place where these things were preached and done, I learned accurately the books of the Old Testament, and send them to you as written below. Their names are as follows: Of Moses, five books: [1] Genesis, [2] Exodus, [3] Numbers, [4] Leviticus, [5] Deuteronomy; [6] Jesus Nave,³ [7] Judges, Ruth; [8 & 9] of Kings, four books⁴; [10] of Chronicles, two; [11] the Psalms of David, [12] the Proverbs of Solomon (Wisdom also),⁵ [13] Ecclesiastes, [14] Song of Songs, [15] Job; of Prophets, [16] Isaiah, [17] Jeremiah⁶; [18] of the twelve prophets, one book; [19] Daniel, [20] Ezekiel, [21] Esdras.⁷ From which also I have made the extracts, dividing them into six books.’ Such are the words of Melito.”⁸

Tertullian (around 200)

In On the Apparel of Women, Book 1, Chapter 3

During his discussion he mentions a “Jewish canon” which did not include Enoch.

Origen of Alexandria (around 240)

As recorded in Eusebius' Church History, Book 6, Chapter 25

Once again, I've inserted **[bold bracket comments]** to help explain his count.

“1. When expounding the first Psalm, he gives a catalogue of the sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament as follows: ‘It should be stated that the canonical books, as the Hebrews have handed them down, are twenty-two; corresponding with the number of their letters.’ Farther on he says:

2. ‘The twenty-two books of the Hebrews are the following: That which is called by us [1] Genesis... [2] Exodus... [3] Leviticus... [4] Numbers... [5] Deuteronomy... [6] Jesus, the son of Nave... [7] Judges and Ruth, among them in one book... [8] the First and Second of Kings... [9] the Third and Fourth of Kings in one... [10] of the Chronicles, the First and Second in one... [11] Esdras,⁹ First and Second¹⁰ in one, Ezra... [12] the book of Psalms... [13] the Proverbs of Solomon... [14] Ecclesiastes... [15] the Song of Songs (not, as some suppose, Songs of Songs)... [16] Isaiah... [17] Jeremiah, with Lamentations and the epistle in one... [18] Daniel; [19] Ezekiel... [20] Job... [21] Esther [**And # 22 (matching Origen's own count in line one of this paragraph) should have been the Twelve Prophets which was accidentally skipped, either by Origen the source or (more likely) Eusebius the copyist.**]. And besides these¹¹ there are the Maccabees.’ He gives these in the above-mentioned work.”

³ “Joshua”

⁴ 1 & 2 Samuel plus 1 & 2 Kings.

⁵ This is probably just an alternate name for Proverbs.

⁶ Which included Lamentations.

⁷ The Greek name for Ezra & probably inclusive of Nehemiah.

⁸ It is odd that Melito doesn't list Esther, since it was certainly part of the “Jewish canon.” It also throws off the traditional Hebrew count of 22.

⁹ The Greek name for Ezra.

¹⁰ Nehemiah

¹¹ This indicates that the Maccabees were considered as non-canonical literature.

NEW TESTAMENT “CANON”

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (around 180)

Against Heresies, Book 3, Chapter 1

Irenaeus asserted that there were four inspired gospels within the Scripture handed down to his generation.

“WE have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, **handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.** For it is unlawful to assert that they preached before they possessed “perfect knowledge,” as some do even venture to say, boasting themselves as improvers of the apostles. For, after our Lord rose from the dead, **[the apostles] were invested with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came down [upon them], were filled from all [His gifts], and had perfect knowledge:** they departed to the ends of the earth, preaching the glad tidings of the good things [sent] from God to us, and proclaiming the peace of heaven to men, who indeed do all equally and individually possess the Gospel of God. **Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect,** while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, **Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him.** Afterwards, **John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel** during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.”

In a latter passage, Irenaeus describes how the heretics were abusing each of the four gospels & in so doing makes the point that the number of inspired gospels is limited to the number four. (*Ibid.*, Chapters 10 & 11)

Muratorian Canon (around 170)

Though its first section is missing, it is obvious that this document upheld the apostolic authenticity of much of what we call the New Testament, starting with the four gospels.

“... those things at which he was present he placed thus.

“The third¹² book of the Gospel—the one according to **Luke**, the well-known physician—was written by Luke in his own name, sequentially, after the ascension of Christ at the time when Paul had associated him with himself as one studious of righteousness. [Luke] himself did not see the Lord in the flesh. As he was able he began his narrative with the birth of John [the Baptist].

“The fourth Gospel is that of **John**, one of the disciples. When his fellow disciples and bishops pleaded with him, he said, “Fast with me for three days, and then we'll tell each other whatever may be revealed to any of us.” That very night it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that John should write everything in his own name as they remembered them.

“As a result, although different points are taught to us in the various books of the Gospels, there is no difference as regards the faith of believers. In all of them under [the influence of] one imperial Spirit, everything is told which concerns the Lord's birth, his suffering, his resurrection, his conduct with His disciples, and his twofold coming: the first in the humiliation of rejection, which is now past, and the second in the glory of royal power, which is still in the future.

“What a marvel it is, then, that John presents these various things so consistently in his letters, too! He says in his own person, “What we have seen with our eyes, heard with our ears, and our hands have handled, that have we written.” For in this way he testifies that he is not only the eye-witness, but also the hearer. Besides that, he is also the historian of all the wondrous facts concerning the Lord in their order.

¹² Despite the fact that this document was missing the first part, it's obvious that the first & second gospels were Matthew & Mark.

Muratorian Canon (continued)

“In addition, the **Acts** of all the Apostles are comprised by Luke in one book and addressed to the most excellent Theophilus, because these events took place when he was present himself. He shows this clearly—i.e., that the principle on which he wrote was, to give only what fell under his own notice—by the omission of the suffering of Peter, and also of the journey of Paul when he went from the city of Rome to Spain.

“As to **the epistles of Paul**: again, to those who will understand the matter, they give their own indication of what they are, from what place or with what purpose they were directed. He wrote first of all—and at considerable length—to the **Corinthians**, to check the schism of heresy; then to the **Galatians**, to forbid circumcision; then to the **Romans** on the rule of the Old Testament Scriptures—and also to show them that Christ is the first object in these, which it is necessary for us to discuss separately.

“The blessed Apostle Paul, following the rule of his predecessor John, **writes to no more than seven churches by name**, in this order: the first to the **Corinthians**, the second to the **Ephesians**, the third to the **Philippians**, the fourth to the **Colossians**, the fifth to the **Galatians**, the sixth to the **Thessalonians**, the seventh to the **Romans**. In addition, though he writes **twice to the Corinthians and Thessalonians** for their correction, still it is apparent—by this sevenfold writing—that there is one Church spread abroad through the whole world. **John**, too, in the **Revelation**, although he writes only to seven churches, yet addresses all.

“**[Paul] wrote, besides these, one to Philemon, one to Titus, and two to Timothy, in simple personal affection and love indeed. Nonetheless, these are holy in the esteem of the catholic [i.e., universal] Church, and in the regulation of church discipline.**

“There are also in circulation one to the Laodiceans and another to the Alexandrians, forged under the name of Paul and addressed against the heresy of Marcion. There are also several others which cannot be received into the catholic Church, for it is not suitable for gall to be mingled with honey.¹³

“The **Epistle of Jude**, indeed, and **two**¹⁴ belonging to the above-named **John**—or bearing the name of John—are reckoned among the catholic epistles, along with the book of Wisdom, written by the friends of Solomon in his honor.¹⁵

“We also receive the **Revelation of John** and that of Peter, though some among us will not have this latter read in the Church.¹⁶ The Pastor, moreover, did Hermas write very recently in our times in the city of Rome, while his brother, bishop Pius, sat in the chair of the Church of Rome. Therefore it also ought to be read, but it cannot be read publicly in the church to the people, nor placed among the prophets—as their number is complete—nor among the apostles to the end of time.¹⁷

“Of the writings of Arsinous, also called Valentinus, or of Miltiades, we receive nothing at all. Those are also rejected who wrote the new Book of Psalms for Marcion, together with Basilides and the founder of the Asian Cataphrygians.

¹³ This shows an early, clear-cut distinction between “canonical” (inspired) & “non-canonical” (uninspired) books.

¹⁴ Evidently 3rd John was not known to this Christian writer.

¹⁵ This so-called “Wisdom of Solomon” was never part of the “Jewish canon” but for some reason was popular in certain Christian circles of the late 2nd Century.

¹⁶ This so-called “Apocalypse of Peter” was not treated as inspired.

¹⁷ The so-called “Shepherd of Hermas” was recommended for personal reading but was not considered inspired or “canonical.”

Tertullian (around 200)

In Against Marcion, Book 4, Chapter 5

In opposing the heretic Marcion, Tertullian also asserts that there are but four inspired Gospels and in the process upholds the apostolic authority of eight specific letters by Paul.

“On the whole, then, if that is evidently more true which is earlier, if that is earlier which is from the very beginning, if that is from the beginning which has the apostles for its authors, then it will certainly be quite as evident, that that comes down from the apostles, which has been kept as a sacred deposit in the churches of the apostles.¹⁸ Let us see what milk the **Corinthians** drank from Paul; to what rule *of faith* the **Galatians** were brought for correction; what the **Philippians**, the **Thessalonians**, the **Ephesians** read *by it*; what utterance also the **Romans** give, so very near (to the apostles), to whom Peter and Paul conjointly bequeathed the gospel even sealed with their own blood. We have also *St. John’s* foster churches. For although Marcion rejects his **Apocalypse**,¹⁹ **the order of the bishops (thereof), when traced up to their origin, will yet rest on John as their author**. In the same manner is recognised the excellent source of the other churches. I say, therefore, that in them (and not simply such of them as were rounded by apostles, but in all those which are united with them in the fellowship of the *mystery of the gospel of Christ*) that **Gospel of Luke** which we are defending with all our might has stood its ground from its very first publication; whereas Marcion’s Gospel is not known to most people, and to none whatever is it known without being at the same time condemned. It too, of course, has its churches, but specially its own—as late as they are spurious; and should you want to know their original, you will more easily discover apostasy in it than apostolicity, with Marcion forsooth as their founder, or some one of Marcion’s swarm. Even wasps make combs; so also these Marcionites make churches. **The same authority of the apostolic churches will afford evidence to the other Gospels also, which we possess equally through their means, and according to their usage—I mean the Gospels of John and Matthew—whilst that which Mark published may be affirmed to be Peter’s whose interpreter Mark was**. For even Luke’s form of the Gospel men usually ascribe to Paul. And it may well seem that the works which disciples publish belong to their masters.”

In On Modesty, Chapter 10

During his discussion he complains that the “Shepherd of Hermas” was being cited as an excuse for tolerating adultery & points out that he might accept such a citation if the book “deserved to find a place in the Divine canon; if it had not been habitually judged by every council of Churches (even of your own) among apocryphal and false (writings);²⁰ itself adulterous.”

In On the Apparel of Women, Chapter 3

While noting that the Book of Enoch was not part of the “Jewish canon” he was none-the-less interested in it for the simple fact a line from it had been quoted in **Jude**.

Eusebius’ Church History, Book 4, Chapter 24 (around 320)

Quotes directly from **Hebrews** 11, stating clearly that it was written by “the Apostle.”

¹⁸ This defends the precept of “canonical writings” being the authentic writings of the apostles themselves or their intimate companions.

¹⁹ Revelation.

²⁰ This indicates that the various churches had already been compiling “canon” lists to rule out uninspired or non-apostolic writings.

Eusebius' Church History, Book 2, Chapter 23 (around 320)

“25. These things are recorded in regard to **James**, who is said to be the author of the first of the so-called catholic epistles. But it is to be observed that it is disputed; at least, not many of the ancients have mentioned it, as is the case likewise with the epistle that bears the name of **Jude**, which is also **one of the seven so-called catholic epistles**.²¹ Nevertheless we know that these also, with the rest, have been read publicly in very many churches.²²”

Eusebius' Church History, Book 6, Chapter 25 (around 320)

Eusebius reviews some of Origen's canon, from about 240.

“4. Among the four Gospels, which are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that the first was written by **Matthew**, who was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it was prepared for the converts from Judaism, and published in the Hebrew language.

“5. The second is by **Mark**, who composed it according to the instructions of Peter, who in his Catholic epistle acknowledges him as a son, saying, 'The church that is at Babylon elected together with you, salutes you, and so does Marcus, my son.' 1 Peter 5:13

“6. And the third by **Luke**, the Gospel commended by Paul, and composed for Gentile converts. Last of all that by **John**.

“7. In the fifth book of his Expositions of John's Gospel, he speaks thus concerning **the epistles of the apostles**: But he who was 'made sufficient to be a minister of the New Testament, not of the letter, but of the Spirit,' 2 Corinthians 3:6 that is, **Paul**, who 'fully preached the Gospel from Jerusalem and round about even unto Illyricum,' Romans 15:19 **did not write to all the churches which he had instructed and to those to which he wrote he sent but few lines.**

“8. And **Peter**, on whom the Church of Christ is built, 'against which the gates of hell shall not prevail,' Matthew 16:18 **has left one acknowledged epistle; perhaps also a second**, but this is doubtful.

“9. Why need we speak of him who reclined upon the bosom of Jesus, **John, who has left us one Gospel**, though he confessed that he might write so many that the world could not contain them? And **he wrote also the Apocalypse**, but was commanded to keep silence and not to write the words of the seven thunders.

“10. **He has left also an epistle of very few lines; perhaps also a second and third**; but not all consider them genuine, and together they do not contain hundred lines.

“11. In addition he makes the following statements in regard to the **Epistle to the Hebrews** in his Homilies upon it: That the verbal style of the epistle entitled 'To the Hebrews,' is not rude like the language of the apostle, who acknowledged himself 'rude in speech' 2 Corinthians 11:6 that is, in expression; but that its diction is purer Greek, any one who has the power to discern differences of phraseology will acknowledge.

“12. Moreover, that the thoughts of the epistle are admirable, and not inferior to the acknowledged apostolic writings, any one who carefully examines the apostolic text will admit.'

“13. Farther on he adds: If I gave my opinion, I should say that the thoughts are those of the apostle, but the diction and phraseology are those of some one who remembered the apostolic teachings, and wrote down at his leisure what had been said by his teacher. **Therefore if any church holds that this epistle is by Paul, let it be commended for this. For not without reason have the ancients handed it down as Paul's.**

“14. But who wrote the epistle, in **truth**, God **knows**. The statement of some who have gone before us is that Clement, bishop of the Romans, wrote the epistle, and of others that Luke, the author of the Gospel and the Acts, wrote it. But let this suffice on these matters.”

²¹ Name applied to James, Jude, 1 & 2 Peter and 1, 2 & 3 John.

²² Which means they were accepted as “inspired” and therefore “canonical.”