

Mount Olive Baptist Church
Bible Study Series: *How We Got the Bible*
Session 8 — “The Canon of the Scriptures”
Chapter 14

Lenten Check-In

Before we enter the lesson, pause and reflect:

- Have you found yourself leaning more on Scripture during this season?
- When temptation or distraction comes, what has been your response?
- Are you replacing what you gave up with time in the Word?

Jesus, when tempted in the wilderness, answered every attack with:

“It is written.” (Matthew 4)

The Living Word relied on the Written Word.

If Christ grounded Himself in Scripture, this season calls us to do the same. Lent is not about proving discipline, it is about deepening dependence.

Let this study remind us that the Word we lean on is trustworthy, preserved, and recognized across history as God’s voice.

.I. What Does “Canon” Mean? (*How We Got The Bible* - Chapter 14, pp. 152–153)

The word *canon* comes from:

- Greek *kanon*
- Hebrew *qaneh*, meaning a reed used as a measuring rod.

It came to mean:

- A standard
- A rule
- An authoritative list

Thus, the Canon refers to: the recognized collection of books received as Holy Scripture.

Canon is not about giving authority to books. It is about recognizing the authority they already possessed.

The church did not make these books Scripture.

They were inspired when written and later acknowledged as such.

II. Canon vs. Authority — A Critical Distinction (p. 153)

A book’s authority comes from divine inspiration, not from later approval.

For example, Paul's letters were authoritative the moment they were written, but they were only later gathered into a recognized collection.

No council made them Scripture.

The church discovered what God had already given.

III. The Canon of the Old Testament Was Already Established (pp. 153–156)

By the time of Jesus:

- The Old Testament canon was already fixed.
- Jesus repeatedly referred to it as “the Scriptures.”

He described its threefold Hebrew structure: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (Luke 24:44)

Jesus also spoke of history from Abel to Zechariah (Luke 11:51), reflecting the full scope of the Hebrew Bible.

IV. Historical Confirmation from Josephus (pp. 154–155)

Jewish historian Josephus (A.D. 95) testified:

- Jews recognized twenty-two books (the same content as our thirty-nine Old Testament books counted differently).
- No one dared add to or remove from them.
- These writings were treated as the very words of God.

Josephus also understood prophetic revelation to have ceased after the time of Artaxerxes (Ezra–Nehemiah era).

This shows the Old Testament canon was settled long before Christianity spread.

V. Early Christian Witnesses Affirm the Emerging New Testament Canon (pp. 156, 158–159)

As Christianity spread, early Christian leaders bore witness to which writings were already being read and trusted in the churches.

Two important voices help us see this process clearly: **Justin Martyr** and **Origen**.

Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 100–165) — Evidence from Christian Worship (p. 156)

Justin Martyr described what happened in Sunday worship gatherings. Believers assembled and read:

“The memoirs of the apostles” together with “the writings of the prophets.”

This shows that by the mid-second century:

- The Gospels were already being read publicly in worship.
- They were treated alongside the Old Testament as authoritative.
- The church was using these writings before any official list existed.

The New Testament was functioning as Scripture in practice before it was formally defined.

Justin gives us a snapshot of canon in use before canon was discussed.

Origen (c. A.D. 185–254) — Scholarly Recognition of the Canon (pp. 158–159)

Origen of Alexandria was one of the most influential biblical scholars in early Christianity.

Who Was He?

- A brilliant theologian and teacher.
- Produced extensive commentaries on nearly every book of Scripture.
- Compared manuscripts carefully to preserve the accurate text.
- Worked diligently to distinguish authentic apostolic writings from others circulating at the time.

Origen's Witness to the Canon

Origen affirmed:

- The four Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — as uniquely authoritative.
- Acts and the letters of Paul.
- Key apostolic writings such as 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude, and Revelation.

Origen noted that a few New Testament books were still being evaluated in some parts of the church, not because their message was doubted, but because those writings had not yet circulated widely enough for all congregations to confirm their apostolic origin.

This shows the church exercising careful discernment as it recognized the writings that had come from the apostles.

Origen compared the New Testament authors to trumpets sounding the message of Christ, each proclaiming the Gospel with divine authority.

VI. How the New Testament Canon Developed (pp. 156–160)

At first, the church had no New Testament.

Their Bible was the Old Testament, and apostolic teaching spread orally.

Gradually:

- Apostles wrote letters to churches.
- Gospels recorded Christ's life.
- These writings were read publicly in worship.

Scripture was forming through use before it was formally listed.

VII. Early Lists and the Muratorian Fragment (pp. 157–160)

One of the earliest New Testament lists included:

- The four Gospels
- Acts
- Paul's letters
- Revelation
- Other recognized apostolic works

Some books were discussed temporarily because circulation varied among churches.

Other writings such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* or the *Epistle of Barnabas* were valued devotionally but never treated as Scripture.

The early church clearly distinguished between helpful reading and inspired writing.

VIII. Final Recognition of the Twenty-Seven New Testament Books (pp. 159–161)

By A.D. 367, Athanasius listed the exact twenty-seven New Testament books we have today.

This did not create the canon.

It confirmed what the churches had already been using for generations.

Recognition was based on:

- Apostolic origin
- Doctrinal consistency
- Widespread use in worship
- Evidence of divine authority

IX. The Canon Was Recognized — Not Invented (p. 161)

The formation of the canon was:

- A historical process
- A spiritual discernment
- A recognition of God's revelation over time

No church council created Scripture or granted it authority. Councils later affirmed what had already been recognized.

God inspired it.

Believers received it.

The church acknowledged it.

Food for Thought

The Bible did not survive because it was protected by institutions.

It survived because generations of believers recognized God speaking through it and preserved it faithfully.

The question is no longer how we got the Bible.
The question is whether we will live under the authority of the Bible we have received.