



THE BEGINNINGS OF THE BIBLE

OCTOBER 22 / 23, 2025

PSALM 1, PSALM 119; II TIMOTHY 3:14-17

GONZALEZ, CHAPTER 23

- I. Introduction: God's People and God's Word
 - a. From the beginning, God's people have been defined by their devotion to His Word.
 - i. Psalm 1: The blessed person is rooted in God's law like a tree beside living waters.
 - ii. Psalm 119: God's Word is a lamp and a light for our path.
 - iii. 2 Timothy 3:14–17: Paul reminds Timothy that Scripture is *"¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."*
 - b. The early church believed that through Scripture, God still speaks — revealing Himself, shaping faith, and directing the life of His people.
 - c. But as the Christian movement spread, a crucial question arose: *Which writings truly bear the authority of God's Word?*
- II. The Foundations of the Canon in the Apostolic Era (1st Century)
 - a. Canon (Greek: kanōn) means *rule* or *measuring rod*.
 - i. The "canon of Scripture" refers to those writings recognized as the authoritative rule of faith and life.
 - b. Early Christians revered:
 - i. The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) — the Bible of Jesus and the apostles.
 - ii. The Apostolic Witness — letters, sermons, and Gospels from those who had seen the risen Lord.

- c. Early churches read apostolic writings in worship alongside the Hebrew Scriptures.
 - i. By the late first century, much of the New Testament was already in circulation — the four Gospels, Acts, Paul’s letters, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation.
 - ii. These texts were treasured not because the church made them holy, but because they bore the apostolic authority of those who had walked with Christ.
- III. The Growth of the Canon (100–200 AD)
- a. After the apostles’ deaths, the church faced two major challenges:
 - i. False writings claiming apostolic authority (Gnostic gospels, forged letters).
 - ii. False teachings, such as Marcionism and Gnosticism, that distorted the gospel.
 - b. Marcion of Sinope (c. 140 AD)
 - i. Rejected the Old Testament and claimed the God of Israel was not the Father of Jesus.
 - ii. Created his own “canon”: an edited Luke and ten of Paul’s letters.
 - iii. His heresy forced the church to clarify what writings were truly authoritative.
 - c. The Church’s Response: The early Christians reaffirmed that...
 - i. The God of the Old Testament is the same as the God revealed in Jesus.
 - ii. The Old and New Testaments form one unified story of redemption.
 - d. By the late second century, Irenaeus of Lyons affirmed the fourfold Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John): *“It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are.” (Against Heresies 3.11.8)*
- IV. The Criteria for Recognizing Scripture (200–300 AD)
- a. As the church discerned which writings were truly God’s Word, three consistent criteria emerged:
 - i. Apostolic Origin – Connected to an apostle or close companion (e.g., Mark with Peter, Luke with Paul).
 - ii. Orthodox Teaching – Consistent with the apostolic “rule of faith.”
 - iii. Widespread and Continuous Use – Read and received across the churches in worship and teaching.
 - b. *“The canon did not descend from heaven ready-made; rather, it was the result of a long process of discernment.”*— Justo González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. I, Ch. 23
 - c. This process was guided not by bureaucracy but by the Holy Spirit — confirming in the church what God had already inspired.
- V. Athanasius of Alexandria and the New Testament Canon (296–373 AD)
- a. Athanasius— defender of Nicene orthodoxy and champion of the canon.

- b. In his Festal Letter of 367 AD, Athanasius listed the 27 books of the New Testament exactly as we know them today. He wrote: “*These are the fountains of salvation... In these alone is the doctrine of godliness proclaimed. Let no one add to them, nor take away from them.*” (Festal Letter 39)
 - c. Athanasius’ contributions:
 - i. First complete list of the 27 New Testament books.
 - ii. Declared these writings alone should be read in worship as Scripture.
 - iii. Distinguished useful devotional writings (e.g., *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Didache*) from inspired Scripture.
 - iv. Influenced later Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397), which confirmed the same list.
 - d. For Athanasius, the canon and the creed were twin defenses of truth — Scripture and faith together safeguarded the church from heresy.
- VI. Jerome and the Latin Vulgate (c. 347–420 AD)
 - a. Jerome— brilliant scholar, translator, and theologian. Commissioned by Pope Damasus I, Jerome translated the Bible into Latin — the Vulgate — which became the Western Church’s standard Bible for over a thousand years.
 - b. Jerome’s contributions:
 - i. Textual Integrity: Returned to Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament, setting a precedent for Reformation scholarship (*ad fontes* — “to the sources”).
 - ii. Canon Clarity: Distinguished between the Hebrew canon and the Apocrypha — the latter valuable for reading, but not authoritative for doctrine.
 - iii. Jerome’s careful distinctions later shaped Protestant views of the canon. The Reformers followed his conviction that only the Hebrew Scriptures and apostolic writings form the inspired Word of God.
- VII. Theological Significance of the Canon. From a Reformed and Presbyterian perspective, the completed canon reveals:
 - a. God’s Providential Guidance
 - i. The canon was not imposed by man but recognized under the Spirit’s direction.
 - ii. God not only inspired His Word — He preserved and gathered it for His church.
 - b. The Sufficiency of Scripture
 - i. *2 Timothy 3:16–17*: Scripture makes us “complete, equipped for every good work.”
 - ii. The canon marks the boundary of divine revelation.
 - iii. The church lives under Scripture — not above or alongside it.
 - iv. This principle is foundational to *Sola Scriptura*.
 - c. The Unity of the Old and New Testaments
 - i. Both covenants reveal one God and one story of redemption.
 - ii. *Augustine*: “The New Testament is hidden in the Old; the Old is revealed in the New.”

- d. The Word as Life: The Canon in Practice
 - i. By 600 AD, the canon of Scripture was settled — the same Bible we hold today.
Yet its power lies not merely in its preservation but in its practice.
 - ii. Monks and clergy devoted themselves to copying, reading, and praying Scripture.
 - iii. The Rule of St. Benedict (c. 530) prescribed daily readings, ensuring that the Word would shape both heart and mind.
 - iv. In this, the church lived out Psalm 1 — delighting in God’s Word as the source of true life.

- VIII. The Canon as Gift and Guide: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” — *Isaiah 40:8*
 - a. By the providence of God, the church received and preserved the canon as a gift — not a human achievement but a divine trust.
 - b. Westminster Confession of Faith (1.4) affirms: “*The authority of Holy Scripture... dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God, the Author thereof.*”
 - c. In every generation, the canon calls the church back to Scripture — to listen, to believe, and to obey.