

INTRODUCTION

In 1945, two Egyptian peasants discovered a small collection of ancient books beneath a boulder in the upper Egyptian city known as Nag Hammadi. The collection of books consisted of thirteen leather-bound volumes of old Coptic-language texts originating from an early fringe movement of Christianity called *Christian Gnosticism*. In those thirteen volumes, scholars unfolded more than fifty different pieces of literature, with some of the manuscripts dating all the way back to the 2nd century AD. Some soon began to claim that they had discovered **“the lost books of the Bible”**—books that contained “ancient truths” about Jesus Christ not found in the canonical Gospels or other books of the NT.

These scholars contended that the contents of the books contained inconvenient truths for the elite of ancient Christendom. Consequently, those in power denounced the writings as unauthoritative and ordered their destruction. A certain monk supposedly buried a few remaining copies of the works under this boulder in Nag Hammadi in order to preserve their existence, and there they remained until 1945.

These works are known today by such titles as the Gospel of Truth; the Gospel of Philip; the Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles; the Sophia of Jesus Christ, and Apocryphon of John. One of the more well-known works was a fully-preserved edition of the Gospel of Thomas. Although claiming to be written by Jesus’ disciple Thomas, no scholar believes it was written by him; all agree it is *pseudepigraphal*—falsely written in someone else’s name in order to attract respect. Nonetheless, some claim that the Gospel of Thomas—along with other books of the Nag Hammadi library—should be treated as an authoritative book for today’s church, a necessary and beneficial authority for understanding Christian faith and practice.

Sincere Christians have sometimes fallen prey to such claims. For one, many are unfamiliar with the contents of the Gospel of Thomas and other such Gnostic writings. They assume them to be credible accounts of the teaching of the Apostles that provide a slightly different take on the life of Christ. As a result, they begin to doubt whether the Bible they hold in their hands actually contains all that it should. However, one of the best cures for such doubt is simply to read these works. As soon as one does, he realizes that these books deserved to be buried under a rock! They contain bizarre, outlandish ideas of Jesus Christ, the way of salvation, and reality in general. For example, consider the concluding words to the Gospel of Thomas:

Simon Peter said to him, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This is just one example. Innumerable selections from these books could be provided.

But another reason why Christians fall prey to the claims of these so-called “scholarly experts” is that many poorly understand the criteria that establishes the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as *Holy Scripture*. They struggle in being able to explain *why* the Bible we hold in our hands is *complete*, and *how* we know that for a fact. To be fair, the topic is complex. It includes more complicated discussions than just the Nag Hammadi library (e.g., why must we reject the Apocrypha—books the Roman Catholic Church insists must be in our Bible?). Yet regardless of the complexity, it is important for all believers to grow in their understanding of what makes the Bible the *complete* Word of God.

THE NATURE OF COMPLETION

A. Defining the Terms

“Canon” = κανὼν (*kanōn*) – “a means to determine the quality of something; rule, standard.”

This first term is foundational for the entire discussion. The term “canon” initially was used in Greek to refer to something that provided a standard of measurement. Over time, it came to refer to “rules” or “principles” by which thinking or behavior was to be assessed. The Apostle Paul uses it this way in **Galatians 6:15–16** – “For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.”

In the early church, particularly in response to heretical movements such as Gnostic Christianity, the term “canon” came to be used by church leaders to refer to the books recognized as *being* God’s Word as opposed to those that were not. Today we use the phrase “canon of Scripture” to refer to **“the rule or standard of divine revelation—that which identifies God’s Word.”**

Other related terms include:

“Canonical revelation” = the totality of God’s Word, at any given era of redemptive history, that serves as the rule for salvation and living life pleasing to God.

“Cessationist” = one who believes that the revelatory and miraculous gifts *ceased* when the apostolic age ended; thus, canonical revelation has ceased for the church age.

“Continuationist” = one who believes that the revelatory and miraculous gifts *continue* throughout the church age; canonical revelation may or may not continue.

Some continuationists are “open-but-cautious,” meaning that they believe that some revelatory gifts could technically operate today, but they are unsure. Nonetheless, they certainly agree that the canon is closed. Other continuationists are “inconsistent.” In other words, they believe that the revelatory and miraculous spiritual gifts continue to operate in the church today, but they still contend that the new revelation that is given through these gifts is not authoritative or canonical. Other continuationists are “radical,” believing that revelatory gifts still operate just as they did in the first century of the church, meaning that apostles and prophets continue to deliver new canonical doctrine to the church.

Although the issues are connected, it is not within the scope of this session to deal with the broader issue of the cessation or continuation of the miraculous gifts in the church age. A helpful resource to consult on that topic is Tom Pennington’s work, *A Biblical Case for Cessationism: Why the Miraculous Gifts of the Spirit Have Ceased* (G3 Press, 2023).

But with respect to the issue of the canon, the *cessationist* position is correct for several vitally-important reasons. As Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley argue, “God has given us the full revelation of himself and his will, and all that we need to know in order to be saved and to glorify him, in the Holy Scriptures” (*Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1.409).

B. Approaches to the Canon

But how do the sixty-six books in our Bible get to the status of “canon”? There are three ways that this question has been answered:

1) **The Church determined the canon.** This is sometimes called the “extrinsic model”—extrinsic in the sense that the status of canonicity was ascribed to the books of the Bible *from the outside*—that is, from the Church. In this sense, the term “canon” is synonymous with church authority. It is argued that the Church in the 4th/5th-century *imparted authority* to a certain set of writings it determined should be used, while excluding others it determined should not have authority. This view is particularly espoused by the Roman Catholic Church, and explains why it has also over time added books like the Apocrypha (Jewish books never recognized by the Jewish people to be inspired). For example, the Roman Catholic Cardinal and key figure in the counter-Reformation, Stanislaus Hosius (1504–1579), stated, “The Scriptures have only as much force as the fables of Aesop, if destitute of the authority of the Church.” For Hosius and the RCC in general, the Church birthed the canon of Scripture.

2) **Utility determined the canon.** This is sometimes called the “functional model”—functional in the sense that the canon gradually and informally developed as the early church used different books for church life and figured out which ones were most helpful and which ones were not. In this sense, the term “canon” is synonymous with *pragmatic use* or *church utility*. That which was most universally acknowledged as helpful for faith and practice became “canon.”

3) **Inspiration determined the canon.** This is sometimes called the “ontological model”—ontological in the sense that what the Scripture *is* is what makes it automatically the *rule or standard*—i.e., the “canon.” Thus, to speak of the “canon” is to speak of anything that possesses the qualities of God’s Word (it is revelation, inspired, clear, true, sufficient, necessary, authoritative, and powerful). In other words, as soon as a text was “breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16), it was “canon.” Because Scripture is *inspired*, it automatically serves as God’s standard for His people. It does not *await* ecclesiastical conferences which confer authority, nor does it *await* application in church life to rise to the level of being useful and thus, authoritative. Scripture was “canon” even before all of God’s people became aware of it. (For example, Paul’s letter to the Romans was instantly canon even before it reached Rome from Corinth, where it was written. And it was already canon even before churches across the Roman Empire became aware of its existence and recognized it for what it was. As J. I. Packer wrote, “The Church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity, by His work of creation, and similarly He gave us the New Testament canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up. Newton did not create gravity, but recognized it” (*God Has Spoken*, 81).

THE TESTIMONY TO COMPLETION

The biblical evidence for the concept of canon and the completion of that canon in our sixty-six books of the Bible can be observed according to the following principles:

A. Scripture Acknowledges the Concept of a Canon

God’s Word establishes the concept of *an authoritative standard* that exists without the need for man’s approval, but by which men must live. The Bible’s own references to itself (as “the Law of Moses,” “the Prophets,” “the Psalms,” “the Scriptures,” etc.) bear this out, and Jesus’ own teaching evidences His own acknowledgment of the canon of Scripture that existed in His day:

- Matthew 21:42; Luke 24:44; Acts 17:11; Romans 1:1–2; 3:21; 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:15–17
- 1 Timothy 5:17–18; 2 Peter 3:15–16

B. Scripture Warns against Alterations to the Canon

At various stages in redemptive history, God’s Word levels strict warnings against any who would add or subtract to its current composition. Certainly, this “canon” of Scripture developed according to the progress of revelation (from Genesis to Revelation). But at various moments along this progression, warnings were given about altering what had been given up to that point, even while acknowledging more revelation was to come from God in the future.

- Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32 (compare with the acknowledgement in Deuteronomy 13 and 18 of future prophets); Proverbs 30:5–6; Revelation 22:18–19

C. Scripture Forewarns about False Claims of Special Revelation

God’s Word prepares God’s people for the inevitable reality that some—in fact, many, will falsely claim to speak or write in God’s name.

- Matthew 24:24–25; 2 Corinthians 11:13–15; Ephesians 4:14–15; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3; 1 John 4:1–5; 2 John 7–11

D. Scripture Asserts That God’s Word Is Self-Attesting.

God’s Word testifies that those born of God will recognize His Word when they hear it. This is an amazing quality of Scripture—because it is inspired—that no other works possesses.

→ John 8:47; 10:4–5, 27; 18:37; 1 John 4:5

E. Scripture Teaches the Sufficiency of the Apostolic Message for the Church Age.

The New Testament makes clear that until the next major stage of God’s plan begins (the Day of the Lord and His Second Coming), the teaching of Christ’s apostles is the canon for the church.

→ Ephesians 2:19–20; 1 Timothy 6:20–21; Hebrews 1:1–2; 2 Peter 1:2–3; Jude 1:3

F. Scripture Provides Its Own Criteria by Which to Test Claims of Revelation.

- **Apostolic conformity.** Each prophecy was expected to conform to the preaching of the apostles—those whom Christ appointed to bear His witness, and those whom the Spirit would teach (e.g., John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 2:19–22; 2 Thessalonians 3:14).
- **Christological orthodoxy.** A major standard was the apostolic preaching about the person of Jesus Christ (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:1–3; 1 John 4:1–6; 2 John 7–11). Agreement was essential.
- **Scriptural fidelity.** New Testament Christians were called upon to discern the claims of revelation by virtue of two forms of writings: (a) the *OT Scriptures* (e.g., Acts 17:11); and (b) the *NT Scriptures* that were being composed by the delegated apostles and prophets (e.g., Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3, 15; 3:14). A true prophecy from the Spirit will never contradict that which was written (OT) or being written (NT) by the superintendence of the same Spirit.
- **Prophetic integrity.** A fourth standard was that of the *character of the prophet himself*. The one who claimed to speak for God had to reflect the moral standards laid down by Jesus himself (e.g., Matthew 7:15–20; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 1 Thessalonians 2:4–7, 10; 2 Peter 2:1).
- **Corporate Prosperity.** A practical standard was that of *edification and the common good*. When claims were being made to revelation, there had to be the recognition that God’s Word always brought about common good to His people (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:3–5; Ephesians 4:11–12). It was no mere private affair.

THE
IMPLICATIONS
OF COMPLETION

The completion of Scripture has definite implications for our lives in the church today.

- A. **Rest!**
- B. **Resist!**
- C. **Avail!**

DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS

Discuss these questions in your small group:

1. In your own words, define “the canon of Scripture.”
2. Explain the three different approaches to defining what constitutes this “canon.” Which one is correct?
3. It is common to hear people claim that “God spoke to me” or “God told me.” Why are these kinds of statements dangerous? How should we respond to such claims?
4. What is the unstated reality among those who are yearning for “fresh words” from God? How do we prevent this from taking root in our own lives?

FURTHER
STUDY

For further study this week:

1. Memorize Proverbs 30:5–6.
2. Listen to the sermon by Tom Pennington, “A Case for Cessationism” (*Grace to You*), preached October 17, 2013, available here: [A Case for Cessationism \(Tom Pennington\)](#).
3. Listen to the seminar by Michael Kruger, “The Definition of the Canon” (*Ligonier Ministries*), July 24, 2024, available here: [The Definition of Canon: The New Testament Canon with Michael Kruger](#).
4. Read more about the “Preservation of Scripture” in John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pp. 113–130, or in John MacArthur, *Essential Christian Doctrine*, pp. 77–83.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: www.gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: February 12, “Evening of Hymns” (Phil Webb)