

The Early Church Fathers on The Canon of Scripture

The Early Church Fathers understood the canon of Scripture was set by God. They also knew that God communicated this fact through the Catholic Church. Many of them lived during the period when this was done. There was no consensus as some seem to think. Eusebius tells us that the book of 1 Clement was read in the churches from the early days until his own time (Church History 3:16 [A.D. 325]). So clearly a lot of churches considered it to be the word of God. Elsewhere, he includes the books of James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation on the list of disputed works (ibid 3:25). And yet, 1 Clement never made it into the canon but the others did. And that is because the Catholic Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, decided it would be that way.

Muratorian Canon

For the blessed apostle Paul himself, following the rule of his predecessor John, writes only by name to seven Churches in the following order—to the Corinthians a first...there is a second to the Corinthians and to the Thessalonians, yet one Church is recognized as being spread over the entire world...Howbeit to Philemon one, to Titus one, and to Timothy two were put in writing...to be in honor however with the Catholic Church for the ordering of ecclesiastical discipline...one to the Laodiceans, another to the Alexandrians, both forged in Paul's name to suit the heresy of Marcion, and several others, which cannot be received into the Catholic Church; for it is not fitting that gall be mixed with honey. The Epistle of Jude no doubt, and the couple bearing the name of John, are accepted by the Catholic Church...But of Arsinous, called also Valentinus, or of Miltiades we receive nothing at all (**inter A.D. 180-200**).

Hippolytus

What is narrated here [in the story of Susannah] happened at a later time, although it is placed at the front of the book [of Daniel], for it was a custom with the writers to narrate many things in an inverted order in their writings. . . . [W]e ought to give heed, beloved, fearing lest anyone be overtaken in any transgression and risk the loss of his soul, knowing as we do that God is the judge of all and the Word himself is the eye which nothing that is done in the world escapes. Therefore, always watchful in heart and pure in life, let us imitate Susannah (*Commentary on Daniel* [A.D. 204]).

Tertullian

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 (*Against Marcion* 4:5 [**inter A.D. 207-212**]).

Origen

In his [Origen] first book on Matthew's Gospel, maintaining the Canon of the Church, he testifies that he knows only four Gospels, writing as follows: 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. 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, saluteth you, and so doth Marcus, my son.' And the third by Luke, the Gospel commended by Paul, and composed for Gentile converts. Last of all that by John (*Commentary on Matthew*, fragment in Eusebius *Church History* 6:25:3 [A.D. 244]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

Learn also diligently, and from the Church, what are the books of the Old Testament, and what those of the New. And, pray, read none of the apocryphal writings: for why do you, who know not those which are acknowledged among all, trouble yourself in vain about those which are disputed? (*Catechetical Lectures* 4:33 [**A.D. 350**]).

Council of Hippo

Besides the canonical Scriptures, nothing shall be read, in the church under the title of divine writings. The canonical books are:—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, the four books of Kings, the two books of Paraleipomena (Chronicles), Job, the Psalms of David, the five books of Solomon, the twelve books of the (Minor) Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Tobias, Judith, Esther, two books of Esdras, two books of the Maccabees. The books of the New Testament are:—the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen Epistles of S. Paul, one Epistle of S. Paul to the Hebrews, two Epistles of S. Peter, three Epistles of S. John, the Epistle of S. James, the Epistle of S. Jude, the Revelation of S. John. Concerning the confirmation of this canon, the transmarine Church shall be consulted (Canon 36 [A.D. 393]).

Athanasius

I beseech you to bear patiently, if I also write, by way of remembrance, of matters with which you are acquainted, influenced by the need and advantage of the Church. In proceeding to make mention of these things [the canon], I shall adopt, to comment my undertaking, the pattern of Luke...to reduce into order for themselves the books termed apocryphal, and to mix them up with the divinely inspired Scripture, concerning which we have been fully persuaded, as they who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word, delivered to the fathers; it seemed good to me also, having been urged thereto by true brethren, and having learned from the beginning, to set before you the books included in the Canon (*Festal Letters* 39 [A.D. 397]).

Council of Carthage

[It has been decided] that nothing except the Canonical Scriptures should be read in the church under the name of the Divine Scriptures. But the Canonical Scriptures are: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Josue, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, Paralipomenon two books, Job, the Psalter of David, five books of Solomon, twelve books of the Prophets, Isaias, Jeremias, Daniel, Ezekiel, Tobias, Judith, Esther, two books of Esdras, two books of the Maccabees. Moreover, of the New Testament: Four books of the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles one book, thirteen epistles of Paul the Apostle, one of the same to the Hebrews, two of Peter, three of John, one of James, one of Jude, the Apocalypse of John (Canon 47 [A.D. 397]).

Augustine

The authority of our books [Scriptures], which is confirmed by agreement of so many nations, supported by a succession of apostles, bishops, and councils, is against you (*Reply to Faustus the Manichean* 13:5 [A.D. 400]).

Council of Toledo

If anyone shall say, or shall believe, that other Scriptures, besides those which the Catholic Church has received, are to be esteemed of authority, or to be venerated, let him be anathema (Canon 12 [A.D. 400]).

Pope Innocent

A brief addition shows what books really are received in the canon. These are the desiderata of which you wished to be informed verbally: of Moses five books, that is, of Genesis, of Exodus, of Leviticus, of Numbers, of Deuteronomy, and Josue, of Judges one book, of Kings four books, also Ruth, of the Prophets sixteen books, of Solomon five books, the Psalms. Likewise of the histories, Job one book, of Tobias one book, Esther one, Judith one, of the Maccabees two, of Esdras two, Paralipomenon two books. Likewise of the New Testament: of the Gospels four books, of Paul the Apostle fourteen epistles, of John three, epistles of Peter two, an epistle of Jude, an epistle of James, the Acts of the Apostles, the Apocalypse of John (*Letter to Exsuperius Bishop of Toulouse* 6:7:13 [A.D. 405]).