

Canon

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Version 1.0 | Published 1 May 2026 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-113278>

Other language version: Kanon (Deutsch)

The word canon has multiple meanings. In the Christian context, it refers on the one hand to the Bible as a collection of sacred writings (cf. art. Scripture) and on the other hand to the foundation or elementary contents of the Christian faith. The relationship between the two is a topic handled within fundamental theology as well as within material dogmatics. The latter disciplines also deal with the biblical canon and biblical hermeneutics, where, in its function as Holy Scripture, the Bible has a normative status that is yet-to-be-determined more precisely not only in the context of proclamation and the life of the Church but also in all of the theological disciplines. However, the extent to which this applies to, and how it manifests itself concretely in, theological work is the subject of ongoing debate.

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1. The Term “Canon”

1.1. Etymology and Conceptual Distinctions

The word *Canon* comes from the Greek (κανών) and is actually a semitic loanword. The Hebrew word *qanah* means “tube,” “straight rod” and it refers to the straightedge, ruler, or measuring stick used in construction. κανών was translated early on into Latin as “regula.”^[1] Figuratively speaking, the word refers to the assessment, code of conduct, or norm (cf. art. Norms and Principles) in ethical matters. In this sense, Paul speaks of the measure (κανών) that God has assigned to him (2 Cor 10:13, 15f.). In Gal 6:16, the new being in Christ is the standard of judgment by which Christians should be guided.

In another sense, the word canon refers to a list, directory, or catalog. Unlike the first, normative meaning of the word, the second is purely descriptive. The oldest list of a canon in the history of Christianity is the Canon Muratori (presumably created in Rome around 170 AD). It includes those writings that are used as Holy Scriptures in the Church, but it has no official character. In addition to the writings found in today’s New Testament, it also lists the Wisdom of Solomon and the Apocalypse of Peter. This annotated list already shows the overlapping of the descriptive and normative meanings of “canon.” This also applies to Irenaeus of Lyon’s ^{GND} canon list whose criterion for the inclusion of individual writings is their being divinely inspired. Some of the writings that are now considered part of the New Testament are missing from Irenaeus’ list. He also lists the Shepherd of Hermas, which the Muratori Canon does not include, as one of the canonical writings to be read publicly in the Church.

The debate about the inspiration of the so-called Antilegomena, which included the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of Jude, and the Apocalypse of John, challenged Church councils to establish a binding canon. Examples include the decision of the Synod of Laodicea (around 360 AD) and the establishment of the biblical canon by the Roman Synod in 382 AD. These were all regional decisions that also declared the Christian double canon of Old and New Testament writings to be binding. In his Easter letter of 367, Athanasius of Alexandria also compiled a list of 27 New Testament writings that were to be regarded as canonized and divinely transmitted books. However, it was not until the Ecumenical Council of 691/92 (Trullanum) that the entire Church (the imperial Church) dealt with questions relating to the canon.

This leads to a third meaning of the word. Canon law or synodal stipulations are also referred to as canons. According to canon law, the canon list in can. 56 of the Synod of Laodicea is a binding decision. The biblical canon is thus the result of a process of canonization that is to be understood as an ecclesiastical act, not a private event. However, this does not answer the question of how the canonization of the biblical writings came about in the first place and to what extent the Church is to be regarded as a subject in the process of canonization.^[2]

1.2. Biblical Canon and *Regula fidei*

In addition to its use as a technical term for the Holy Scriptures or the sacred writings of Christianity, “canon” can also refer to the foundations or basic tenets of the Christian faith. The Greek term is ὁ κανὼν τῆς πίστεως (rule/norm of faith) or ὁ κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας (rule/norm of truth). In Latin, it is referred to as *regula fidei* or *regula veritatis*. The *regula fidei* initially exists independently of the biblical canon. It finds expression in concise creeds, which, of course, did not arise independently of the later canonized writings of the Old and New Testaments, but rather profess in condensed form the faith based on the Gospel testified to in the Bible. As a summary of the faith, the *regula fidei* can also be understood as a summary of the entire biblical testimony (cf. art. Witness). Again, the creed must be measured against the standard of the biblical canon. However, this also raises the question concerning which authority guarantees the legitimacy of the creed and the canonicity of its interpretation, as well as that of the biblical texts. The answers to this question vary among the different denominations. According to Orthodox and Catholic doctrine, this

task belongs to the office of bishop, while, according to the Reformation understanding, Holy Scripture interprets itself and is, accordingly, also the authority that decides on the legitimacy of the interpretation of the *regula fidei*.

Within Lutheranism, the function of the *regula fidei* as well as the Creed is articulated in Martin Luther's ^{GND} Small and Large Catechisms (*Kleiner und Großer Katechismus*). The 1577 Lutheran Formula of Concord (*Konkordienformel*) describes Luther's Catechisms as "the layman's Bible, encompassing everything that is dealt with at length in Holy Scripture and that is necessary for a Christian to know for his salvation."^[3] The creeds and other writings of the Church tradition, on the other hand, are "not judges like Holy Scripture but only testimony to, and explanation of, the faith"^[4] that indicate how Holy Scripture and controversial articles of the faith have been interpreted in the past.

2. Bible – Canon – Scripture

Any teaching on Scripture in systematic theology must begin with the conceptual distinction between the Bible, the canon, Scripture, and the Word of God. The term Bible is derived from the plural of the Greek word βιβλίον = book. The Bible is therefore a collection of sacred writings, the scope of which is, however, not identical in the various churches. *Bible* is thus a term used in literary studies or religious studies (cf. art. Religious Studies, Study of Religion[s] and Theology). Originally, the writings compiled in the Bible circulated as individual texts or scrolls. It was only with the invention of the codex that partial or complete Bibles were produced that compiled the selected writings as one book. This development is reflected in the Latin loanword *Biblia*, which turns the Greek plural τὰ βιβλία into a singular. Accordingly, the sacred writings in the plural become Holy Scripture in the singular. *Biblia* is therefore synonymous with *Scriptura sacra*. This equation is also found in the title of Luther's translation of the Bible into German: "Biblia das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift."^[5] To be sure, the term "Holy Scripture" can be understood descriptively in the academic study of religion. However, it functions normatively in the ecclesiastical and theological context. Its normativity is expressed in the concept of the canon. Here the Reformation tradition distinguishes between Scripture as *norma normans* and the confessional writings of the 16th century as *norma normata*, whose claim to truth and validity must always be measured against Holy Scripture. As sacred texts, the writings of the Old and New Testaments have canonical status. They are to be used and interpreted in worship. They are authoritative texts, serving as the source and guide for faith, its teaching, and its practice in life. However, the biblical texts are not Scripture qua material artifacts but only in their liturgical and worship use, that is, when they call the Gospel of Jesus Christ and thus the living word of God to mind. In brief: they are scripture only when they function as a medium of communication for the Gospel. The use of scripture (*Schriftgebrauch*) is not limited to its recitation but also occurs in the form of scriptural interpretation (*Schriftauslegung*), whose most important *Sitz im Leben* is the sermon. However, scriptural interpretation also takes place in pastoral care and educational processes, in biblical exegesis, as well as in the interpretation of Scripture in systematic theology. As a canon, the Bible is not only a source for, but also a measure of, systematic theology, insofar as *scripturality* (*Schriftgemäßheit*) is, at least according to the Reformation tradition, the most decisive criterion of all theology.

3. Canon and Word of God

Scripture and canon must, however, be distinguished from the Word of God, where the latter refers to God's speaking in the here-and-now. God's speaking in the present cannot be separated from human processes of communication, but it nonetheless must be distinguished from them. The reason for this is that the Word of God is not a fixed teaching (*fixierbare Lehre*) but rather the event and experience through which God's saving presence changes and reorients a person's life. The Gospel as the word or power of God (cf. Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 1:18) is communicated in, with, and among human communication processes, but it is not identical with them. It takes the form of indirect communication, which becomes a divine address for the recipients in the act of hearing or reading. The Word of God is "not effective in the Church merely as a literal repetition" of the Bible, "but also as an independent creed (*viva vox evangelii*), although, insofar as and since the Bible is available, never without a demonstrable connection to it."^[6]

4. The Christian Double Canon: Old and New Testaments

All Christian churches share the double canon of the Old and New Testaments. The incorporation of the Jewish Bible into the Christian canon is an expression of the enduring connection between the Church and Israel. When the New Testament refers to “Scripture” or “the Scriptures,” it means the Jewish Bible. Through exegesis of the Old Testament, the authors of the New Testament seek to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah of the God of Israel. Remarkably, the Church did not edit the Old Testament in a Christian manner but instead left its wording unchanged. However, the Greek version of the Jewish Bible, the Septuagint, was given greater weight in the early Church than the Hebrew Bible.

With the inclusion of the Old Testament in the Christian canon, the emerging mainstream Church turned against Marcion ^{GND} and the church he founded, which strictly separated the God of the Old Testament from that of the New Testament. In post-Enlightenment theology, it was Friedrich Schleiermacher ^{GND}, like Johann Salomo Semler ^{GND} before him, who classified the Old Testament as a historical document of a pre-Christian religion and accepted only the New Testament as the actual Christian canon. According to Adolf von Harnack ^{GND}, the rejection of the Old Testament in the debate with Marcion and Gnosticism would have been a mistake. He considered its retention during the Reformation to be fate. However, its preservation in modern Protestantism was a sign of “religious and ecclesiastical paralysis (*Lähmung*).”^[7] More recently, the Protestant systematic theologian Notger Slenczka ^{GND} sparked a heated debate with his thesis on the de-canonization of the Old Testament, which he argued should only retain the status of so-called apocryphal or deuterocanonical writings in the Christian Church.

The preservation of the Old Testament not only reflects Christianity's enduring connection to Judaism (from which it emerged) but also expresses the Christian belief in God, since this is a belief in the God of Israel and God's selfhood and faithfulness as well as God's eschatological act of redemption in the Christ event (*Christusgeschehen*), which Christians understand as the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel. However, there is a hermeneutical circle between the Old and New Testaments. On the one hand, the Christ event (cf. art. Gospel) in the New Testament is interpreted within the horizon of the Old Testament. On the other hand, the Old Testament is subjected to a new reading based on the Christ event.

Discourse about God and about Jesus as the Christ are mutually dependent. In this way, discourse about God and questions about him take on their unmistakable Christian profile. It is impossible to speak about God without reference to Christ or about Jesus as the Christ without reference to God and God's actions through and in him. Otherwise, God is equated with a metaphysical principle and Christology is reduced to mere anthropology. But God is present in the Spirit, which in the New Testament is referred to as the Spirit of Christ. Implicitly, the Trinitarian concept of God is ultimately also inscribed in the Christian biblical canon insofar as the latter only took on its final form after the doctrine of the Trinity became dogma in the 4th century. The Trinitarian understanding of God and the biblical canon therefore form a hermeneutical circle.

5. Emergence, Scope, and Composition of the Canon as a Problem in Systematic Theology

The Old and New Testaments were developed over a long period of time. In addition to the Hebrew version of the Old Testament, the Greek Septuagint – on which the Latin Vulgate is based – also plays an important role in Christianity. Because of the Septuagint and Vulgate, texts that are not found in the Hebrew Bible have become part of the Christian Bible where they are classified as deuterocanonical writings or, as in the case of Martin Luther ^{GND}, as apocrypha of the Hebrew Bible. In principle, we can conclude that there is a biblical canon shared among the various Christian churches. However, it is also the case that there remain considerable variations in this biblical canon today. For example, the biblical canon of the Ethiopian Church contains the Book of Enoch and the Book of Jubilees. There are also considerable differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic editions of the Old Testament.

From the perspective of systematic theology, special attention must be paid not only to the scope but also to the composition of the Old Testament and New Testament canons. The fact that the Septuagint ends with the prophetic books, while the Hebrew Bible ends with the books of Chronicles, is not incidental but rather an expression of different theological programs. Although the Church Father Jerome favored the Hebrew Bible with its *hebraica veritas*, Christian editions of the Old Testament ultimately follow the structure of the Septuagint. The prophets thus announce the Messiah whose coming is attested to in the New Testament. For theological reasons, Luther made changes to the pre-Reformation canon in his German translation of the Bible, placing the Epistle of James and the Epistle to the Hebrews at the end and thus subjecting them to factual criticism.

6. Canon and Church, Biblical Canon, Translations, and Confessional Identities

The validity of the Bible as Holy Scripture and the idea of the canon can be understood from its use in worship. Both the complex process of the individual biblical books' canonization, which cannot be traced in detail here, and the formation of the biblical canon as a whole are the result of the texts' reception among, and application by, the faithful, something which has its *Sitz im Leben* in the worshipping community.

There is, however, disagreement among the denominations as to what role the Church plays in the process of canon formation.^[8] Within the Catholic tradition, the Church is viewed as the subject of the process, while the Reformation tradition maintains that the canonization of the New Testament writings and the Christian double canon is the work of God or, more specifically, the Holy Spirit. The Church therefore did not create the canon but only recognized divine authority and subsequently ratified it. Karl Barth ^{GND} explains: "[T]he Bible constitutes itself as Canon. It is the Canon because it imposed itself upon the church as such, and continually does so."^[9] We have no yardstick with which to measure the Bible or to determine its canonical status. "No, the Bible is the Canon just because it is so. It is so by imposing itself as such."^[10]

The history of the development of the biblical canon already shows that the decision concerning which writings belong to the canon has an impact on the interpretation of the Bible as a whole. On the one hand, there are instances of intertextuality within and between the books of the Bible; on the other hand, the canon itself directs us not to read and interpret the biblical writings and individual texts in isolation but as part of the one Holy Scripture. With Martin Luther ^{GND}, this maxim finds expression in the thesis that Holy Scripture is its own interpreter. While the official teaching of the Lutheran Church has not defined the scope of the canon, the Council of Trent not only made a doctrinal determination but also established the Vulgate as the authoritative text. According to Catholic doctrine, only the doctrinal definition of the scope of the canon guarantees "that the interpreter can truly interpret Scripture 'in its entirety with all its parts'^[11] and thus receive it from God^[12] as a gift of salvation."^[13] However, the authoritative interpreter of the canon or Holy Scripture is the Church's magisterium.

Confessional writings in the Reformed Church also contain lists of canonical texts accompanied by a theological justification as to why the Bible should also be translated into modern national languages in order to spread the word of God. According to Alfred Schindler ^{GND}, "a 'fluid' demarcation of the canon [is highly compatible] with the belief in the word of God not *as*, but *in* the Bible."^[14] The Reformed tradition interprets *sola scriptura* in the sense of *tota scriptura*, which is why the determination of the scope of the canon is also of theological importance to them.

The post-Reformation churches emphasize the givenness, externality, and irrefutable authority of the divine word. In truth, however, they did not use a pre-existing canon. Rather, by referring to the Hebrew Bible whose books are arranged according to the model of the Septuagint, they "*created* a hybrid canon, that is, a canon that had never existed before and has since only existed in national translations."^[15] Different forms of the biblical canon thus mark and shape the various confessional identities to this day (cf. Art. Confession).

7. Canon und Scriptural Principle

According to classical Reformation doctrine, Scripture alone is the source and standard of Christian faith, Christian teaching, and Christian life. This is based on Luther's ^{GND} formula "*sola scriptura*,"^[16] which, of course, does not stand alone but belongs to a quartet of mutually explanatory *solus*-formulas: *Sola scriptura – solus Christus – sola gratia – sola fide*. Scripture alone is the source and standard of faith because and insofar as it testifies to Christ who alone is the source of salvation, namely, the Gospel that acquits sinners. The justification of the sinner is accomplished by grace for Christ's sake alone – and solely through faith in the Gospel as testified to by Scripture. For Luther, Scripture is the *principium* of theology, a teaching that presupposes that God is the actual author and interpreter of the Scriptures as well as the external and internal clarity of the biblical texts (*claritas scripturae*).

Through *sola scriptura*, reformation theology, on the one hand, elevated the status of Scripture above all other traditions. On the other hand, Luther declared that the Gospel was primarily an "oral proclamation" ("*mündlich Geschrei*")^[17] and not a written text. Although the proclamation of the Gospel in its distinctiveness and its relation to the law is bound by Scripture, Christianity is not a book religion.

8. "The Center of Scripture" – "Canon in a Canon"

Regardless of the long history of the Bible and its individual texts' origins as well as the diversity of traditions and voices within the Bible, the Reformation principle of Scripture presupposes that the Bible has an internal unity. This unity, however, is grounded in the person of Jesus Christ and in the Gospel that bears witness to him, which, although not identical with it, can be found in Scripture. According to Luther ^{GND}, the inner standard of Scripture and scripturality is "what motivates Christ" ("*was Christum treibet*"). The unity of Scripture is also referred to by the figurative expression "center of Scripture." The Protestant dogmatic theologian Johann Gerhard ^{GND} (1582–1637) calls Christ the *ultimus scopus* and the *centrum scripturae*.^[18] If Christ forms the center of Scripture, then its center lies outside of itself, just as the foundation and center of faith is not within but outside of itself insofar as it is founded in Christ or in God. Luther speaks of the *extra nos* of faith.

Talk about a *canon within the canon* emerged in the twentieth century. The New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann ^{GND} (1906–1998) understood this not as a specific body of texts in the Bible but as the Gospel of the justification of the ungodly as testified to by the Bible.^[19] All the writings of the New Testament are to be measured against this inner-biblical criterion. According to Käsemann, this criterion is derived from the letters of Paul as well as from the proclamation of the historical Jesus himself.

The way in which Christ is proclaimed so that the world is changed for the better cannot be equated with individual Bible texts. Rather, these texts are merely the authoritative historical testimonies (cf. art. Witness) of what, in Christian parlance, is called the Gospel. The message of Christ cannot, of course, be formulated apart from Scripture. It can only be rediscovered again and again through constant interpretation of Scripture, in order to be re-expressed in independently responsible theological statements or in proclamation. Only Scripture interpreted in this sense may be considered the norm of dogmatics. The current criterion of evangelical (*evangeliumsgemäßer*) theology (i.e., theology in accordance with the Gospel) is the extent to which the current consciousness of faith is determined by Scripture applied to the times and not, conversely, the interpretation of Scripture by the general spirit of the times.

9. Literal Normativity and Mediality

In recent systematic theology, a shift from literal normativity to mediality can be observed in the question of the canon.^[20] This shift essentially began with Friedrich Schleiermacher ^{GND} (1768–1834), who explained in his "Speeches on Religion" (1799) that it is a misunderstanding to assume that Christianity is based on a "closed codex of religion" ("*geschlossener Codex der Religion*"), as if the "slumber of the spirit" ("*Schlummer des Geistes*") were equivalent to its

death. The living spirit of God also testifies to itself outside the biblical canon. "The holy writings have become Scripture by their own power, but they prohibit no other book from also being or becoming Scripture, and whatever has been written with equal power they would gladly have associated with themselves."^[21]

The topic of scriptural interpretation (*Schriftlehre*) in recent dogmatics has increasingly migrated from prolegomena to pneumatology. However, the work of the Spirit is conveyed through different media. The topics of canon and scripture are therefore placed in the context of a comprehensive theology of the mediality of the communication of the Gospel, which is to be expanded beyond the classical topics of the means of salvation or the sacraments to a comprehensive theology of media.

Recommended Literature

For recommended literature, see the German version of this article.

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Citation Style

Körtner, Ulrich: „Canon“, Version 1.0, in: Online Lexicon for Systematic Theology, ISSN 3052-685X, 1 May 2026. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-113278>

Metadata

DOI	https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-113278
Creative Commons Licence Type	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs CC BY-NC-ND (4.0)
peer reviewed by	Stefan Alkier
Translator(s)	Dylan S. Belton
Index Theologicus (IxTheo)	Church , Confession , Faith , Revelation , Scripture , Tradition , Word of God
Subject Headings (LOC)	Church , Confession , Faith , Revelation , Scripture , Tradition , Word of God
Keyword	Church , Confession , Faith , Revelation , Scripture , Tradition , Word of God
Mentioned People	Athanasius of Alexandria , Karl Barth , Johann Gerhard , Adolf von Harnack , Irenaeus of Lyon , Ernst Käsemann , Martin Luther , Marcion , Saint Jerome , Alfred Schindler , Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher , Johann Salomo Semler , Notger Slenczka

KEYWORDS

Church

Confession

Faith

Revelation

Scripture

Tradition

Word of God