

How We Got Our Bible

THE PURPOSE OF THIS SERIES

This series will investigate the history of the inspiration of the Bible, the recognition of the Bible, the copying of the Bible, and the translation of the Bible. In summary, this series will explain where our English Bible came from.

Objectives

1. Give you confidence in our English translations
2. Help you understand why we have various English translations
3. Give you discernment for evaluating what others say about the Bible
 - *Example:* It is common to hear others claim the Bible has been changed
 - *Example:* Books and TV programs use extra-biblical literature, such as *The Gospel of Thomas*, to cast doubt on the Bible
4. Enable you to understand some of the issues discussed in Bible commentaries about the text of Scripture
 - *Example:* Some translations contain Mark 9:44 and 46, and other translations do not.
 - *Example:* Some translations do not contain the account of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11).
5. Enable you to respond to unbelievers who challenge the validity of our Bibles

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THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE

1. The Preparation of the Biblical Writers

God providentially and carefully prepared the writers of God's Word for this special task.

Jer. 1:5 "“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”"

Question: In what specific ways do you think God prepared the writers of Scripture?

1. Ancestry
2. Personality
3. Education
4. Vocabulary and writing style
5. Kept them from disqualifying evil
6. Protected them from enemies (Daniel and the lions' den)
7. Called them to their ministries as prophets or apostles

*By Steve Sherman, Pastor of Christian Fellowship Church, East Brunswick, NJ.
Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV).*

B.B. Warfield: The preparation of the writers was “physical, intellectual, spiritual, which must have attended them throughout their whole lives and indeed, must have had its beginning in their remote ancestors, and the effect of which was to bring the right men to the right places at the right times, with the right endowments, impulses, acquirements, to write just the books which were designed for them.”¹

Question: What were the unique backgrounds of some of the biblical writers? How did these backgrounds contribute to their preparation?

1. Moses received the highest education available in Egypt. This prepared him for writing the first five books of the OT.
2. The Lord gave David godly ancestors, including Boaz and Ruth. This was according to God’s plan of making David a man after His own heart, which was necessary for writing the many psalms he wrote. The experiences David had in often running for his life also contributed to his preparation for writing many of the psalms.
3. Paul received the highest training in the Jewish law. This was part of his preparation to write about the law and justification. It also prepared him to write in the very logical way he does in Romans, bringing in plentiful evidence from the OT for the points he makes.

2. The Superintendence of the Biblical Writers

Here we want to consider how God directed the biblical writers while they wrote.

2 Peter 1:19-21

21 “were carried along”

- The Greek word is used in a similar way in the following passage (in bold):

Acts 27:14–17 "But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and **were driven along**. Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship’s boat. After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they **were driven along**."

Question: How would you describe in your own words what the Holy Spirit did when he “moved” or “carried along” the biblical writers?

- Miraculous event
- Not dictation, for the most part
- The result is that the writings are truly words of man and words of God

Question: What other work of the Holy Spirit resulted in something that was fully human and fully divine?

1 Corinthians 2:7-13

¹ Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 155.

- 7 "we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God,"
- 10 "these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit."
- 13 "And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit,"

In summary, the Holy Spirit “carried along” the biblical writers and “taught” them the words they used. In this way God “breathed out” Scripture.

- **2 Tim. 3:16a** "All Scripture is breathed out by God"

K.S. Kantzer: “Biblical inspiration [is the]...work of the Holy Spirit by which, without setting aside their personalities and literary or human faculties, God so guided the authors of Scripture as to enable them to write exactly the words which convey His truth to men, and in doing so preserved their judgments from error in the original manuscripts.”²

Parts of Scripture appear to have possibly been dictated by God word-for-word

- In the OT prophets, the phrase, “Thus says the Lord,” occurs 351 times (ESV)

The majority of Scripture does not appear to have been dictated, but reflects the unique styles of the human authors.

The book titles and section headings that you find in most Bibles are not original, and therefore not inspired.

3. The History of Inspiration

The OT was written approximately between 1400 B.C. and 430 B.C.

- The first books to be written were the Pentateuch and apparently Job
- The last book to be written was Malachi near the time of Nehemiah’s ministry

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The OT was inspired mostly in Hebrew

- Only the consonants were written. No punctuation marks were used. In Hebrew, there are no upper and lower case letters.
- The majority of the OT was inspired at a time when Hebrew was written in **paleo-Hebrew script**
- **Example of paleo-Hebrew script**³
 - 11Q paleoLev
 - Leviticus 20:2-6
 - 2nd-1st-century B.C.

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² Kantzer, “The Communication of Revelation,” in *The Bible: The Living Word of Revelation*, ed. M. C. Tenney, 180.

³ The Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library, photographed by Shai Halevi, <https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/image/B-295277>

- After their return from the Babylonian exile (538 B.C.), the Jews adopted the Aramaic language and gradually began writing Hebrew in **Square script**.
- *Example of Square script*⁴
 - 4Q Deut
 - The 10 Commandments in Deuteronomy 5
 - 30-1 B.C.
- Presumably several OT books were originally written in Square script.

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Three passages were inspired in Aramaic—Jer 10:11; Dan 2:4-7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26

- *Example of Aramaic*⁵
 - 4Q tgJob
 - Part of Job
 - 1st century B.C. to 1st century A.D.
- A language that originated in Aram (Syria) among the Arameans
- It was most widely spoken in the 7th and 8th centuries B.C. when the Assyrian empire controlled much of the Ancient Near East
- When the Assyrian army came against King Hezekiah, the Assyrian Rabshakeh spoke demoralizing words in Hebrew to the people of Jerusalem. **2 Kings 18:26** "Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, and Shebna, and Joah, said to the Rabshakeh, 'Please speak to your servants in **Aramaic**, for we understand it. Do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall.'"
- Continued to be the most common language in the Ancient Near East at the time of the Babylonian exile
- The fact that, after the Babylonian exile, many of the Jews did not know Hebrew is seen in **Neh. 13:23–24** "In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and **they could not speak the language of Judah**, but only the language of each people."
- **Jer. 10:10–11** "But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation.

⁴ The Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library, photographed by Shai Halevi, <https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/image/B-314643>

⁵ The Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library, photographed by Shai Halevi, <https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/image/B-358468>

Thus shall you say to them [the nations]: “The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.””

- **Dan. 2:4** "Then the Chaldeans said to the king in Aramaic, **“O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation.”**”
- **Ezra 4:7–8** "In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. **Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:**"
- **Ezra 7:11–12** "This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel: **‘Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven. Peace...’**”

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The NT was written approximately between A.D. 45 and A.D. 95

- The first books to be written were probably Galatians and James
- The last book to be written was probably Revelation
 - Irenaeus testified to the time Revelation was written. Irenaeus was from Smyrna and received teaching directly from Polycarp, who had talked with the apostle John.
 - Irenaeus wrote, “John received the Revelation almost in our own time, toward the end of the reign of Domitian.”⁶ Domitian was emperor from A.D. 81-96. Thus, Irenaeus’ testimony places the writing of Revelation in the 90’s.

The NT was inspired in Greek

- *Example of Greek*⁷
 - P46
 - 1 Corinthians 13:2-11
 - approximately 200 A.D.
- Greek became the *lingua franca* (common language) of the Mediterranean area following its conquest by Alexander the Great (approximately 332 B.C.)⁸
- Greek was probably not the main language of Jesus and His apostles. However, being written in Greek, the New Testament was able to quickly spread through the Roman Empire with no language barriers.

⁶ *The ESV Study Bible*, 2453.

⁷ The Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, Digital Manuscript Collection, https://manuscripts.csntm.org/manuscript/Group/GA_P46

⁸ Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 81.

- The prologue of Luke was written in classical Greek, and the rest of the NT was written in Koine (common) Greek.
- Koine Greek was simpler than classical and suited for being spoken throughout the vast Greek and Roman empires
- Greek is a precise language. For example, its nouns have case endings that signify the grammatical function of the noun within a sentence. The preciseness of Greek makes it a perfect language for theological discourses like Romans.
- At the time the NT was inspired, Greek was written without spaces between words, since writing materials were expensive. It was written in all capital letters (called uncials), with no punctuation marks.

The writing materials commonly used when the Bible was inspired included....

- Papyrus
 - **2 John 1:12** "Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use **paper** and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete."
 - Made from the papyrus plant, a reed plant that grows along the Nile River
 - The English word 'paper' is derived from the Greek word for papyrus
 - Papyrus sheets could be joined in scrolls or books (called codices)
- Leather
- Parchment
 - **2 Tim. 4:13** "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments."
 - Parchment was made from animal skins. The skins were soaked in lime water to make them white. The younger the animal, the finer was the quality.
 - Pergamum was important as a center of parchment production.

Some human authors of Scripture wrote through a secretary (called an amanuensis)

Paul's letters are an example:

- **Rom. 16:22** "I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord."
- **Gal. 6:11** "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand."
- **1 Cor. 16:21–24** "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen."
- **2 Th. 3:17–18** "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."

In all, God inspired the Bible using around 50 human authors.

The result of inspiration was one unified book that is the very Word of God.

THE RECOGNITION OF THE BIBLE

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Question: How do we know which books are part of the Bible, and which ones are not?

Question: Why is this an important question?

- Matt. 4:4 "But he answered, "It is written, "“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.””"
- Deut. 4:2 "You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you." (also 12:32)
- We are responsible to preserve God’s written Word

To discuss the recognition of the Bible, you need to understand the meaning of the theological term, ‘canon.’ In general use, this word means a standard or norm. It has the following theological meaning:

“The canon of Scripture is the list of all the books that belong in the Bible” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 54).

Who has determined the canon, and how was it determined? God determined the canon by inspiring the books of the Bible. Every book He inspired is in the canon, and no others.

The official discussion the church had in the past regarding the canon is often mistaken for the initial and authoritative establishment of the canon. No activity of the church—including statements of church fathers, decrees of councils, etc.—created the canon. God created it.

How can we recognize which books are inspired by God? To answer that question, it is helpful to look back at how the Old and New Testament canons were recognized in the past.

1. Recognition of the Old Testament Canon

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From the beginning of inspiration, the inspired writings were collected and preserved

- Ex. 25:16 "And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you." (also Deut 10:2-5)
- Deut. 31:24–26 "When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, "Take

this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you."

- Josh. 24:25–26 "So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God."

The OT canon recognized by the Jews is the same as our OT canon. The Jews recognized the inspiration of the Old Testament books as the Holy Spirit testified to their spirits that these were inspired.

Some Old Testament books were recognized by other Old Testament books.

- a. The book of Micah was recognized by the book of Jeremiah

Jer. 26:17–18 "And certain of the elders of the land arose and spoke to all the assembled people, saying, "Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah: 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, " "Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.'"

- b. The book of Jeremiah was recognized by the book of Daniel

Dan. 9:2 "...I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years."

The Holy Spirit helped the Jews recognize what God had inspired as they also considered the human authors and compared writings with previous revelation.

There was a remarkable unity among the Jews regarding which writings were inspired.

Joseph, a Jewish historian writing during the latter part of the 1st century A.D., states that the Jews had only 22 sacred books.⁹ (The Jews combined some of our OT books, and Josephus also combined Ruth and Judges; Jeremiah and Lamentations.)

The way the Jews organized the inspired writings is somewhat different than the way we have organized them.

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Luke 24:44 "Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in **the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms** must be fulfilled.'"

Matt. 22:40 "On these two commandments depend all **the Law and the Prophets.**'"

Chronicles came at the end

⁹ Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.7-8 sections 37-39.

- **Luke 11:50–51** "so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah [2 Chron 24:20-21], who perished between the altar and the sanctuary."

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The Roman Catholic Church has more books (or portions of books) in their Old Testaments than we do. The Eastern Orthodox Church has even more than the Roman Catholic Church. The additional books are called the Apocrypha, a term that comes from the Greek word, *apokruphos*, which means "hidden."

The apocryphal books are Jewish writings, mostly written in Palestine between 300 B.C. and A.D. 100. The Jews did not recognize these books as inspired. So they were not included in the Hebrew Bible.

But after much of the church lost contact with the Jews, and heretics (e.g., Marcion) arose in the church claiming that certain OT books were not canonical, uncertainty grew about the OT canon.

Apocryphal books were included as an addendum in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint (LXX), in copies dating back to the 4th century A.D. The first Latin Bible (called the Vulgate) was translated by Jerome (c. 345-420) from the Greek Bible, and also included the Apocrypha. However, Jerome deemed only those books in the Jewish Bible to be canonical, and distinguished in the Latin Bible the "canonical books" and the "ecclesiastical books," treating the Apocrypha as secondary in status. Other scholars who, like Jerome, agreed with the Jewish canon included Melito, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, and Epiphanius.

Some other early translations and paraphrases of the Old Testament lacked the Apocrypha, including the Aramaic Targums and the earliest form of the Syriac Peshitta.

In 397, at the Council of Carthage, which Augustine attended, it was decided to accept the Apocrypha, except 1-2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh, as canonical, and anyone who disputed this decision was anathematized.

The Reformers denied the canonicity of the Apocrypha, saying it was unworthy and contradictory to the doctrines of the true canon. However, Luther said it was "profitable and good to read." The Bibles translated by the early Protestants included the Apocrypha, but set it apart from the canonical books of the Old Testament. These included the Coverdale Bible, the Geneva Bible, and the KJV. After much debate, the British and Foreign Bible Society decided in 1827 to exclude the Apocrypha from its Bibles. The American branch soon agreed. This set the pattern for English Bible from then on. The only Protestant churches today that use the Apocrypha are Anglican Churches.

The Apocrypha is published today in such translations as The Jerusalem Bible (Roman Catholic), The New English Bible (Anglican), and the New Revised Standard Version.

There are various indications that the apocryphal books were not inspired by God.

Question: What such indications can you find in these excerpts from the Apocrypha?

Tobit 12:6-10 Raphael called the two men aside privately and said to them: “Thank God! Give him the praise and the glory. Before all the living, acknowledge the many good things he has done for you, by blessing and extolling his name in song. Before all men, honor and proclaim God’s deeds, and do not be slack in praising him. ⁷ A king’s secret it is prudent to keep, but the works of God are to be declared and made known. Praise them with due honor. Do good, and evil will not find its way to you. ⁸ Prayer and fasting are good, but better than either is almsgiving accompanied by righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than abundance with wickedness. It is better to give alms than to store up gold; ⁹ for almsgiving saves one from death and expiates every sin. Those who regularly give alms shall enjoy a full life; ¹⁰ but those habitually guilty of sin are their own worst enemies.

- Salvation by the good work of almsgiving (9)
 - What OT passages teach that salvation is not by works, but by grace through faith?

2 Maccabees 12:40-45 Then under the tunic of each one of the dead they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was the reason these men had fallen. ⁴¹ So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; ⁴² and they turned to supplication, praying that the sin that had been committed might be wholly blotted out. The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had fallen. ⁴³ He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. ⁴⁴ For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. ⁴⁵ But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.

- Praying for the dead (42, 44). The deliverance of the dead from their sin (43, 45).
 - What doctrine taught in the OT is in contradiction? Salvation by faith in the God of grace
 - What is an OT passage that implies the believer enters heaven at death? Ps 23:6

The source of part of the Apocrypha can be seen to be worldly philosophy rather than the mind of God. For example, the hope for immortality taught in the Apocrypha was greatly influenced by Greek thought. And the highly developed teaching on angels taught in the Apocrypha is rooted in dualism.

The New Testament quotes most of the 39 books of the Old Testament as divinely authoritative, or at least alludes to them. The only exceptions are Ruth, Ezra, and Song of Solomon. Yet the New Testament neither quotes from nor alludes to a single Apocryphal book. It is inconceivable that the New Testament authors could have considered the Apocrypha as canonical and never quoted from nor alluded to any of them.

While the Protestant Reformers aligned themselves with the OT canon recognized by Jerome and the Jews, the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent (1546) declared that the Jewish Bible and Apocrypha together were authoritative Scripture. In their “Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures,” the council listed all the books in the Jewish Bible and the Apocrypha and wrote, “But if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition; and knowingly and deliberately condemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema.”¹⁰

Traditional Protestant View of the Canon	Traditional Roman Catholic View of the Canon
1. The church recognized the biblical books as inspired texts.	1. The church authorized the Bible.
2. The Bible and God’s Word created the church.	2. The church created the Bible.
3. The Bible alone is inspired.	3. The Bible and church tradition are authoritative.
4. Revelation has ceased.	4. Revelation is continuing.
5. The Apocrypha is not accepted as inspired.	5. The Apocrypha is accepted.

Chart taken from Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 108.

Though there is no record of how the Jews recognized the OT canon, some hints are found in the following statement Josephus made about the Jewish canon (bold added):

It therefore naturally, or rather necessarily, follows (seeing that with us it is not open to everybody to write the records, **and that there is no discrepancy in what is written**; seeing that, on the contrary, **the prophets alone had this privilege**, obtaining their knowledge of the most remote and ancient history **through the inspiration which they owed to God**, and committing to writing a clear account of the events of their own time just as they occurred)—it follows, I say, that we do not possess myriads of inconsistent books, conflicting with each other. Our books, those which are justly accredited, are but two and twenty, and contain the record of all time.

Of these, five are the books of Moses, comprising the laws and the traditional history from the birth of man down to the death of the lawgiver.... The prophets subsequent to Moses wrote the history of the events of their own times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.

From Artaxerxes to our own time the complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets.

We have given **practical proof of our reverence for our own Scriptures. For, although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a**

¹⁰ In Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 107.

syllable; and it is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them.¹¹

Josephus' statement suggests how the Jews recognized Scripture. They understood that Scripture...

- Does not contain contradictions
- Was written by a prophet or someone recognized to be writing with divine authority
- Originated through inspiration from God
- Was accepted by the Jews as authoritative material

Though we do not believe the Apocrypha is inspired and part of the canon, these books are helpful for understanding more about the historical background of the NT and the Jewish mindset in Jesus' day.

Sidenote about the Pseudepigrapha

The pseudepigrapha is a body of Jewish writings probably written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. They were never seriously considered canonical. The word, 'pseudepigrapha,' means "false writings." Many of these books falsely attribute themselves to people in the OT such as Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezra.

2. Recognition of the New Testament Canon

The apostles were Christ's formal, authorized, commissioned representatives.

John 20:21 "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.'"

As the apostles died, it was important that their teaching be preserved. The apostles were concerned about this.

1 Cor. 11:1-2 "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and **maintain the traditions** even as I delivered them to you."

- NASB "hold firmly to the traditions"
- 'Traditions' means instruction that has been handed down

2 Th. 2:15 "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to **the traditions** that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter."

- NIV "the teachings"

Gal. 1:9 "As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed."

So the written apostolic witness became increasingly crucial. God providentially preserved the inspired apostolic writings through local churches, pastors, copyists, and church councils.

Note: Not every apostolic writing was inspired.

¹¹ Josephus, *Contra Apion*, 1.7-8 sections 37-42, in Wegner, 117.

- *Question:* Can you think of an apostolic writing referred to in Scripture that was not preserved?
 - 1 Cor. 5:9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—
- *Question:* The apostles occasionally taught error. Can you think of an example?
 - Gal 2:11-14

The apostolic witness was sometimes written down by others, called prophets.

- **Eph. 2:19–20** “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and **prophets**, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,”

The NT prophets operated under the supervision of the apostles (**1 Cor 14:36-38**).

- *Question:* What books of the New Testament were written down by prophets rather than apostles?
 - Mark, Luke, Hebrews, James, Jude
- *Question:* What do we know about the relationships between these prophets and the apostles?

So the inspiration of the New Testament books is partially indicated by their authorship. It is also indicated by their harmony with previous revelation (Acts 17:11).

Ultimately, the inspiration of the New Testament books has been indicated to the church by the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.

- *Definition from Trevor Craigen:* “The internal witness of the Spirit that produces a fullness of conviction about the certainty and reliability of Truth, the Word of God, in the mind and heart of the believer”¹²
- It is a work of the Holy Spirit that gives us certainty that the Bible is the Word of God
- 1 John 2:19-21, 26-27
- **1 Th. 2:13** “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”
- Also 2 Cor 4:3-6

As a result of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, there has been a stunning unanimity in the church regarding the canon of the New Testament.

Before we look at the development of this unanimity, consider this question. What all would need to happen after a New Testament book was inspired by God, before it would be recognized by all of the church as Scripture?

1. The original recipient would need to recognize its great significance
2. The original recipient would need to communicate to others its great significance

¹² Unpublished syllabus for “Theology II” at The Master’s Seminary.

3. Copies would need to be distributed
4. This would need to continue happening until all parts of the church received a copy
5. All parts of the church would need to recognize it as Scripture

How long would you expect this to take for all 27 books? Keep in mind that the system of communications was poor in comparison with modern standards, copies were made by hand, and the copies needed to be made extremely accurately.

Some NT books were quickly recognized by at least part of the church. Other books took longer to be recognized by the whole church.

- **1 Tim. 5:18** “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain [Deut 25:4],’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages [Luke 10:7].’”
- **2 Pet. 3:15–16** “And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in **all his letters** when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do **the other Scriptures.**”

For the rest of our study, let’s survey the years A.D. 90- 419. (I am indebted for much of this material to Dr. Robert Thomas of The Master’s Seminary, and his syllabus for New Testament Introduction.)

Clement of Rome

Around the time the last New Testament books were being written (A.D. 90 or so), extrabiblical writings were already referring to passages in New Testament books and viewing them as having the same authority as the Old Testament. Clement of Rome is one such author. He lived from A.D. 30 until A.D. 100. He was overseer of the church in Rome from 88-97. His writings reveal knowledge of at least one synoptic Gospel (Matthew, Mark, or Luke) and 1 Corinthians. He also shows familiarity with Hebrews and Romans. He has probable references to Acts, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, and James, and possible references to Colossians and 2 Timothy. These are 14 out of the 27 New Testament books!

Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius wrote seven letters on his way to Rome to be martyred. His martyrdom came some time during the last decade of the reign of Trajan, the Roman emperor (A.D. 98-117). Six of these letters were to churches in various cities, and the seventh was to Polycarp, overseer of the church in Smyrna. In these writings, Ignatius shows a knowledge of many New Testament books. He was familiar with most of Paul’s epistles, especially Romans and 1 Corinthians. His knowledge of Ephesians and Colossians is very probable, and he probably knew 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and the Pastoral Epistles. He may allude to James or 1 Peter. He knew the Gospels of Matthew and John.

The Didache

Also known as, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, this book was written around A.D. 100.¹³ It uses Matthew and Luke and shows a familiarity with most of the New Testament books.

The Role of Doctrinal Disputes

Unanimity regarding the canon of the New Testament arose fairly quickly out of necessity. Doctrinal disputes arose quickly among early Christians. Without much knowledge of the New Testament writings, this is very understandable. In the doctrinal disputes, both sides appealed to the highest authority they knew to prove their points of view. Surprisingly, from what we can tell, the earliest of these appeals to refer to New Testament writings as “Scripture” came from false teachers. Basilides of Alexandria, the founder of a Gnostic sect around the beginning of the 2nd century, is the first one known to introduce NT quotations in this manner. Other heretics followed his lead as they appealed more and more to the authority of the New Testament in order to try to persuade people with their false teachings.

This tactic of the heretics forced true Christianity to do the same. Since the heretics through their appeals were marking out the books they considered canonical, it was necessary for true Christians to define the body of truth they considered canonical.

The Canon of Marcion

In about A.D. 140, a heretic named Marcion published his own list of NT writings. He included a shortened Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul’s epistles. (He excluded the Pastoral epistles.) This canon was widely received because there was already a great hunger in Christians to tie down the limits of the New Testament canon. Marcion recognized this hunger and moved to give his answer first.

The true church had to respond and give its own answer to the question, “Which books should be include?” Otherwise, many worthy books would have been excluded from recognition.

The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians

Polycarp died about A.D. 155. In this letter, he makes more references to New Testament books than any other literature of this period. The letter shows an acquaintance with most of the New Testament. In one statement he combines Psa 4:4 and Eph 4:26 and calls them, “Scripture.”¹⁴

Summary of A.D. 70-170

¹³ Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 137.

¹⁴ Polycarp, *To the Philippians*, 12.1.

The authority of the apostles was accepted as equal to that of the Old Testament. Apostolic writings were read in church services along with those of the Old Testament. By the end of this period, the principle of a fixed and written New Testament canon was established.

The extent of this New Testament canon was known to include the four gospels and the epistles of Paul. The remainder was still vague.

Of our 27 books, only 2 Peter remained unnoticed during this period. There was only one book not in our 27 that retained some favor regarding canonical recognition. That was the Apocalypse of Peter. However, it was by no means accepted by all sectors of the church.

After 170, there no longer was a question about the existence of a New Testament canon. The focus fell upon what the extent of that canon was.

The Muratorian Fragment

Also called the *Muratorian Canon*, this document was probably written about A.D. 170. Perhaps this document was written in response to the truncated canon of Marcion. It lists the New Testament books which are to be accepted as canonical and notes certain ones that are to be excluded from such a list. Sadly, the entire document did not survive. The fragment we have includes 21 or 22 of our 27.

The author of the *Muratorian Fragment* “speaks throughout of a received and general opinion. He does not suggest a novel theory about the Apostolic books, but states what was held to be certainly known. He does not hazard an individual judgment, but appeals to the practice of ‘the Catholic [universal] Church.’”¹⁵

Irenaeus

Irenaeus spent his early years in Asia Minor. During this time he was a pupil of Polycarp, who had been a disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus then taught for a while in Rome. Later he became overseer of the church in Lyons, Gaul (the Roman name for France). He died in about A.D. 203.

Irenaeus wrote a book, *Against All Heresies*, in which he proceeds “to adduce proofs from the Scriptures” to provide “the means of combating and vanquishing those who, in whatever manner, are propagating falsehood.” The “proofs from the Scriptures” are derived mostly from the New Testament, and include at least 21 of the 27 New Testament books.

Origen

Origen lived from A.D. 186-254. He devoted his long life to a study of the Scriptures, giving specific attention to issues of canonicity. After traveling widely throughout the Christian world and acquainting himself with the biblical material used at each location, he formulated a list of NT books “accepted universally” by Christians, and a list of NT books “held in

¹⁵ B. F. Westcott, in Wegner, 142.

dispute by some.” Regarding the NT canon, he wrote, “There are four Gospels only uncontroverted in the Church of God spread under heaven. Peter has left one Epistle generally acknowledged; and perhaps a second, for that is disputed. John wrote the Apocalypse and an Epistle of very few lines; and, it may be, a second and third, since all do not admit them to be genuine.” Of Hebrews, he writes that “the thoughts are the thoughts of the Apostle Paul; ... but who it was who wrote the Epistle, God only knows certainly.” Elsewhere he quotes James and Jude, but at the same time alludes to the doubts entertained as to their canonicity.

Origen alludes to various apocryphal books and either questions or rejects their canonicity. The books he acknowledged in the highest sense as being Scripture include the four gospels, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, the 13 epistles of Paul, and Revelation. Hebrews is only slightly, if at all, behind these in authority. After deliberation, he seems to have endorsed James, 2 Peter, and Jude. His position on 2 and 3 John is debatable.

Summary of A.D. 170-303

Though precise limits were not yet defined, it was assumed by everyone that the contents of the New Testament were known and recognized as authoritative. The writers of the 3rd century were a little more definite in this matter than those of the end of the 2nd century.

By the end of the period, the apocryphal writings, including the Apocalypse of Peter, had all but disappeared as candidates for canonicity.

In the heretical challenges to orthodox Christianity during the period, each side appealed to the same Scriptures.

Persecution by the Roman Emperor Diocletian

In 303, because of his determination that all his subjects should worship him exclusively as god, Diocletian issued an edict that all sacred books be destroyed by being burned. Refusal to comply was punishable by death. This was an empire-wide effort which caused Christians to give an even closer look at which books they considered to be canonical. If a person chose to obey God rather than man, he was forced to hide the canonical works at the risk of losing his life.

Eusebius of Caesarea

A very significant person who lived through this persecution was Eusebius of Caesarea (270-340). He was overseer of the church in Caesarea before 315, and the outstanding church historian of the early centuries. The persecution came to an end when Diocletian’s rule came to an end and Constantine became emperor. In 313, Constantine declared Christianity to be a legal religion. He then requested Eusebius to make him fifty copies of the New Testament. This was further incentive for the church to settle the question of the New Testament canon. It is not surprising that Eusebius devotes much space in his famous *Church History* to the question of which books are in the canon and which are not.

Eusebius divided early Christian writings which claimed to be apostolic into three categories: the acknowledged books, the disputed books, and the heretical books. To be in the first category, a book's authenticity had to be undisputed and its writer had to possess apostolic authority. Eusebius included in the first category all the present 27 except James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and possibly Revelation, which he included in the second category.

Athanasius

Athanasius was overseer of the church in Alexandria. In his Festal Letter of 365, a communication which customarily set the date for Easter each year, he presented his judgment on the matter of the New Testament canon. He listed the 27 books of the present canon and had strong words forbidding the use of any other books such as the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*.

Church Councils

In the next several decades, there was extensive discussion of the canon in various sections of the Christian world. The first discussion by a representative provincial council was the Council of Hippo in A.D. 393. Augustine took part in it. The decisions of this council have been lost, but were reaffirmed at the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397. The judgment of Augustine, which also reflects that of Jerome in his translation of the Latin Vulgate at about this same time, is reflected in the decree of this council: “[It is decreed] that nothing except the canonical Scriptures be read in the church under the name of divine Scriptures.... Of the New Testament the four gospels, Acts, thirteen epistles of St. Paul, the epistle of the same to the Hebrews, Peter (2), John (3), James, Jude, Apocalypse.” These are the 27 books we recognize today. In A.D. 419 at another Council of Carthage, this decree was confirmed. General accord with this decision was evidenced in the practice of all the church from this point on.

The Issues with which the Early Church Grappled in Seeking to Recognize the NT Canon

From early church writings, it appears the early church considered the following:

1. Was the book written by an apostle, or associated with an apostle?
2. Did it agree with the teaching of the apostles?
3. Was it widely, if not universally, accepted in the church?
4. Does it have a self-authenticating divine nature?¹⁶

Hebrews

The Eastern church ascribed it to Paul and accepted it into the canon on that basis, but the Western church was reluctant because Tertullian assigned authorship to Barnabas.

¹⁶ Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 148. Robert L. Plummer, *The Story of Scripture: How We Got Our Bible and Why We Can Trust It*, 65.

Since the author does not identify himself and disclaims being one of the apostles (2:3), the book was suspect among those in the West who were not aware of the original acceptance of the book in the East.¹⁷

The fact that the heretical Montanists appealed to Hebrews to support some of their erroneous views slowed its acceptance in orthodox circles.¹⁸

The Western church came to believe Hebrews is Pauline.

Even if Paul is not the author, it is associated with the apostles (2:3; 13:23).

It is apostolic in content.

James

The original readers and those after them could verify whether this was the James of the apostolic circle, the brother of Jesus (Acts 15:13; Gal 1:19). But the Western church was more distanced from this information.

The teaching on justification and works was thought by some to conflict with the apostle Paul's teaching of justification by faith, but came to be properly understood as consistent.

2 Peter

There is a notable difference in style compared with 1 Peter, which led some to question if Peter wrote it. However, this can be accounted for by Peter's use of a scribe in 1 Peter (5:12) and the difference in time, topic, and recipients. Similarities of content with Peter's speeches recorded in Acts support his authorship.

Once the apostle Peter was understood to have authored the book, there was little opposition in recognizing it as Scripture.

2 & 3 John

The writer identifies himself only as "the elder."

They had a limited circulation.

Their similarity in style and message to 1 John, which was widely accepted, made it obvious they were from John the apostle. Who else was so familiar to the early Asian believers that he could write authoritatively under the affectionate title of "the elder"?

The apostle Peter also called himself an elder (1 Pet 5:1).

Jude

¹⁷ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*, 150.

¹⁸ Geisler and Nix, 150.

The dispute centered mainly around the references to the pseudepigraphal Book of Enoch (Jude 14-15) and a possible reference to the Assumption of Moses (Jude 9).¹⁹

The pseudepigraphal quotes are not essentially different from citations made by Paul of non-Christian poets (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; Tit 1:12). In neither case are the books cited as authoritative, nor does the quote vouch for everything in the book—it merely cites a truth contained in the book.²⁰

In summary, these books were spoken against by some of the early church Fathers. This was usually because of a lack of communication or because of misinterpretations which had attached themselves to these books. Once the truth was known by all, they were fully and finally recognized as part of the canon, just as they had been recognized by Christians at the very beginning.

¹⁹ Geisler and Nix, 152.

²⁰ Geisler and Nix, 153.