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The Historic Reliability of the Old Testament

By Josh McDowell

Is the Bible accurate in its description of persons, places, and events? That question is crucial. If the Bible is to be taken seriously, then the recording of historical events must be accurate. We cannot trust the theological observations of writers who cannot report historical events correctly.

The great biblical scholar F. F. Bruce echoed these thoughts:

> That Christianity has its roots in history is emphasized in the church's earliest creeds, which fix the supreme revelation of God at a particular point in time, when "Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord… suffered under Pontius Pilate." This historical "once-for-all-ness" of Christianity, which distinguishes it from those religious and philosophical systems which are not specially related to any particular time, makes the reliability of the writings which purport to record this revelation a question of first-rate importance.[1]

We will see that historical events recorded in the Old Testament are accurate as far as we can determine from present external evidence. (There are some events described in the Bible for which there is as yet no external historical evidence. Obviously the lack of evidence cannot be seen as a mark against the historical reliability of the Old Testament.)

The chronology of the history of ancient Israel is an issue that is hotly debated by archaeologists, historians, and others, and there is no consensus about these matters. We will review several possible chronologies in this section. But whatever view you follow, one thing is clear: The historical facts that the Bible mentions are totally reliable, and the model must be started by taking into account these facts rather than criticizing them from some outside position. The following examples will confirm the accuracy of the Bible in the more or less generally accepted chronology.

We must emphasize that we do not believe that the Bible is the Word of God merely because it records history accurately. Correct historical reporting does not determine inspiration. One cannot have credible inspiration, however, with faulty historical records.

Old Testament History

Biblical scholar John Bright correctly points out the Bible's own high view of history:

> The genius of the Old Testament faith does not lie in its idea of God or in the elevation of its ethical teachings. Rather, it lies in its understanding of history, specifically of Israel's history, as the theatre

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of God's purposive activity. The Old Testament offers a theological interpretation of history. A concern with the meaning of history, and of specific events within history, is one of its most characteristic features. It records a real history, and it interprets every detail of that history in the light of Yahweh's sovereign purpose and righteous will…. The Old Testament consistently views Israel's history as one that is guided on to a destination by the word and will of her God.[2]

Archaeology and Old Testament Times

(see table of countries and dates on our website www.theologymatters.com)

R. K. Harrison, noted Old Testament scholar and historian, emphasized the important role of archaeology in affirming the historical reliability of the Old Testament:

> Archaeology must not be regarded as the sole determining consideration in matters of historical criticism, since it, too, is beset with its own kind of problems. These include poor excavating techniques in earlier days, the varied interpretation of specific artifacts, and the difficulty of establishing an assured chronological framework into which events can be placed with confidence. Archaeology is in no sense an adequate "control" mechanism by which OT historic sequences stand or fall.
>
> Nevertheless, archaeological discoveries have helped enormously in proving the historicity of certain OT events and personages, and in other areas have furnished an authentic social and cultural background against which many OT narratives can be set with assurance.[3]

Now we will briefly survey the Old Testament, showing some historical and archaeological evidence that gives further testimony to the reliability of biblical events. We will separate our survey into three major historical periods: the Middle Bronze Age (1950-1550 B.C.**),** the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 B.C.), and the Iron Age (1200-330 B.C.).

The Middle Bronze Age

Old Testament scholar D. J. Wiseman shows how archaeology has helped confirm early biblical history from the Middle Bronze Age:

> The Patriarchs fit best into the early Middle Bronze Age (MBA I), though their association with the Amorites or other folk-movements (including early Hapiru) known from contemporary texts cannot be proved. The Genesis narrative accords well with the archaeologically known occupation of the city-states that were then a dominant feature of Palestine. The occupation of Bethel, Shechem, Hebron (Kirjath-Arba), and the Dead Sea region of Sodom and Gomorrah is confirmed, as is that of the Negeb in southwest Palestine where flocks and herds (cf. Genesis 18:7; 20:1; 24:62) and grain crops (Genesis 26:12; 37:7) are traced in MBA I. There is valuable evidence of the verisimilitude [quality of appearing to be true] of the patriarchal personal and place names at this time. Thus, the name "Abram" occurs in a text from Dilbat *(Aba[m]rama)* and Aburahana (Abraham) and Zabilan (Zebulon) in Egyptian execration texts….Other texts from these towns and from Alalah (from the eighteenth to the fifteenth century), Ur, Ras Shamra (fourteenth century), and Nuzi in Assyria (fifteenth century) throw considerable light on the patriarchal social customs. They show that it was usual for a childless couple to adopt an heir and then displace him at the birth of a real son (Genesis 15:4). According to her marriage contract, a barren woman was to provide her husband with a slave-girl to bear a son. Marriages were arranged for public purposes by the rulers of Ugarit and Qatna, as well as by Egyptian kings, and this may be reflected in the adventures of Sarah (Genesis 20) and Rebekah (Genesis 26). The special position of the first-born son (cf. Genesis 21:10ff.; 48:14ff.), the bridegroom "asking" for a daughter as bride, the use of betrothal and bride-gifts (Genesis 34:12), and the stipulation of marriage contracts that a man might take a third wife only if the first two were barren or take a second wife only if the first failed to give birth within seven years explain incidents in Genesis.[4]

Biblical archaeologist William F. Albright confirmed the historical and archaeological accuracy of the Old Testament during the patriarchal period:

> Until recently it was the fashion among biblical historians to treat the patriarchal sagas of Genesis as though they were artificial creations of Israelite scribes of the Divided Monarchy or tales told by imaginative rhapsodists around Israelite campfires during the centuries following their occupation of the country. Eminent names among scholars can be cited for regarding every item of Genesis 11-50 as reflecting late invention, or at least retrojection of events and conditions under the Monarchy into the remote past, about which nothing was thought to have been really known to the writers of later days....

Archaeological discoveries since 1925 have changed all this. Aside from a few diehards among older scholars, there is scarcely a single biblical historian who has not been impressed by the data supporting the historicity of patriarchal tradition.[5]

The Late Bronze Age

The Late Bronze Age deals with the period from 1550-1200 B.C. This is one area in which archaeology has been able to confirm the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites. The Bible records that Joshua conquered Canaan through a series of battles.

In the past many liberal scholars believed that the Israelites slowly and peacefully infiltrated the central hill country of Canaan. Those scholars rejected the biblical account. Paul Lapp gives the background of the situation.

> The [Canaan] conquest provides another example of the search for connections between biblical and historical-archaeological material. This concerns an event for which there is a considerable amount of archaeological evidence, a great amount of detailed description in the biblical sources, and volumes of diverse opinions and hypotheses produced by modern scholars.[6]

Excavation in the cities of Bethel, Lachish, and Debir showed that the biblical account was correct. Canaan was taken through conquest; all of those sites revealed destruction around 1200 B.C. Lapp concludes:

> The archaeological evidence supports the view that the biblical traditions developed from an actual historical conquest under Joshua in the late thirteenth century B.C.[7]

The Iron Age

Since the Iron Age is so much closer to our time period, there is much more historical and archaeological evidence in support of the biblical events recorded of that time period (1200-330 B.C.). Below we have reproduced a summary of significant archaeological finds confirming biblical narratives:

> From this period onward, historical confirmation of the OT narratives is a much simpler matter, due to the comparative availability of extra-biblical evidence. The inscribed stele of Benhadad I, found in 1940 at a north Syrian site, has furnished general confirmation of the Syrian list in 1 Kings 15:18, without, however, identifying the Rezon who founded the Damascene dynasty or being specific about the number of Benhadads who ruled in Damascus. The discovery of the Moabite Stone in 1868 illustrated the vigor that Omri of Israel (c. 880-873 B.C.) displayed toward neighboring nations, and not least toward the Moabites. At this time Israel was referred to in Assyrian records at *Bit-Humri* (House of Omri). Omri's successors were known as *mar-Humri* or "offspring of Omri." "Ahab the Israelite" was mentioned in the Monolith Inscription of Shalmaneser III (c. 858-824 B.C.) as the leader of a powerful military group....

The discovery of D. J. Wiseman in 1956 of four additional tablets of the Babylonian Chronicle in the archives of the British Museum provided the first extrabiblical confirmation of the capture of Jerusalem in 597 B.C., dating it precisely on the second of Adar (March 15-16). Besides mentioning the defeat of the Egyptian forces at Carchemish in 605, the tablets preserved an account of a previously unrecorded battle between Egypt and Babylon in 601, in which both sides suffered heavy losses. This material thus confirms the OT tradition that Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 597 and again in 587.[8]

Clifford Wilson observes how archaeological discoveries have confirmed the biblical account of the Syrian invasion of Israel:

> It is interesting that in 1 Chronicles 5:26 we read that God stirred up the spirit of Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, but he is also referred to there by the name Pul. At first this seems to be a mistake; then we look again and notice that a singular verb is used in association with the two names. It turns out that Pullu was the throne name adopted by Tiglath-pileser when he became king of Babylon. He took this Babylonian name to avoid giving offense to the Babylonian people. The casual Bible reference is a remarkable piece of local color, and it is this sort of evidence that consistently reminds us that the Bible prophets and recorders lived against the backgrounds claimed for them. They confidently referred to kings and customs of the people with whom they and their leaders were in direct contact….

Let's change contexts for a moment. Who would know the titles of army officers in World War II, or in the wars fought in Korea or Vietnam? Only those who had been in those conflicts or who had direct contact with those who had been there. The way these Bible writers confidently and consistently use the titles of the enemy is a clear pointer to the fact that they were writing against the backgrounds claimed for them by the Bible.[9]

Some Reversals in Old Testament Criticism

Until this century with its archaeological discoveries, it was believed that Moses could not have written the first five books of the Old Testament because writing was said to be virtually unknown. The consensus was that Moses could not have written the first five books of the Old Testament because of the lack of the widespread use of writing or his lack of interest in recording Israel's history.

Modern discoveries, however, show that writing was in common use prior to the time of Moses. Moses did have

the capacity to write the first five books. D. J. Wiseman observes:

> Well before the end of the second millennium the pressures of trade and need for communication led to the widespread use of this simple form of writing (e.g., in marking personal objects; cf. stone inscriptions of Ahiram). Thus, by the time of the entry of the Hebrews into Canaan in the Late Bronze Age they would be confronted, if not already familiar, with at least five different forms of writing systems used for eight or more languages: (1) Egyptian hieroglyphs (Beth-shan, Chinnereth); (2) the Byblos syllabic script; (3) "Proto-Hebrew" (Lachish, Hazor); (4) Akkadian (Mesopotamian) cuneiform; and (5) the Ugaritic alphabetic script (found also at Beth-Shemesh).[10]

This is echoed by Old Testament authority Cyrus Gordon, who wrote:

> The excavations at Ugarit have revealed a high material and literary culture in Canaan prior to the emergence of the Hebrews. The educational system was so advanced that dictionaries in four languages were compiled for the use of scribes, and the individual words were listed in their Ugaritic, Babylonian, Sumerian, and Hurrian equivalents. The beginnings of Israel are rooted in a highly cultural Canaan…. Canaan in the days of the Patriarchs was the hub of a great international culture.[11]

The Hittites

The Hittites, mentioned some fifty times in the Old Testament, were considered for a long time to be a biblically fabricated people. That is, the biblical references to the Hittites used to be regarded as historically worthless. John Elder comments on modern confirmation of the Hittites:

> One of the striking confirmations of Bible history to come from the science of archaeology is the "recovery" of the Hittite peoples and their empires. Here is a people whose name appears again and again in the Old Testament, but who in secular history had been completely forgotten and whose very existence was considered to be extremely doubtful…. In Genesis 23:10, it is told that Abraham bought a parcel of land for a burying place from Ephron the Hittite. In Genesis 26:34, Esau takes a Hittite girl for a wife, to the great grief of his mother. In the Book of Exodus, the Hittites are frequently mentioned in the lists of people whose land the Hebrews set out to conquer. In Joshua 11:1-9, the Hittites join in the confederation of nations that try to resist Joshua's advance, only to be defeated by the waters of Merom. In Judges, intermarriage occurs between the Hebrews and the Hittites. In 1 Samuel 26, Hittites enroll in David's army, and during the reign of Solomon he makes slaves of the Hittite element in his kingdom and allows his people to take Hittite wives. But until the investigations of modern archaeologists, the Hittites remained a shadowy and undefined people.[12]

Archaeologist A. H. Sayce was the first scholar to identify the Hittite people from a nonbiblical source, the monuments. In 1876 he released his information and revolutionized critical theory concerning the Hittites.

Since Sayce's time in the last century, much information about the Hittites has been discovered, confirming again the historical accuracy of the Old Testament. Fred H. Wight concludes:

> Now the Bible picture of this people fits in perfectly with what we know of the Hittite nation from the monuments. As an empire they never conquered the land of Canaan itself, although Hittite local tribes did settle there at an early date. Nothing discovered by the excavators has in any way discredited the biblical account. Scripture accuracy has once more been proved by the archaeologists.[13]

Summary and Conclusion

After examining some of the historical and archaeological evidence in favor of the historical reliability of the Old Testament, we conclude with several observations:

1. The persons, places, and events listed during the different periods of Old Testament history match up well with the facts and evidence from history and archaeology.

2. Recent developments in textual criticism give examples of reversals by liberal critics who dismissed Old Testament passages for lack of evidence and then were forced by new evidence to accept them as historically reliable.

3. We first believe the Old Testament to be historically reliable because of the testimony of Jesus Christ, God in human flesh, whose claims were validated by his resurrection from the dead. Old Testament authority John Bright summarized it like this:

> I am quite unable to get around the fact. . . that the Old Testament was authoritative Scripture for Jesus himself. Jesus knew no Scripture save the Old Testament, no God save its God; it was this God whom he addressed as "Father."... The very fact that the Old Testament was normative Scripture to Jesus, from which he understood both his God and (however we interpret his self-consciousness) himself, means that it must in some way be normative Scripture for us too.[14]

The Historical Reliability of the New Testament

The New Testament is primarily a record of the salvation work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is not primarily a historical record. Yet when the New Testament addresses itself to historical issues, it is accurate and reliable.

Much of the older New Testament criticism did not have the vital testimony of archaeological evidence available today. Archaeologist William F. Albright observed:

> The form-critical school founded by M. Dibelius and R. Bultmann a generation before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has continued to flourish without the slightest regard for the Dead Sea Scrolls. In other words, all radical schools in New Testament criticism which have existed in the past or which exist today are prearchaeological, and are, therefore, since they were built *in der Luft* ["in the air"], quite antiquated today.[15]

This chapter reviews some of the important archaeological discoveries that confirm the New Testament view of the first-century world. We will first discuss the life and work of New Testament archaeologist-historian Sir William Ramsey and then review several important archaeological and historical finds that affirm the reliability of the New Testament.

Sir William Ramsey

Sir William Ramsey is an example of how an honest scholar of history can change his entire presuppositional perspective when faced by incontrovertible evidence from history and archaeology. Ramsey began his historical research toward the end of the nineteenth century. When he began his research he based it on the German (Tűbingen) liberal/critical school of thought, which taught that the New Testament was not written in the first century and was not historically reliable. Instead, it was an invention of the second-century church. Although the New Testament book of Acts contained a variety of supposedly present-tense historical references, liberal critics rejected its historicity and declared it a fabrication.

As a young historian, Ramsey determined to develop an independent historical and geographical study of first-century Asia Minor. Assuming the unreliability of the book of Acts, he ignored its historical allusions in his studies. The amount of usable historical information concerning first-century Asia Minor, however, was too little for him to proceed very far with his work. That led him, almost in desperation, to consult the book of Acts. He discovered that it was true to first-century history. Here are Ramsey's own words chronicling his change of mind:

> I may fairly claim to have entered on this investigation without prejudice in favor of the conclusion which I shall now seek to justify to the reader. On the contrary, I began with a mind unfavorable to it, for the ingenuity and apparent completeness of the Tűbingen theory had at one time quite convinced me. It did not then lie in my line of life to investigate the subject minutely, but more recently I found myself brought into contact with the Book of Acts as an authority for the topography, antiquities and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth.[16]

Ramsey's studies led him to conclude that "Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness,[17] and "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy…this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."[18]

From the experience of Ramsey we see that the New Testament writer Luke, author of a large portion of the New Testament (Luke and Acts) and an eyewitness of many events during the growth of the first-century church, was a careful historian.

The fact that many historical details, national boundaries, and government structures in Asia Minor were different in the second century from what they had been in the first makes it still more reasonable to conclude that the accurate author of Luke and Acts was a first-century author, not a second-century one.

Acts 14:1-6, for example, was in disrepute historically for many years. The passage implies that Lystra and Derbe were in Lycaonia but Iconium was not. Later Roman writers...contradicted the passage, asserting that Iconium was in Lycaonia. For years this was used by the critical school to show the historical unreliability of Acts.

In 1910, however, Sir William Ramsey discovered a first-century inscription declaring that the first-century Iconium was under the authority of Phrygia, not Lycaonia. It was only in the second century that territorial boundaries changed and Iconium came under Lycaonian rule. A first-century writer would be aware of this historical detail; a second-century writer could have been ignorant of it. Ramsey's discovery was another confirmation of the historical reliability of the New Testament.

The Census in the Gospel of Luke

For years New Testament critics denied the historical reliability of the account about the Roman census recorded in Luke 2. Critics saw this as an excuse invented for Mary and Joseph to be in Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus. They believed that second-century New Testament writers had to fabricate a fulfillment to the Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Luke wrote:

> Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David; in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. (Luke 2:1-5)

For many years there was no evidence of a census at that time. Jesus was born sometime before 4 B.C. A census was taken under Quirinius in A.D. 6 or 7, but there was no evidence for an earlier one that could correspond with the date of Jesus' birth. Many critics assumed that this was another historical error of some second-century writer who called himself Luke and claimed to have "checked his facts." However, what was eventually discovered revealed Luke's integrity and reflected poorly on the critics. Biblical scholar Gleason L. Archer chronicles the problem and its solution:

> Luke 2:1 tells of a decree from Caesar Augustus to have the whole "world" *(oikoumene* actually means all the world under the authority of Rome) enrolled in a census report for taxation purposes. Verse 2 specifies which census taking was involved at the time Joseph and Mary went down to Bethlehem, to fill out the census forms as descendants of the Bethlehemite family of King David. This was the first census undertaken by Quirinius (or "Cyrenius") as governor (or at least as acting governor) of Syria. Josephus mentions no census in the reign of Herod the Great (who died in 4 B.C.) but he does mention one taken by "Cyrenius" *(Antiquities* 17.13.5) soon after Herod Archelaus was deposed in A.D. 6: "Cyrenius, one that had been consul, was sent by Caesar to take account of people's effects in Syria, and to sell the house of Archelaus." (Apparently the palace of the deposed king was to be sold and the proceeds turned over to the Roman government.)
>
> If Luke dates the census in 8 or 7 B.C., and if Josephus dates it in A.D. 6 or 7, there appears to be a discrepancy of about fourteen years. Also, since Saturninus (according to Tertullian in *Contra Marcion* 4:19) was legate of Syria from 9 B.C. to 6 B.C., and Quintilius Varus was legate from 7 B.C. to A.D. 4 (note the one-year overlap in these two terms!), there is doubt as to whether Quirinius was ever governor of Syria at all.
>
> By way of solution, let it be noted first of all that Luke says this was a "first" enrollment that took place under Quirinius *(haute apographe prote egeneto).* A "first" surely implies a *second* one sometime later. Luke was therefore well aware of that second census, taken by Quirinius again in A.D. 7, which Josephus alludes to in the passage cited above. We know this because Luke (who lived much closer to the time than Josephus did) also quotes Gamaliel as alluding to the insurrection of Judas of Galilee "in the days of the census taking" (Acts 5:27). The Romans tended to conduct a census every fourteen years, and so this comes out right for a first census in 7 B.C. and a second in A.D. 7.[19]

The Burial Place of Jesus

Another detail of New Testament history that has been confirmed concerns the burial place of Jesus Christ. Contemporary archaeologist and historian Edwin Yamauchi reports:

> The traditional site of Calvary and the associate tomb of Christ was desecrated by Hadrian in A.D. 135. In the fourth century, Helena, the mother of Constantine, was led to the site, where she then built the church of the Holy Sepulcher. Excavations in and around the church have helped demonstrate that it lay outside the wall in Jesus' day. Shafts dug in the church show that the area was used as a quarry and was therefore extramural, a conclusion also supported by Kenyon's excavations in the adjoining Muristan area. Thus there is no reason to doubt the general authenticity of the site.
>
> In the course of repairs since 1954 remains of the original Constantinian structure have been exposed. In 1975 M. Broshi found near St. Helena's chapel in the church a red and black picture of a Roman sailing ship and a Latin phrase *Domine iuimus,* "Lord, we went" (cf. Ps. 122:1). These words and the drawing were placed there by a pilgrim A.D. 330.
>
> As for the actual tomb of Christ, quarrying operations may have obliterated the grave. A bench *arcosolium* (flat surface under a recessed arch) must have been used for Jesus. But early Christian pilgrims seem to have seen a trough *arcololium* (rock-cut sarcophagus); this raises the question of whether they saw the actual tomb.

In 1842 Otto Thenius, a German pastor, was attracted to a hill 150 yards north of the present walled city because of two cavities that give it a skull-like appearance. The hill was popularized among Protestants as an alternative site for Calvary by General Gordon in 1883. A seventeenth-century sketch of the hill demonstrates, however, that the cavities were not yet present then. The nearby "Garden Tomb" likewise has no claim to be the authentic tomb of Christ.[20]

Summary and Conclusions

After reviewing some highlights of the overwhelming evidence supporting the historical reliability of the New Testament, we can come to the following conclusions:

1. Archaeological and historical evidence concerning the historical events, places, names, and concepts mentioned in the New Testament conclusively affirms the basic historical reliability of the text. In addition, the nature of much of the evidence supports the biblical assertion that the New Testament writers wrote during the first century and were either eyewitnesses of the events they described, or had carefully checked the facts and evidence with eyewitnesses. Luke reminds us of this concern for historical accuracy.

2. Not only are the New Testament authors accurate in their general historical observations, they are also accurate and meticulous in their recording of details.

3. Such concern for accuracy in general and in particular, which is exhibited by the New Testament writers for their historical accounts, is commensurate with a fidelity for truth in matters of teachings, moral, and spiritually significant issues. While historical accuracy does not guarantee such fidelity, it is a correlative necessity that one who claims to bring truth should tell the truth in all matters with which he or she deals. We should expect no less than historical accuracy from those who wrote the New Testament and claimed to represent the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6).

4. If we accept the promise of Jesus Christ to send the Holy Spirit as our guide, teacher, and comforter, then we should not be surprised that the Holy Spirit guided the disciples and New Testament writers. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26).

We can trust the New Testament. Such accuracy is consistent with the inspiration and fidelity to truth claimed by the writers of the New Testament.

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The Canon of the New Testament

By F. F. Bruce

Even when we have come to a conclusion about the date and origin of the individual books of the New Testament, another question remains to be answered. How did the New Testament itself as a collection of writings come into being? Who collected the writings, and on what principles? What circumstances led to the fixing of a list, or canon, of authoritative books?

The historic Christian belief is that the Holy Spirit, who controlled the writing of the individual books, also controlled their selection and collection, thus continuing to fulfill our Lord's promise that He would guide His disciples into all the truth. This, however, is something that is to be discerned by spiritual insight, and not by historical research. Our object is to find out what historical research reveals about the origin of the New Testament canon. Some will tell us that we receive the twenty-seven books of the New Testament on the

authority of the Church; but even if we do, how did the Church come to recognise these twenty-seven and no others as worthy of being placed on a level of inspiration and authority with the Old Testament canon?

The matter is oversimplified in Article VI of the Thirty Nine Articles, when it says: "In the name of the holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church." For, leaving on one side the question of the Old Testament canon, it is not quite accurate to say that there has never been any doubt in the Church of any of our New Testament books. A few of the shorter Epistles (e.g. 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude) and the Revelation were much longer in being accepted in some parts than in others; while elsewhere books which we do not now include in the New Testament were received as canonical. Thus the Codex Sinaiticus included the "Epistle of Barnabas" and the Shepherd of Hermas, a Roman work of about AD 110 or earlier, while the Codex Alexandrinus included the writings known as the First and Second Epistles of Clement; and the inclusion of these works alongside the biblical writings probably indicates that they were accorded some degree of canonical status.

The earliest list of New Testament books of which we have definite knowledge was drawn up at Rome by the heretic Marcion about 140. Marcion distinguished the inferior Creator-God of the Old Testament from the God and Father revealed in Christ, and believed that the Church ought to jettison all that appertained to the former. This "theological anti-semitism" involved the rejecting not only of the entire Old Testament but also of those parts of the New Testament which seemed to him to be infected with Judaism. So Marcion's canon consisted of two parts: (a) an expurgated edition of the third Gospel, which is the least Jewish of the Gospels, being written by the Gentile Luke; and (b) ten of the Pauline Epistles (the three "Pastoral Epistles" being omitted). Marcion's list, however, does not represent the current verdict of the Church but a deliberate aberration from it.

Another early list, also of Roman provenance, dated about the end of the second century, is that commonly called the "Muratorian Fragment," because it was first published in Italy in 1740 by the antiquarian Cardinal L. A. Muratori. It is unfortunately mutilated at the beginning, but it evidently mentioned Matthew and Mark, because it refers to Luke as the third Gospel; then it mentions John, Acts, "Paul's nine letters to churches and four to individuals (Philemon, Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy), Jude, two Epistles of John, and the Apocalypse of John and that of Peter." The Shepherd of Hermas is mentioned as worthy to be read (i.e. in church) but not to be included in the number of prophetic or apostolic writings.

The first steps in the formation of a canon of authoritative Christian books, worthy to stand beside the Old Testament canon, which was the Bible of our Lord and His apostles, appear to have been taken about the beginning of the second century, when there is evidence for the circulation of two collections of Christian writings in the Church.

At a very early date it appears that the four Gospels were united in one collection. They must have been brought together very soon after the writing of the Gospel according to John. This fourfold collection was known originally as "The Gospel" in the singular, not "The Gospels" in the plural; there was only one Gospel, narrated in four records, distinguished as "according to Matthew," "according to Mark," and so on. About AD 115 Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, refers to "The Gospel" as an authoritative writing, and as he knew more than one of the four "Gospels" it may well be that by "The Gospel" he means the fourfold collection which went by that name.

About AD 170 an Assyrian Christian named Tatian turned the fourfold Gospel into a continuous narrative or "Harmony of the Gospels," which for long was the favourite if not the official form of the fourfold Gospel in the Assyrian Church. It was distinct from the four Gospels in the Old Syriac version. It is not certain whether Tatian originally composed his Harmony, usually known as the Diatessaron, in Greek or in Syriac; but as it seems to have been compiled at Rome its original language was probably Greek, and a fragment of Tatian's Diatessaron in Greek was discovered in the year 1933 at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates. At any rate, it was given to the Assyrian Christians in a Syriac form when Tatian returned home from Rome, and this Syriac Diatessaron remained the "Authorised Version" of the Gospels for them until it was replaced by the Peshitta or "simple" version in the fifth century.

By the time of Irenaeus, who, though a native of Asia Minor, was bishop of Lyons in Gaul about AD 180, the idea of a fourfold Gospel had become so axiomatic in the Church at large that he can refer to it as an established and recognised fact as obvious as the four cardinal points of the compass or the four winds:

> For as there are four quarters of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and as the Church is dispersed over all the earth, and the gospel is the pillar and base of the Church and the breath of life, so it is natural that it should have four pillars, breathing immortality from every quarter and kindling the life of men anew. Whence it is manifest that the Word, the architect of all things, who sits

> upon the cherubim and holds all things together, having been manifested to men, has given us the gospel in fourfold form, but held together by one Spirit.

When the four Gospels were gathered together in one volume, it meant the severance of the two parts of Luke's history. When Luke and Acts were thus separated one or two modifications were apparently introduced into the text at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. Originally Luke seems to have left all mention of the ascension to his second treatise; now the words "and was carried up into heaven" were added in Luke xxiv. 51, to round off the narrative, and in consequence "was taken up" was added in Acts i. 2. Thus the inconsistencies which some have detected between the accounts of the ascension in Luke and Acts are most likely due to these adjustments made when the two books were separated from each other.

Acts, however, naturally shared the authority and prestige of the third Gospel, being the work of the same author, and was apparently received as canonical by all except Marcion and his followers. Indeed, Acts occupied a very important place in the New Testament canon, being the pivotal book of the New Testament, as Harnack called it, since it links the Gospels with the Epistles, and, by its record of the conversion, call, and missionary service of Paul, showed clearly how real an apostolic authority lay behind the Pauline Epistles.

The *corpus Paulinum*, or collection of Paul's writings, was brought together about the same time as the collecting of the fourfold Gospel. As the Gospel collection was designated by the Greek word *Euangelion*, so the Pauline collection was designated by the one word *Apostolos*, each letter being distinguished as "To the Romans," "First to the Corinthians," and so on. Before long, the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews was bound up with the Pauline writings. Acts, as a matter of convenience, came to be bound up with the "General Epistles" (those of Peter, James, John and Jude).

The only books about which there was any substantial doubt after the middle of the second century were some of those which come at the end of our New Testament. Origen (185-254) mentions the four Gospels, the Acts, the thirteen Paulines, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation as acknowledged by all; he says that Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude, with the "Epistle of Barnabas," the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, and the "Gospel according to the Hebrews," were disputed by some. Eusebius (c. 265-340) mentions as generally acknowledged all the books of our New Testament except James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, which were disputed by some, but recognised by the majority. Athanasius in 367 lays down the twenty-seven books of our New Testament as alone canonical; shortly afterwards Jerome and Augustine followed his example in the West. The process farther east took a little longer; it was not until c. 508 that 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation were included in a version of the Syriac Bible in addition to the other twenty two books.

For various reasons it was necessary for the Church to know exactly what books were divinely authoritative. The Gospels, recording "all that Jesus began both to do and to teach," could not be regarded as one whit lower in authority than the Old Testament books. And the teaching of the apostles in the Acts and Epistles was regarded as vested with His authority. It was natural, then, to accord to the apostolic writings of the new covenant the same degree of homage as was already paid to the prophetic writings of the old. Thus Justin Martyr, about AD 150, classes the "Memoirs of the Apostles" along with the writings of the prophets, saving that both were read in meetings of Christians (*Apol* i. 67). For the Church did not, in spite of the breach with Judaism, repudiate the authority of the Old Testament; but, following the example of Christ and His apostles, received it as the Word of God. Indeed, so much did they make the Septuagint their own that, although it was originally a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek for Greek-speaking Jews before the time of Christ, the Jews left the Septuagint to the Christians, and a fresh Greek version of the Old Testament was made for Greek speaking Jews.

It was specially important to determine which books might be used for the establishment of Christian doctrine, and which might most confidently be appealed to in disputes with heretics. In particular, when Marcion drew up his canon about AD 140, it was necessary for the orthodox churches to know exactly what the true canon was, and this helped to speed up a process which had already begun. It is wrong, however, to talk or write as if the Church first began to draw up a canon after Marcion had published his.

Other circumstances which demanded clear definition of those books which possessed divine authority were the necessity of deciding which books should be read in church services (though certain books might be suitable for this purpose, which could not be used to settle doctrinal questions), and the necessity of knowing which books might and might not be handed over on demand to the imperial police in times of persecution without incurring the guilt of sacrilege.

One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included

them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognising their innate worth and general apostolic authority, direct or indirect. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa—at Hippo Regius in 393 and at Carthage in 397—but what these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities.

There are many theological questions arising out of the history of the canon which we cannot go into here; but for a practical demonstration that the Church made the right choice one need only compare the books of our New Testament with the various early documents collected by M. R. James in his *Apocryphal New Testament* (1924), or even with the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, to realise the superiority of our New Testament books to these others.

A word may be added about the "Gospel according to the Hebrews" which, as was mentioned above, Origen listed as one of the books which in his day were disputed by some. This work, which circulated in Transjordan and Egypt among the Jewish Christian groups called Ebionites, bore some affinity to the canonical Gospel of Matthew. Perhaps it was an independent expansion of an Aramaic document related to our canonical Matthew. It was known to some of the early Christian Fathers in a Greek version.

Jerome (347-420) identified this "Gospel according to the Hebrews" with one which he found in Syria, called the Gospel of the Nazarene, and which he mistakenly thought at first was the Hebrew (or Aramaic) original of Matthew. It is possible that he was also mistaken in identifying it with the gospel according to the Hebrews; the Nazarene Gospel found by Jerome (and translated by him into Greek and Latin) may simply have been an Aramaic translation of the canonical Greek Matthew. In any case, the Gospel according to the Hebrews and the Gospel of the Nazarenes both had some relation to Matthew, and they are to be distinguished from the multitude of apocryphal Gospels which were also current in those days, and which have no bearing on our present historical study. These, like several books of apocryphal "Acts," and similar writings, are almost entirely pure romances. One of the books of apocryphal Acts, however, the "Acts of Paul," while admittedly a romance of the second century, is interesting because of a pen-portrait of Paul which it contains, and which, because of its vigorous and unconventional character, was thought by Sir William Ramsay to embody a tradition of the apostle's appearance preserved in Asia Minor. Paul is described as "a man small in size, with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose, bald-headed, bowlegged, strongly built, full of grace, for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel."

F. F. Bruce (1910-1990). Bruce's book: New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? *was voted by* Christianity Today *as one of the top 50 books which "shaped evangelicals." This article is reprinted from chapter 3 in the above book, (5th edition, Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1959) with permission.*

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

by Bruce Metzger

The term "canon" used with reference to the Bible means the collection of books which are received as divinely inspired and therefore authoritative for faith and life. The recognition of the canon of the New Testament is one of the most important developments in the thought and practice of the early church; yet history is silent as to how, when, and by whom it was brought about. It is possible, however, to reconstruct some of the influences that must have contributed to the emergence of the New Testament canon.

The Bible of the earliest Christians was the Old Testament, and, with one possible exception, all the references in the New Testament writings to "the scriptures" refer to the Jewish scriptures (the possible exception is the mention in II Pet. 3:16 of "the other scriptures"). Like every pious Jew, Jesus accepted the Old Testament as the word of God and appealed to it. Thus, he proves the indissolubility of marriage from Genesis 1:27; 2:24 (Mark 10:6ff.), states that the Holy Spirit had inspired David (Mark 12:36), and more than

once bases arguments on the presupposition that scripture cannot be broken (Matt. 26:54; Luke 22:37; John 10:35). Most significantly, in the several parts of the Old Testament he finds his coming, his work, and his death foretold (Luke 4:16-21; 24:24-27, 44-46, John 5:39).

In a similar vein Peter (in Acts 1:16), James (Jas. 4:5), Stephen (in Acts 7:38), and Paul (Rom. 3:2) refer explicitly or implicitly to the Old Testament as oracles of God which cannot be set aside. For the early church as a whole, as for Jesus, the Old Testament pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah, and its prophecies obtained their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth (John 5:39; Acts 17:2-3; II Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:1). It follows that it can be rightly understood only with reference to this fulfillment.

For the early Christians the supreme authority was not the Old Testament but Jesus Christ, their true Master and risen Lord. The apostles and their helpers did not preach the Old Testament; they bore witness to Jesus Christ who had come to fulfill the law and the prophets (that is, to bring them to completion, Matt. 5:17) and who, in doing this, had given authoritative pronouncements concerning what is the true and most profound meaning of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:21-28; Mark 10:2ff.) and had repealed certain of its prescriptions (Mark 7:19).

We are not surprised, therefore, that in the early Church, the words of Jesus were treasured and quoted, taking their place beside the Old Testament and being held as of equal or superior authority to it (Acts 20:35; I Cor. 7:10, 12; 9:14; I Tim. 5:18). Parallel with the oral circulation of Jesus' teaching were apostolic interpretations of the significance of his person and work for the life of the church. It is natural that when these two kinds of authoritative materials (the remembered words of Jesus and the apostolic explanations of his person and work) were drawn up in written form, the documents would be circulated and read in services of worship (Col. 4:16; I Thess. 5:27; Rev. 1:3).

Just when it was that certain Christ writings began to be generally accepted as of equal authority with the Old Testament is not known. Presumably, as each Gospel was completed, it was approved (cf. John 21:24, "we know that his testimony is true") and used for public reading, first in the place of its composition, then copied and circulated to other churches. The collecting of Paul's letters must have begun early, in the apostle's own lifetime. He himself prescribed (Col. 4:16) that two churches interchange two of his letters (making copies, naturally); from that it was the natural step to their collecting copies of his other letters as well. The book of Acts doubtless shared the circulation and acceptance of Luke's earlier volume, the third Gospel.

At first a local church would have only a few apostolic letters and perhaps one or two Gospels. During the course of the second century most churches came to possess and acknowledge a canon which included the present four Gospels, the Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, I Peter, and I John. Seven books still lacked general recognition; Hebrews, James, II Peter, II and III John, Jude, and Revelation. It is hard to say if this was the cause or the effect of the divergent opinions concerning their canonicity. On the other hand, certain other Christian writings, such as the first letter of Clement, the letter of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Didache, otherwise known as the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,[1] were accepted as scriptural by several ecclesiastical writers, though rejected by the majority.

During the third century and part of the fourth century there was a sifting of the disputed books; certain of them came to be acknowledged as canonical and others as apocryphal. Among the church fathers who made a careful study of the usage throughout the church was Eusebius of Caesarea, who quotes in his *Ecclesiastical History* the pronouncements of earlier writers concerning the limits of the canon. In summarizing the results of his investigations (Book III, chap. 25), he divides the books into three classes: (a) twenty-two are generally acknowledged to be canonical, namely the four Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul (including Hebrews), I John, I Peter, and Revelation (though see Eusebius' comment cited in (c) below); (b) five are widely accepted, though disputed by some (apparently all were accepted by Eusebius himself) namely James, Jude, II Peter (earlier regarded by Eusebius as spurious), II and III John; and (c) five are spurious, namely the Acts of Paul, Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Barnabas, and the Didache; Eusebius continues, "To these perhaps the Revelation of John should be added, as some reject it while others count it among the accepted books." It will be observed that this is virtually the canon as we know it today. After Eusebius' time (about A.D. 325) the fluctuations in the canon are very slight.

In the East, Athanasius was the first to name (in his Festal Letter for A.D. 367) exactly the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as exclusively canonical.[2] In the West, at the African synods of Hippo Regius (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397 and 419) the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were accepted. Augustine supported this canon, which through the Latin Vulgate translation of Jerome soon came into vogue through the Western church. Though in the East some continued to have doubts about the canonicity of the book of Revelation, eventually the

canon of most of the Eastern churches came to be identified with that of the Western church. The Syrian church, however, accepted only twenty-two books; II Peter, II and III John, Jude and Revelation are lacking in the standard version of the Syriac Bible, called the Peshitta, dating from the early part of the fifth century. Among Western Syrians acceptance of these books was slow; they were finally included in Bibles in the sixth and seventh centuries (the Philoxenian version). The Eastern Syrian church, having lost contact with the rest of Christendom, continued much longer to hold to the shorter canon.

Various external circumstances assisted in the process of canonization of the New Testament books. The emergence of heretical sects having their own sacred books made it imperative for the church to determine the limits of the canon. Likewise, when Christians were persecuted for their faith it became a matter of utmost importance to know which books could and which could not be handed over to the imperial police without incurring the guilt of sacrilege.

As far as can be determined, the chief criterion for acceptance of particular writings as sacred, authoritative, and worthy of being read in services of worship was apostolic authorship. This requirement, however was not applied in a narrow sense, for in the case of two of the Gospels, the tradition of apostolic atmosphere and association (Mark with Peter and Luke with Paul) vouched for their authority. Other tests of canonicity included the question of a book's general harmony with the rest of the New Testament, and its continuous acceptance and usage in the churches as a sign of its value.

The slowness of determining the final limits of the canon is testimony to the care and vigilance of early Christians in receiving books purporting to be apostolic. But, while the collection of the New Testament into one volume was slow, the belief in a written rule of faith was primitive and apostolic. When, toward the close of the fourth century, church synods and councils began to issue pronouncements concerning the New Testament canon, they were merely ratifying the judgment of individual Christians throughout the church who had come to perceive by intuitive insight the inherent worth of the several books. In the most basic sense neither individuals nor councils created the canon; instead they came to perceive and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church.

1. These writings are available in English translation in what is known as the corpus of the Apostolic Fathers; current editions have been edited by K. Lake (1930), J. A. Kleist (1946-58), and E. J. Goospeed (1950).
2. In Athanasius' list the book of Acts is followed immediately by the General Letters.

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Canon: A Moving Target?

by Tom Hobson

In our modern debates about the Bible, we have tended to quickly assume that we agree on which books belong in the Bible. We no longer have the luxury of that assumption. Books such as Bart Ehrman's *Lost Christianities* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* have raised anew an issue that we thought was settled, by claiming that decisions about the Biblical canon were top-down decrees that were imposed upon the early church. Such claims force us to go back and reexamine how we arrived at our conclusions that these books, and no others, comprise the inspired Word of God.

The Forming of the Canon

Some people have the mistaken impression that the New Testament canon was decided by a church council in the late 300's A.D., and the Old Testament canon was decided by a council of rabbis in 100 A.D. Church councils did not determine the canon but acknowledged the books that by common acceptance had already become the canon.

The term "canon" comes from the Greek word *kanon*, meaning "reed" or measuring rod. When we speak of the Biblical canon, we are speaking of a standard by

which we measure which writings are inspired by God and which are not.

A canon of holy writings can be formulated in one of two ways. One way is simply by observing which books are treated as authoritative in popular usage. The other way is to write up an official list of authoritative books. In the cases of both Old and New Testaments, official lists came last, after a long period of wide selection by popular usage. Simply put, the people of God chose the canon gradually over time.

Let's take a look first at the formation of the New Testament canon, and then look at the Old Testament canon. As we look at these, we'll see what sorts of books failed to be affirmed by the people of God. Some were passed over, not because of inferior content, but simply because they were too late, or for other reasons were not judged to come from a recognized authoritative source. Others were rejected because their content was inconsistent with other books that were accepted as authoritative.

The New Testament Canon

According to McDonald[1] and most New Testament scholars, the four criteria that played a role in the development of the New Testament canon were apostolicity, antiquity, orthodoxy, and usage. Did a book come from an apostle, or from someone connected to the apostles, such as Mark, Luke, or the author of Hebrews? If a book was judged to have been written too late to have come from an apostolic authority, it was judged to be of devotional value, but not authoritative. Such was the verdict over time for 1 Clement, the Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas: not heretical, but not apostolic.

As for usage and orthodoxy, how do we know if what was popular was also orthodox? The only way we know is through the decisions of the earliest believers, who were in a reliable position to know what Jesus and his apostles really said and did. Early believers looked for books that gave them their best access to Jesus while the memory of the apostolic age was still alive. We are dependent today on the guidance of believers who lived in 80–100 A.D. and recognized certain books as genuinely apostolic. We trust that they did their job faithfully.

Pseudonymity was a unique issue for Christians, because it impacted apostolicity. It did not matter who wrote a Greco-Roman religious text. Nor does it matter who wrote any of the Buddhist texts, because all that matters is that they contain Buddhism. For Christians, however, the issue of whether a text is apostolic in its origins is foundational. We need to know whether a text is an authorized word from Jesus. This was crucial for the early church since it was barraged with false claims of words from Jesus that led to a false theology.

Evidence indicates that a canon began to form as early as 100 A.D., as our four Gospels began to circulate together,[2] as well as a collection of Paul's letters, which may have been put together by Luke.[3] By the second half of the second century A.D., Justin Martyr (150 A.D.), Celsus (175 A.D.), and the Syriac Gospel harmony known as the Diatesseron (180 A.D.) all bear witness to four recognized Gospels. Papias (100 A.D.) knows three Gospels plus 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation, but makes no mention of Luke or Paul, probably because the writings we possess from him are highly fragmentary.

The first snapshot of a list of canonical New Testament writings is the so-called Muratorian Canon. Although some have claimed that this list actually comes from the fourth century A.D. from the East,[4] I agree with both Ferguson and Metzger that it dates to the second half of the second century (170 A.D.?) and that it comes from the West.[5] Although the name of the author is not preserved in the fragment, Hippolytus is suggested as a possible author. This early list affirms all of our New Testament books with the exception of Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John, plus it includes the book of Wisdom (from the Old Testament Apocrypha!), and the Apocalypse of Peter (although it says that some will not allow it to be read in church). This list states that the recently written Shepherd of Hermas is helpful for Christians but is not Scripture. It also rejects some late second-century heretical works with the rationale that "gall ought not to be mixed with honey."

The rest of the evidence for the de facto canon at this time comes from usage. Irenaeus (180 A.D.) cites all of our New Testament books except Philemon, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude, plus he cites the Shepherd of Hermas as Scripture. Tertullian (200 A.D.) affirms our entire New Testament except Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. Clement of Alexandria (200 A.D.) uses all but James, 2 Peter, and 3 John, plus he also quotes the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache. Clement quotes from the Gospels to the Hebrews and the Egyptians, but he only recognizes our four Gospels as Scripture.

Note how little evidence we have for the use of 2 Peter and James. The Shepherd of Hermas (150 A.D., or possibly earlier) uses "double-minded," a term found nowhere in Greek other than James, 55 times. 1 Clement (90 A.D.) may allude to 2 Peter 1:17 and 3:4, and Barnabas (130 A.D.) and Justin Martyr seem to allude to 2 Peter 3:8. Both James and 2 Peter seem to have fallen out of favor early on, possibly because they

were rooted in the Jewish rather than Pauline branch of the church. These books then appear to have gone through a rediscovery in the late third century A.D. While the church subjected them to critical examination using standards comparable to ours, the church must have had access to authenticating information that we do not have, for the church ultimately accepted both books as genuine apostolic writings.

At the close of the second century A.D., we can say that the developing New Testament canon is closed but not settled. There is a solid core of agreed-upon books, but the limits are fluid, due to books on the periphery that are in dispute. Books like the Gospels of Peter, Thomas, and Judas are firmly and unanimously rejected, and no new books are being sought. But if the New Testament canon had been permanently fixed at this point, some of our present canon would have been excluded, and some other books might have been included.

Origen (early third century A.D.) divides the New Testament writings into undisputed, disputed, and false. In his middle category are 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John. He does not mention James, and he does not tell us how many letters of Paul he accepts. He accepts Hebrews, but he makes the famous comment that "God only knows" who wrote it.

During Diocletian's persecution (early 300's A.D.), the Romans sought to burn the Christians' holy books. However, the church itself was not totally agreed as to which books were covered by that command. Constantine's reversal of this command with a command to produce 50 official copies of Scripture forces the issue of canon to be officially decided by the church.

Yet even here, the decision was not made immediately. As we examine fourth century codices of Scripture that appear to be official full-length editions of the New Testament, we find variations in their contents. Codex Aleph (Sinaiticus) contains our canonical books, plus Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and possibly others (the manuscript breaks off). Codex A contains these two additions, plus the Psalms of Solomon. Codex B contains 1 and 2 Clement, but Timothy, Titus, and Revelation are missing (although again, the manuscript is missing pages at the end). Codex D lacks Thessalonians, Philippians, and Hebrews, but has Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Acts of Paul, and the Apocalypse of Peter. The Syriac Peshitta omits 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation.

The church historian Eusebius (ca. 330 A.D.) delineates four categories of books in his approach to the New Testament canon: undisputed (*homologoumena*), disputed (*antilegomena*), spurious (*notha*), and downright heretical. Eusebius does not recognize any non-Pauline letters as undisputed, plus he observes that Revelation is in dispute, yet he does not himself reject any of the books he identifies as disputed.

In a festal letter to his churches, Athanasius (367 A.D.) lists our exact New Testament canon. He is the first to use the word "canonize" (*kanonizo*). Jerome, Augustine, and the Synod of Carthage (397 A.D.) all agree with Athanasius' list. By the end of the fourth century A.D., the New Testament canon is settled as we have it today.

The Old Testament Canon

The same cannot be said for the Old Testament canon! Here, both Judaism and the Christian church played a role in the identification of God's word, and the process ended up producing two canons within the Christian church: the Hebrew canon, and an Apocrypha ("Hidden Books") consisting of Jewish books that were left out of the Hebrew canon. As in the case of the rise of the New Testament canon, de facto usage led the way, and lists came later.

The Pentateuch appears to have been canonized by 400 B.C. The Prophets appear to have been canonized by 200 B.C., if not at the same time as the Pentateuch. Likewise, the Psalms appear to have been packaged together in five books with titles no later than 400 B.C.[6] By 200 B.C., Judaism begins to use the standard expression "the Law and the Prophets." Josephus states that books written after Artaxerxes were not inspired because of the failure of prophetic succession (*Against Apion* 41).

The question is which books were considered to be part of the Prophets. By the first century A.D., Judaism was beginning to speak of *three* categories of Scripture: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (*Kethuvim*), a category that today includes Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel, Ruth, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. When were these books deemed to be authoritative? Was the entire Old Testament canon as we know it fixed when the Prophets (including the *Kethuvim*) were added to the Law, or was the rest of the canon (i.e. the *Kethuvim*) not finalized until the close of the first century A.D.?

According to today's Jewish classification, the Prophets include the books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel-Kings. But during the time when the Jews only spoke of "the Law and the Prophets" as their canon, did the Prophets also include all the books now known as "the Writings"? One might include them under the

understanding that any writer of inspired Scripture is a prophet, whether they are writing first-person oracles from God, history, or poetry. David, Solomon, Ezra, and the writer(s) of Joshua-Kings become prophets. In 4 Maccabees 18:10–19, the "Law and the Prophets" includes Daniel and the Psalms.

The issue of when the canon was finalized impacts the question of which books were part of the canon for Jesus and his apostles. If the status of the Writings was still in question, all we have to go on is Jesus' formula in Luke 24:44 where he refers to "the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms." (Similarly, 4QMMT from Qumran refers to "Moses, the Prophets, and David.")

Second Maccabees 2:13–15 says that the holy books were stored in the Temple, and were re-collected by Judas Maccabeus after Antiochus IV burned them. Josephus confirms that the canonical books were stored in the Temple. After the Temple is destroyed, Josephus is the first to make a written list of those books.

There appears to have been surprising agreement on which books belonged in the Hebrew canon. As much as Qumran and the rabbis argued with each other, there was absolutely no fight between them as to which books were Scripture. Qumran had a lot of books like Jubilees and Enoch that were extremely popular among them, but these books were never treated as Scripture. Only Esther and Obadiah were not found at Qumran (Obadiah being probably too short). The rabbis at the Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D. discussed whether Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon were holy (literally, they "render the hands unclean" – m. Yadayim 3:5).

The chief issue over what books to include in the canon arises when the Old Testament is translated into Greek to form the Septuagint. At this point, a number of books are added that are only extant in Greek (Sirach alone has been found partly in Hebrew), plus some Greek additions to Esther. There is no consistent list of these added books; they vary between the various major manuscripts. Furthermore, while they are sometimes referred to as the Alexandrian canon (as opposed to the "Palestinian canon") because they were translated into Greek in Egypt, neither Jews nor the New Testament quote these added books as Scripture.

In 190 A.D., Melito gives the first Christian list of Old Testament Scriptures. His list is identical to the Palestinian canon. Yet much of the early church regarded the Greek Septuagint rather than the Hebrew version as their authoritative Bible. Jerome, the scholar who translated the Latin Vulgate around 400 A.D., argued for the Hebrew text and Hebrew canon as the Word of God rather than the Greek. Augustine, who lived around the same time, said that the church should follow the lead of the majority of bishops, which would mean accepting the Greek text and canon as the Word of God. Augustine claimed that the Septuagint was Jesus' Bible, while Jerome claimed that Jesus' canon was the Hebrew canon.

Clearly no council of rabbis or bishops dictated which books belong in Israel's collection of authoritative Scriptures. The library of sacred books in the Temple was formed over time, informed by a gradual consensus of God's people. And the canon of Jesus and his apostles becomes the authority for ours.

Reopening the Canon?

Should we consider reopening the Biblical canon debate today? As I teach my class on "The Truth About the Early Church" to laypeople, I find that when they read the Infancy Gospels and the Gospels of Thomas, Peter, Judas, and Mary for themselves, they categorically reject these books because they see a totally different Jesus in these books than the one they know from the Gospels that they trust.

We might compare reopening the canon to the question of adding into our Bibles words of Jesus that are not recorded in our Gospels. Some of these sound bites, found in places like the Gospel of Thomas and quotes by Jerome and Clement of Alexandria, might be authentic, but practically none of them give us any compelling teaching or action of Jesus to add to what we already have. For instance, I could see Jesus saying that the Pharisees are like the dog in the manger that won't eat or let the oxen eat (Thomas 102), or "It is impossible for a man to mount two horses or to stretch two bows" (Thomas 47), but neither of these adds anything vital or indispensible to our picture of Jesus.

The most recent attempt to re-open the canon is the recently released *New New Testament* produced by a group of scholars including former PC(USA) Moderator Bruce Reyes-Chow. The group adds ten texts to our present New Testament, including the Gospels of Thomas and Mary, the [Gnostic] Gospel of Truth, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and the Odes of Solomon.

One passionate advocate for the re-opening of the New Testament canon is the Jesus Seminar scholar Robert Funk, who proclaims in his essay "The Once and Future New Testament"[7] that the limits of the current New Testament are "entirely arbitrary." The reason Funk gives for this urgent new need is that modern humanity can no longer believe what the present canon has given us.

Funk's de facto operational canon consists of Darwin, Einstein, and Biblical criticism, all three of which he

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argues have undermined the present canon to where it is no longer useful, and he attributes a downright embarrassing degree of inerrancy to these "new" authorities. His supporting arguments are in essence "because I said so."

Theologian James D. G. Dunn exemplifies the spirit of the PC(USA) second ordination vow when he writes:

> *It is not possible to hold to Jesus the center without also holding to the New Testament witness to the center*. For so far as the Jesus of first-century history and faith is concerned, we are always like Zacchaeus, standing behind the crowd of first-century disciples, dependent on what those in the crowd nearest to us report of this Jesus whom we too would see. It is not possible to hear Jesus of Nazareth except in the words of his followers. It is not possible to encounter the Jesus of history except in the words of the New Testament.[8]

Dunn concludes:

> The New Testament is canonical not because it contains a ragbag of writings documenting the diverse developments of the first century, not because it contains a cross section of first-century "party manifestos," but because the interlocking character of so many of its component parts holds the whole together in the unity of a diversity which acknowledges a common loyalty.[9]

Conclusion

The canonical Bible was not the result of a political human power struggle. Rather, God guided the people of God to recognize and affirm the writings where God has truly spoken, in order to give us an authoritative measuring rod to distinguish truth from error.

1. Lee McDonald, "Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: The Critical Question," in Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 423–434.
2. In addition to P^{75}, which is believed to be the second half of a four-gospel codex, T. C. Skeat ("The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels," *New Testament Studies* 43 [1997]:1–34) proposes that P^{4}, P^{64}, and P^{67} all come from a single four-gospel codex.
3. Lewis Foster, "The Earliest Collection of Paul's Epistles," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10 (1967): 44-55.
4. Albert C. Sundberg, "Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973): 1–41.
5. Everett Ferguson, "Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance," *Studia Patristica* 17/2 (1982): 677–83; Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 191–201. Lack of Hebrews and James would make this canon highly unusual in the fourth century East, but it fits a second-century setting in the West.
6. See Matitiahu Tzevat, *A Study of the Language of the Biblical Psalms* (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1955), 64. Tzevat demonstrates that the language of the titles has changed by the time of Chronicles.
7. Robert W. Funk, "The Once and Future New Testament," in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin MacDonald and James A. Sanders: Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 541–57.
8. James D. G. Dunn, "Has the Canon a Continuing Function?," in MacDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 572.
9. Dunn, "Canon," 579.

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