

How It Was Made

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Living in the desert isn't as fun as you might think it is. There's no grass, nothing to do. But some Bedouin shepherds were traveling in the desert nonetheless. The desert location came to be known as Qumran and in the times of Jesus, long ago, there was a community called the Essenes that lived there. They had hundreds of documents stored away in a safe and sacred place. These shepherds had no way of knowing that within the caves were very old documents that would ensure their place in the history books. In 1947, these Bedouins discovered the ceramic pots and jars in which this Qumran community had kept copies of Israel's Old Testament, among other works, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating back many years before the current copies of the Old Testament that were held. We are still studying and cataloguing these texts today!

There was a man in 1844 who set out on a mission to find parchments and copies of the Greek New Testament. He was skilled in knowing what to look for and worked for a university in Leipzig. His name was Tischendorf and he traveled the ruins of many biblical lands to find what he was looking for. He just happened to find himself in the Monastery of St. Catherine hanging out with some monks when he discovered in their trash bin that they used to light their oven some leaves of parchment. A leaf is like a page of what are called Greek uncials, a kind of parchment used to write upon, like our paper today. As he glanced at these leaves, he began to recognize parts of

the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament! There were 43 leaves with several books of the Old Testament written on them and he promptly took the monks' trash home with him and published these findings in 1846. Then, in 1859, he was able to return and through a series of cajoling and earning the right to see the rest of the manuscript, Tischendorf and some merchants who knew Greek were allowed to copy the whole manuscript eight leaves at a time. Eventually, through some church politics, he was able to gain the original manuscript and save the Word of God from being burned in an oven!

These two stories highlight some of the most natural, but greatest dangers to God's Word throughout the ages. I am in debt to several scholars for these stories, including the excellent work of Bruce Metzger, for the second story. The first story is part of the recorded history we have for the Dead Sea Scrolls. I shared these so that each of us can notice that God's Word doesn't have to have enemies burning it to be at risk of being lost to us forever. Not much is required to lose any work of the ancients. Besides natural decay of writing materials, there are a host of other problems. In fact, it cannot be stressed enough how little the amounts of copies for some of the greatest works of the ages that each of us might have read in school. But the stories of God's protection of His Word are extraordinary compared to other ancient writings.

As a pastor, I am asked every once in a while how we received the Bible as a whole. How do we know that we have all of God's Word in our Bibles? Are there other books that should be included? Are any of the books that we have not supposed to be in the Bible? As most have come to know, Protestants support 66 books of the Bible in two testaments, while the Roman Catholic Church includes some 14 or so other books. In a future article, I will discuss specifically the understanding of why some books are in and out of the Bible. That is part two of our discussion on what scholars call the canon. Canon is a word that speaks of a rule or standard. So there became a standard to what books belonged in the collection we call the Bible today. In this first article, I would like to focus on the criteria for considering a book part of the canon of Scripture and share some of the evidence for how God has so greatly preserved His Word above the ancient standards of preservation for written documents.

When we look at our Bibles, many often wonder how it came about that each book is considered the authority and words of the God of the universe. Let us begin by observing the Old Testament and discussing how we came to have it as sacred Scripture. There was one test for the canonicity, the acceptance of a book into the canon, of the Old Testament. We are much indebted today to the Jews for their scrupulous care of the text of the Old Testament. Once a book was considered to be part of the canon, the Jews preserved it with their lives and did not allow any change in it. They were so meticulous that in the eighth century BC the Masorites, a group of scholars that bemoaned the loss of being able to properly read out loud the text of God's Word for lack of vowels, created a vowel system to help pronunciation. All of the vowels went

under, inside or above the original consonants, thereby not even changing the text itself!

But now that we know they have so preserved God's Word, how did they know that it was God's Word? The one test for canonicity in the Old Testament was that a book bore the marks of a prophet as its author. Some books flatly tell you that they were written by Moses or by Samuel, or by the prophets of Israel. Others are by tradition marked under certain prophets. For instance, it is believed that the book of Ruth was written by Samuel. No author is given, but the traditions, which are kept almost as well as the texts themselves, are clear in most cases of authorship. A prophet was a special person who was God's mouthpiece in Israel and literally spoke God's Words, usually penning those words in what we now have as the Old Testament.

Although there have been throughout the centuries questions concerning why we hold a book to be canonized, one very important distinction is noted. In every discussion over which books are included in the canon for the Old Testament, there is only discussion about people who don't perceive this book or that book is included, or have questions about this book or that book. Never does anyone make an authoritative statement that these books are in the canon. It seems that God wrote these books and the people of Israel merely agreed that they are His! The Bible was written by human hands, to be sure, but God is the one who inspired them to write. In this sense, God is the one who authorized the canon, and though councils can meet and discuss canonicity, they cannot give authoritative demands of what must be included. They can only agree with what is already accepted in the canon.

Now there are two special manuscripts of the Old Testament that help us to see what was in the original texts. The original texts are called autographs and they are all long gone because of decay and destruction. Now that last sentence may worry you for a few minutes, but keep reading because I will explain why that is not a bad thing. Before the autographs were destroyed by age and decay, they were copied several times over from original languages and also translated into other languages. The more copies that we have, the more we can see what agrees with what and what looks like it is an error. These copies are called manuscripts. Now in the Old Testament, because God's Word was so well preserved, we have two manuscripts with the whole of the Old Testament that we have in our Bible today called the Aleppo Codex from 925 AD and the Leningrad Codex from 1008 AD. A codex, unlike the original form of 10 inch by 30 foot scrolls, is a book form of the text. These two are the earliest complete works that we have of the Old Testament that was finished around 425 BC.

However, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls contains manuscripts that date back farther than that, over a thousand years in the past! Now the Dead Sea Scrolls are extremely important to the Old Testament because they give us much earlier manuscripts that are well preserved because of the arid desert conditions and being 1300 feet under sea level. They are composed of biblical and nonbiblical scrolls, but contain all the Old Testament books except Esther, as well as commentaries on all of these books. We will discuss them a bit more in the second article on the missing books of the Bible.

Even though the attempts to burn God's Word or ruin it in so many different ways

have multiplied throughout the years, God has preserved His Word by having many copies of it. The multiple copies actually help us to ensure accuracy of the Bible today. But this can be even more explained with the New Testament. The earliest claims to an Old Testament canon actually originate before the time of Jesus around 200 BC. Most scholars point to a rabbinic council in 170 AD, but they did not truly discuss canonicity in that council. It was a bunch of rabbis getting together and discussing that one or two books were in contention for some people. At the end, they reaffirm that they are okay with the canon as it stands. The only books that have ever been in contention were Esther, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon.

Let us now talk about the New Testament, and then we will finish by discussing the internal evidence of canonicity found in the Bible itself. The New Testament contains 27 books that are part of the canon. The way that the New Testament canon is given is through the criteria first of the book being written by one of the apostles. Apostle is a very stringent term here that speaks of eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry and teachings.

Jesus gave the authority to the apostles to write down His teachings. Within the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus says that all authority has been given to Him, and then tells the eleven disciples (a twelfth apostle would be added in Acts 1), to teach everyone to observe or put into practice everything that He has commanded. In Luke 24:32, Jesus is revealed in His teaching on the road to Emmaus. Even stronger is further in Luke 24:44-48 where Jesus explains all of Scripture and then calls them witnesses of these things. The apostles who have witnessed Christ's life and

teachings, His death, burial and resurrection, have His authority to then write the New Testament.

But what about the books that are not written by apostles? To be sure, Paul's 13 letters and the five books by John are written by apostles, along with Matthew and Peter's writings. But what about Hebrews, which names no author, Jude, James, Mark, Luke and Acts? Well, these are written by close friends of apostles or people who traveled with the apostles, or are heavily influenced by the apostles as they are being written. For example, Mark is written by John-Mark, who traveled and worked with Peter. Mark tells us much from Peter's account of Jesus. Luke and Acts are written by the first century doctor who traveled with Paul and "gives an orderly account from eyewitnesses" (Luke 1:2-3; Acts 1:1-3). Luke was more like a reporter or historian gathering first-hand accounts from eyewitnesses, who fulfill the technical term of apostle because they were with Jesus in His lifetime and teachings.

Now James and Jude are the biological brothers of Jesus, and James is the lead pastor of the thriving church in Jerusalem, very much respected, as his brother Jude, because they also lived with Jesus and saw the things that Jesus did. Our largest problem comes with the book of Hebrews, which names no author, so that we cannot know if an apostle wrote it. Early on in the church fathers, the book was put with the letters of Paul, even though we are almost completely certain today that Paul did not write Hebrews. So why is it included in the canon?

There were other marks of authority for the New Testament books besides authors being apostles. A second criterion is that the book

was well used by the churches and was helpful to their growth. In this second sense and in the third I will mention in a few moments, Hebrews is easily included in the canon. The churches found great use of the book of Hebrews. The third criterion is inspiration by God, or as Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:16, that the books were "God-breathed." So Hebrews falls into this easily.

On the historical side of canonicity, what are the earliest records we have of a complete canon of 27 books like we have today? Well, first of all, we must realize that the early church fathers did not seek to give a list of the canon, but to talk about and quote Scripture as it was useful to their churches. To hunt for the earliest mention of the whole New Testament canon is to ask for what they would have done only against heresy. Clarification would have had to been demanded of them for them to list the books.

However, the first 27-book canon that matches the closed canon for today is found in the writings of Athanasius, who wrote them in 367 AD. Isn't that kind of late in history, someone might ask? Well, as I said, the church fathers were not pressed to give a record because the church knew the books that were canonical already. The equivalent of asking the church fathers for a list of the 27 books would be for someone to demand every chemist no matter what their experiment to list all of the elements in the periodic table, whether or not they were using all of them in their experiment each time. There are several older canons that come close to the 27 we have today. It might also be mentioned that although the early church fathers did not present a list of the canon, they quoted from the canon authoritatively, speaking to a canon with quotations by the early 200s AD!

I will start with individuals, and a heretic nonetheless. Marcion in 140 AD produced his own canon that included of the gospels just Luke, all of the Paulines except the pastoral epistles (1 Tim, 2 Tim and Titus), but nothing else. Irenaeus (about 130 AD) either called canonical or quoted from every New Testament book except Philemon, James, 2 Peter and 3 John. And these books are quite small, which makes quoting them or their subject matter becoming part of the conversation difficult! Polycarp, from about 110-130 AD quoted from all of the New Testament canon save nine books (2 Tim, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 3 John, Jude and Revelation), and he was a second generation Christian who was one of the apostle John's disciples! Clement of Alexandria (150 AD) quoted or authoritatively called canon all but six books, and Cyril of Jerusalem around 315 AD called all canonical except Revelation.

You might be noticing that the books that had the most trouble being canonized are 2 Peter, James, Hebrews and Jude. Second Peter is earliest quoted by Pseudo Barnabas (70-130 AD) and Clement of Rome (95-97 AD). James was quoted by the one of the earliest church fathers, Clement of Rome, around 95-97 AD. Hebrews was first quoted by both of these first fathers as well, and Jude was quoted by Irenaeus in 130 AD. So although they were late to be added by canons, the earliest fathers were quoting them as authoritative. There is a long history of these books being canonical without the lists from councils and canon lists. But let us discuss those next.

The strongest and earliest canon is called the Muratorion Canon of about 170 AD. The only books it is missing are Hebrews through Second Peter! That's 170 AD! And some scholars suggest that it is missing a

part of the fragment, since the missing books are successive. Some of the fragments we have date so early and close to originals that liberals are surprised. We have actually been able to push the date of completion of books closer to Jesus' death because of the dates of some of these fragments we have found. All of the church fathers are second to fourth generation Christians, who have all quoted from at least one of the 27 books of our New Testament. That's some strong evidence! Of course, there are the councils, the first of which very late in 393 AD (Council of Hippo) and 397 AD (Council of Carthage) that confirm the 27 books. Earlier councils like Nicea (325 AD) mention the canon in total that we have today with the exception of five books (James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Jude).

I want to leave the believer with a shot in the arm of their faith. So let me finish by talking about the manuscripts for the Greek New Testament and the quotations from the Early Church Fathers, and also encouragement about how our canon came to be authoritative and closed. Some internal evidence in the New Testament itself comes from the apostles' own writing! One great example is Paul quoting Luke 10:7 in 1 Timothy 5:8, a saying of Jesus never previously recorded in the Old Testament or anywhere else! Other internal evidence abounds as well, one of the strongest being Peter calling Paul's writings "hard to understand" and "scripture" (2 Peter 3:15-16). This shows us that even the apostles as they were writing scripture were aware that it was scripture they were writing.

Let's talk manuscripts for just one moment. A manuscript is a copy of the original or another copy that contains either fragments, whole books, or whole collections of New Testament books. Did you know that there

are well over 5,700 manuscripts that we have found so far! These are much closer to the time of original writing than any other ancient work! So the loss of information is extremely minimal because there were possibly 20 years between Jesus' ascension and the first book to be written. Homer's Iliad doesn't even come close! There are only about nine manuscripts and they come from hundreds of years after the original writing. Let us not forget as well that the Bible very early was translated into Syriac, the Coptic (Egyptian) Bible, and Old Latin (about 200 AD).

But I want to leave you with this shocker as far as whether we can trust that God gave us everything we need to know Him and grow in Him. Some fragments only have parts of the text. There are so many manuscript copies. Doesn't this produce tons of errors? I tell you that most of the errors are misspellings of Greek words that we know how to spell! How about theological issues that might be in error or missing? Not one theological fundamental has been lost to us in all of these copies and in all of this time!

And the kicker: All but about 10 verses of the entire New Testament have been quoted by the Early Church Fathers! Even if we had not one manuscript, we would still have all but about 10 verses! Some scholars have suggested that even with all the copies, we can guarantee accuracy of our current New Testament to the original writings at about 99.5%! God has surely preserved His Word to us! The canon is closed, and has been since John penned the last letters of the book of Revelation, and God has preserved these books, and not others. We can be sure that God has got our best in mind as He has kept His Word from all the corruption and destruction of the world, whether natural or human. With our faith bolstered, let us turn

to the written Word so that we might find in its pages the Living Word, Jesus!

Helpful Books and Resources on this topic:

Brotzman, Ellis R. *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994. Look at chapters 5, 6 and 8.

Geisler, Norman L. and William E. Nix. *A General Introduction to the Bible, Revised and Expanded*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996.

Metzger, Bruce M. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration, Third Enlarged Edition*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992. Look at Section 1, chapter 5 for some statistics. A very technical book!

Nunnally, Wave, *Central Faithbuilders Podcasts*, dated 07/20/08, 07/27/08, 08/03/08 and 09/01/08. You can pick up the podcast here:

<http://feed.centrafaithbuilders.com/>.

Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998. Chapter 3 is very helpful.