

# **“Are the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Writings Part of the Apocrypha? Why Aren't They Scripture?”**

**I can't find any solid information on the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha [Ed. note: (Greek, “falsely attributed”) Jewish writings of the period between the Old and New Testament, which were attributed to authors who did not actually write them] and why these books are not consider inspired scripture. I know they are considered false writings, but why?Are the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the Old Testament Apocrypha considered the same thing? Could the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha be just a branch of the Old Testament Apocrypha? And therefore the same principles are applied to the Pseudepigrapha and the Apocrypha about why they are not considered scripture?**

The books that you are referring to did not meet the standards of canonization. I suggest you read *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible* by Norman Geisler and William Nix. The [Apocrypha](#) is a different set of works that have traditionally been handed down along with the Old Testament by some Christians but not Jews. It is recognized as canonical by the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox church, but not Protestants who acknowledge its importance as intertestamental literature and even consider it helpful to read for spiritual development, but do not accord it the same status as Scripture. There are multiple theological and historical problems with these books. And their authorship remains unknown.

Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese

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# **“How Do I Know the Bible is True?”**

**How do I know that the Bible was true, since I base my faith on it? Why weren't some books canonized?**

Great question! We have several articles that will help you with answers.

*Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?*

[www.probe.org/are-the-biblical-documents-reliable/](http://www.probe.org/are-the-biblical-documents-reliable/)

*Authority of the Bible:*

[probe.org/authority-of-the-bible-a-strong-argument-for-christianity/](http://probe.org/authority-of-the-bible-a-strong-argument-for-christianity/)

*The Inspiration of the Bible:*

[www.probe.org/the-inspiration-of-the-bible/](http://www.probe.org/the-inspiration-of-the-bible/)

*The New Testament: Can I Trust It?*

[www.probe.org/the-new-testament-can-i-trust-it/](http://www.probe.org/the-new-testament-can-i-trust-it/)

*The Christian Canon:*

[www.probe.org/the-christian-canon/](http://www.probe.org/the-christian-canon/)

You will be especially interested in this answer to email:  
*“How Did the Church Recognize Which Books Were Inspired By God?”*

[www.probe.org/how-did-the-church-recognize-which-books-were-inspired-by-god/](http://www.probe.org/how-did-the-church-recognize-which-books-were-inspired-by-god/)

So glad you wrote!

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries Webmistress

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## **“Why is the Appendix to the Book of Daniel Omitted from Most Bible Versions?”**

**One of my Sunday School classmates mentioned that his Bible had an appendix to Daniel, which included three additional chapters (13 to 15). Do you know the reason why these are excluded from most Bible versions?**

The Hebrew and Aramaic texts of Daniel have been very well preserved. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament written in the third century B.C., includes these other chapters but they are not in the Hebrew or Aramaic texts: the Prayer of Azariah, Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon. These books were never accepted as inspired by the Jews and were never in their Old Testament. As well, the Dead Sea Scrolls do not contain these chapters. These were probably later additions which probably came from Egypt.

Pat Zukeran

Probe Ministries

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# **“There Is No Compelling Reason to Accept the Books of the Bible as Special”**

I have some comments and questions regarding [your article on the church canon](#)—in particular, the last paragraph. You state that:

“We show that it is true to unbelievers by demonstrating that it is systematically consistent.”

However, there are numerous inconsistencies throughout the bible—in both the old and new testaments—and in particular throughout the gospels and the accounts of the life and death of Jesus—as most non-believers can readily point out. While the inconsistencies as a whole do not negate the viability of the scripture, it does indicate that the canon as it stands is NOT systematically consistent.

You also state that:

“We make belief possible by using both historical evidence and philosophical tools.”

Philosophical, yes—but historical, no. Archeological and historical research has done as much to prove as disprove the scripture—at best a 50-50 balance.

And you also state:

“Once individuals refuse to accept the claim of inspiration that the Bible makes for itself, they are left with a set of ethics without a foundation.”

True—however, it is not sufficient to take the word of one source in regards to origin or inspiration. In other words, just because one book of the bible (a collection of documents written at very different times and by very different authors) says so isn't sufficient to make it so for the whole. At the time that portion of the bible was written, the whole did not yet exist and the reference to inspiration could only be referring to the work in which it appears.

If that is the argument—then there is no need for philosophical or historical tools to aid in believe. You cannot “have your cake and eat it too” in this case—either use science (history, etc.) to prove the reliability and uniqueness of the canon or base it on faith—one or the other, not both.

It seems to me—that despite an otherwise well researched and argued explanation of the canonization of the current bible—there still is no compelling reason for the current books of the bible to be held in any higher esteem than those of the apocrypha or the writings of early church fathers.

Thank you for the thoughtful response to my essay on the canonization of the Bible. Let me briefly respond to some of your points.

*However, there are numerous inconsistencies throughout the bible in both the old and new testaments—and in particular throughout the gospels and the accounts of the life and death of Jesus as most non-believers can readily point out. While the inconsistencies as a whole do not negate the viability of the scripture, it does indicate that the canon as it stands is NOT systematically consistent.*

The question of consistency regarding the Gospels has been hotly contested. Perhaps the problem partly lies in defining what we mean by consistency. No one denies that the writers were attempting to give different perspectives regarding the

events and ministry of Jesus. My view and the view of conservative theologians is that the teachings of the four Gospels are consistent even though individual details might differ. Where some see inconsistency and conflict, others see different perspectives of a single or similar event. The Gospels were not written as a history text or as a biographical work in the modern sense, to hold these texts to this kind of standard would be placing unwarranted restrictions on the writings.

*Archeological and historical research has done as much to prove as disprove the scripture at best a 50-50 balance.*

The role of archaeology and historical evidence in affirming the NT writings is also a complex one. You seem to be arguing that if one places their faith in the teachings of the NT they cannot use historical and archaeological evidence to defend the texts in any manner. While I would agree that neither archaeological nor historical evidence can prove that the teachings of the Bible are theologically true, they can affirm a number of things about the nature of the texts. First, they give us expanding knowledge of the geographical setting of the events that are described. Second, they help us to understand the religious milieu of the time (ex. Nag Hammadi findings). Third, they constrain the attempts of some to mythologize the NT. The discoveries of the Well of Jacob, the Pool of Siloam, the probable location of the Pool of Bethesda, and the name of Pilate himself on a stone in the Roman theater at Caesarea lend historical credibility to the NT text. Certainly the reliability of the NT writings can benefit from positive archaeological and historical evidence.

*At the time that portion of the bible was written, the whole did not yet exist and the reference to inspiration could only be referring to the work in which it appears.*

The high regard that the church Fathers had for the OT writings did not transfer to the NT texts until the church was

forced to respond to threatening issues. Since some had been disciples of Apostles, the urgency to define the canon was not intense. Once given the need to do so in the second and third centuries, believers held to those writings that affirmed the tradition that had been handed down from the beginning. The place given to the Apocrypha by the early church is another issue which I address in [my essay](#) on those writings.

Thanks again for your comments.

Sincerely,

Don Closson

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## **“I Have Questions about the Christian Canon”**

I just read Don Closson's article about the history of the [Christian Canon](#) and found it to be interesting and helpful. I have recently been looking deeper into my religion and other Christian religions to get a better understanding of the various beliefs. However, I have some questions.

Don mentions that the Church Fathers respected and quoted from works that have generally passed out of the Christian tradition. Why are these books no longer considered important? It's almost as though there were some kind of stock market drop in the value of these writings. If certain writings were so important as to guide the early Christians in what was probably the most difficult time for the Church why do they not hold the same value today? Also, were any of the early teachings taken from the Apocrypha?

My other question is more of an observation. When you explain

the process of determining the Canon of the NT after the Reformation you write, "As usual, the Catholic position rested upon the authority of the Church hierarchy itself." Then you go on to say, "Instead of the authority of the Church, Luther and the reformers focused on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit." To me this seems to be a very biased statement in an otherwise objective article. From what I understand, the Catholic Church also believes in the internal witness of the Holy Spirit working through its leaders. And since the NT of both Protestants and Catholics is the same (a surprising fact I just learned and which your article was a little misleading) would you not say it probably did inspire both groups?

Thanks for the thoughtful questions and observations. Let me try to respond to each issue you raise.

*Why don't we read the writings of the Church Fathers today?*

It appears that there has been an ebb and flow regarding the popularity of these writings among average believers. Protestants may have carried the notion of *Sola Scriptura* too far, fearing that spending too much time in the writings of the early church might lead to an unhealthy elevation of these works. However, there appears to be growth in both interest in, and appreciation for, the works of the early church among all Christians that might move us towards a better balance. I recently finished *Reading Scripture With The Church Fathers*, by Christopher Hall (an InterVarsity publication) and found that his admonition to delve into the writings of the early church an enticing one. Part of the problem is that many Christians do not read theological works of any type, much less serious works that are planted in a very different set of cultural challenges. Theological writing is done in response to the demands of pressing cultural questions and issues. The foreignness of the cultural milieu surrounding the early church can make reading the Church Fathers a considerable effort. I do see a trend, especially among the post-baby-boomer generations, towards desiring a deeper spiritual life,



one that is often exhibited by the leaders of the early church. People are looking to that era for models of devotion and authentic community that are often lacking in our modern, and postmodern, society.

*My bias against the Roman Catholic Church.*

You are right, my statement is overly biased. I need to revisit that section of the essay and restate my views. I do not mean to say that the Catholic Church does not claim guidance from the Holy Spirit, but that they have depended more on the decisions of a centralized leadership (magisterium) in deciding on the canon rather than on actual use and acceptance by the universal church and individual believers. Thanks for pointing this out. If you don't mind I am going to paste into this response a portion of an essay that I wrote on the [Apocrypha](#) that might help explain my view.

*In a recent meeting of Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox theologians called the Rose Hill conference, evangelical theologian Harold O. J. Brown asks that we hold a dynamic view of this relationship between the church and the Bible. He notes that Catholics have argued "that the church—the Catholic Church—gave us the Bible and that church authority authenticates it." Protestants have responded with the view that "Scripture creates the church, which is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles." However, he admits that there is no way to make the New Testament older than the church. Does this leave us then bowing to church authority only? Brown doesn't think so. He writes, "[I]t is the work of the Spirit that makes the Scripture divinely authoritative and preserves them from error. In addition the Holy Spirit was active in the early congregations and councils, enabling them to recognize the right Scriptures as God's Word." He adds that even though the completed canon is younger than the church, it is not in captivity to the church. Instead, "it is the 'norm that norms' the church's teaching and life."*

Many Catholics argue that the additional books found in the Apocrypha (Septuagint plus) which they call the deuterocanon, were universally held by the early church to be canonical. This is a considerable overstatement. However, Protestants have acted as if these books never existed or played any role whatsoever in the early church. This too is an extreme position. Although many of the early church fathers recognized a distinction between the Apocryphal books and inspired Scripture, they universally held them in high regard. Protestants who are serious students of their faith cannot ignore this material if they hope to understand the early church or the thinking of its earliest theologians.

On the issue of canonicity, of the Old Testament or the New, Norman Geisler lists the principles that outline the Protestant perspective. Put in the form of a series of questions he asks, "Was the book written by a spokesperson for God, who was confirmed by an act of God, who told the truth in the power of God, and was accepted by the people of God?" If these can be answered in the affirmative, especially the first question, the book was usually immediately recognized as inspired and included in the canon. The Old Testament Apocrypha lacks many of these characteristics. None of the books claim to be written by a prophet, and Maccabees specifically denies being prophetic. Others contain extensive factual errors. Most importantly, many in the early church including Melito of Sardis, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Jerome rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha, although retaining high regards for its devotional and inspirational value.

A final irony in this matter is the fact that even Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Luther at Augsburg in 1518, published a Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament (1532) in which he did not include the Apocrypha.

Sincerely,

Don Closson

Probe Ministries

Please check out the related posts below for more information.

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## **“How Did the Church Recognize Which Books Were Inspired by God?”**

Please elaborate on this statement from your article on [\*The Da Vinci Code\*](#): “...the Canon gradually took shape as the church recognized and embraced those books that were inspired by God.”

How did the church “recognize” which books were inspired by God? Did the church, therefore, consider other texts not to be “inspired by God”? Can you suggest any material that refers to the above?

Thank you for your thoughtful question and for visiting our web site.

Below is a document that I composed from information found in F. F. Bruce’s book *The Canon*. I highly recommend his work if you are interested in digging deeper into the subject of canonicity.

Other works were used by the early church (Didache and Shepherd of Hermas) but were not equated to scripture. Later writings were weighed against the Apostles’ teachings and rejected or read accordingly.

Sincerely,

Don Closson

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## The Canon

From *The Canon of Scripture* by F. F. Bruce

“That the New Testament consists of the twenty-seven books which have been recognized as belonging to it since the fourth century is not a value judgment; it is a statement of fact. Individuals or communities may consider that it is too restricted or too comprehensive; but their opinion does not affect the identity of the canon. The canon is not going to be diminished or increased because of what they think or say: it is a literary, historical and theological datum.”[\[1\]](#)

Bruce defines the criteria for canonicity in chapter 21 of his book; he includes the following items:

**Apostolic Authority** – All of the NT writings contained a degree of apostolic authority. This could be established by direct apostolic appointment (those chosen directly by Jesus), writing on behalf of one with apostolic authority (Mark writing on behalf of Peter), or being a member of Jesus’ family (James & Jude). The *Acts of Paul*, which was written in the middle of the second century, was orthodox but the author had no apostolic authority and it was a work of fiction. Bruce also points out that any book known to be pseudonymous [written by a person other than the attributed author] would not have been included in the canon.

**Antiquity** – The writing must belong to the apostolic age. Anything written later, although useful and theologically accurate (Shepherd of Hermas) would not be considered canonical. “Writings of a later date, whatever their merit, could not be included among the apostolic or canonical books.”[\[2\]](#)

**Orthodoxy** – Any writing considered to be part of the canon must be theologically consistent with the apostolic faith. This faith rested upon the undisputed apostolic writings and the teachings established in those churches founded by the apostles. The Bishop of Antioch (199 AD) named Serapion had *The Gospel of Peter* removed from books that were read in the church of Rhossus when he discovered that it included a docetic (heretical) view of Christ. Docetism and Gnosticism were two views of Christ that competed with the orthodox apostolic teachings in the early church.

**Catholicity** – Only those works that were received by the greater part of the catholic or universal church could be acknowledged as canon. This might be combined with the notion of traditional use. Bruce writes, “If any church leader came along in the third or fourth century with a previously unknown book, recommending it as genuinely apostolic, he would have found great difficulty in gaining acceptance for it: his fellow Christians would simply have said, ‘But no one has ever heard of it!’”<sup>{3}</sup>

**Inspiration** – Canonicity and inspiration have been closely connected in the minds of Christians since the early days of the church. Even when apostolic authority was questioned (as with Mark and Luke) works were accepted because they were considered authoritative (inspired, God breathed) and trustworthy witnesses to the saving events of Christ’s ministry.

## Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 250.
2. Ibid., p. 259.
3. Ibid., p. 263.

See related posts for more relevant articles and answers to questions.

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## **“What About the Apocrypha?”**

The Catholic institution claims the apocrypha is inspired. Protestants don't. Therefore, within the Body, there are two different lists of supposedly God-inspired authoritative Scripture.

So... How can we claim the Bible is authoritative when there are two differing lists of supposed Scriptures within Christianity...Two different Bibles? My next question is akin to the first: How do we know with certainty which list is THE list?" Both of these questions center on authority. Who do we trust as our God approved authority able to testify for us on behalf of Scriptures?

It is no wonder that the other religions of the world do not take true Christianity seriously when such fundamental divisions exist within the Body.

The Apocrypha is not included as part of the inspired text because it does not meet the criteria of the [inspired canon](#). Here are just a few examples.

The Apocrypha contains historical errors. In Judith 1:1 Nebuchadnezzar is reigning in Ninevah instead of Babylon.

The Apocrypha contains unbiblical teaching. 2 Maccabees 12 teaches to pray for the dead. Tobit 12:9 teaches faith by works, a clear contradiction to the Bible (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Jesus and the Apostles do not quote the Apocrypha. We do not see it directly quoted in the New Testament.

Finally Jesus tells us where the inspired canon ends in Luke 11:51. He says the prophets extend from Abel (Genesis 4) to Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:20-21). So the line of prophets ends with the Jewish Old Testament, the Masoretic text that Jesus used as authoritative.

The history of the Apocrypha is interesting. It was not part of the Catholic Church's inspired canon until 1545 AD. No council recognized it in the first four centuries. The historical evidence goes against the Apocrypha. It was incorporated by the Catholic Church in response to the Protestant challenge to several unbiblical teachings such as praying for the dead and penance. Hope this helps.

Patrick Zukeran  
Probe Ministries

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# The Old Testament Apocrypha Controversy – The Canon of Scripture

*Don Closson analyzes the controversial issue of the Apocrypha, weighing the evidence on the canonicity of these books, affirming their value, but agreeing with the Protestant tradition which does not regard them as inspired Scripture.*

## The Source of the Controversy

A fundamental issue that separates Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions is the question of the Old Testament Apocrypha. Catholics argue that the Apocrypha was an integral

part of the early church and should be included in the list of inspired Old Testament books. Protestants believe that the books of the Apocrypha are valuable for understanding the events and culture of the inter-testamental period and for devotional reading, but are not inspired nor should they be included in the canon, the list of books included in the Bible. This disagreement about which books belong in the Bible points to other differences in Roman Catholic and Protestant beliefs about canonicity itself and the interplay between the authority of the Bible and the authority of tradition as expressed in the institutional church. Catholics contend that God established the church and that the Church, the Roman Catholic Church, both gave us the Bible and verified its authenticity. Protestants believe that the Scriptures, the writings of the prophets and apostles, are the foundation upon which the church is built and are authenticated by the Holy Spirit, who has been and is active in church congregations and councils.

The books of the Apocrypha considered to be canonical by the Roman Catholic Church are first found in Christian era copies of the Greek Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. According to Old Testament authority F. F. Bruce, Hebrew scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, began translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek around 250 B.C. because the Jews in that region had given up the Hebrew language for Greek.<sup>{1}</sup> The resulting translation is called the Septuagint (or LXX) because of legend that claims that seventy Hebrew scholars finished their work in seventy days, indicating its divine origins.

The books or writings from the Apocrypha that the Roman Catholic Church claims are inspired are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Letter of Jeremiah, additions to Esther, Prayer of Azariah, Susanna (Daniel 13), and Bel and the Dragon (Daniel 14). Three other Apocryphal books in the Septuagint, the Prayer of Manasseh,



and 1 & 2 Esdras, are not considered to be inspired or canonical by the Roman Catholic Church.

This disagreement over the canonicity of the Apocryphal books is significant if only for the size of the material being debated. By including it with the Old Testament one adds 152,185 words to the King James Bible. Considering that the King James New Testament has 181,253 words, one can see how including the books would greatly increase the influence of pre-Christian Jewish life and thought.

This issue is important for two other reasons as well. First, there are specific doctrines that are held by the Roman Catholic Church which are supported by the Apocryphal books. The selling of indulgences for forgiveness of sins and purgatory are two examples. Secondly, the issue of canonicity itself is reflected in the debate. Does the church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, recognize what is already canonical, or does the church make a text canonical by its declarations?

As believers who have called upon the saving work of Jesus Christ as our only hope for salvation, we all want to know what is from God and what is from man. The remainder of this article will defend the traditional Protestant position against the inclusion of the Apocrypha as inspired canon.

## **The Jewish Canon**

As we are considering the debate over the canonicity of the Old Testament Apocrypha or what has been called the "Septuagint plus," we will first look at evidence that Alexandrian Jews accepted what has been called a wider canon.

As mentioned previously, Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, began translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint) hundreds of years before Christ. Because the earliest complete manuscripts we have of this version of the

OT includes extra books called the Apocrypha, many believe that these books should be considered part of the OT canon even though they are not found in the Hebrew OT. In effect, some argue that we have two OT canons, the Hebrew canon of twenty-two books, often called the Palestinian canon, and the larger Greek or Alexandrian canon that includes the Apocrypha.

F. F. Bruce states there is no evidence that the Jews (neither Hebrew nor Greek speaking) ever accepted a wider canon than the twenty-two books of the Hebrew OT. He argues that when the Christian community took over the Greek OT they added the Apocrypha to it and “gave some measure of scriptural status to them also.”[\[2\]](#)

Gleason Archer makes the point that other Jewish translations of the OT did not include the Apocryphal books. The Targums, the Aramaic translation of the OT, did not include them; neither did the earliest versions of the Syriac translation called the Peshitta. Only one Jewish translation, the Greek (Septuagint), and those translations later derived from it (the Itala, the Coptic, Ethiopic, and later Syriac) contained the Apocrypha.[\[3\]](#)

Even the respected Greek Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria never quotes from the Apocrypha. One would think that if the Greek Jews had accepted the additional books, they would have used them as part of the canon. Josephus, who used the Septuagint and made references to 1 Esdras and 1 Maccabees writing about 90 A.D. states that the canon was closed in the time of Artaxerxes I whose reign ended in 423 B.C.[\[4\]](#) It is also important to note that Aquila’s Greek version of the OT made about 128 A.D., which was adopted by the Alexandrian Jews, did not include the Apocrypha.

Advocates of the Apocrypha argue that it does not matter if the Jews ever accepted the extra books since they rejected Jesus as well. They contend that the only important opinion is that of the early church. However, even the Christian era

copies of the Greek Septuagint differ in their selection of included books. The three oldest complete copies we have of the Greek OT include different additional books. Codex Vaticanus (4th century) omits 1 and 2 Maccabees, which is canonical according to the Roman Catholic Church, and includes 1 Esdras, which they reject. Codex Sinaiticus (4th century) leaves out Baruch, which is supposed to be canonical, but includes 4 Maccabees, which they reject. Codex Alexandrinus (5th century) includes three non-canonical Apocryphal books, 1 Esdras and 3 and 4 Maccabees.[\[5\]](#) All of this points to the fact that although these books were included in these early Bibles, this alone does not guarantee their status as canon.

Although some may find it unimportant that the Jews rejected the inspiration and canonicity of the Apocrypha, Paul argues in Romans that the Jews have been entrusted with the “very words of God.”[\[6\]](#) And as we will see, the early church was not unanimous regarding the appropriate use of the Apocrypha. But first, let’s consider how Jesus and the apostles viewed the Apocrypha.

## **Jesus and the Apostles**

Those who support the canonicity of the Apocrypha argue that both Jesus and his followers were familiar with the Greek OT called the Septuagint. They also argue that when the New Testament writers quote Old Testament passages, they are quoting from the Greek OT. Since the Septuagint included the additional books of the Apocrypha, Jesus and the apostles must have accepted the Apocrypha as inspired scripture. In other words, the acceptance of the Septuagint indicates acceptance of the Apocrypha as well. Finally, they contend that the New Testament is full of references to material found in the Apocrypha, further establishing its canonicity. A number of objections have been raised to these arguments.

First, the claim that the Septuagint of apostolic times included the Apocrypha is not certain. As we noted previously,

the earliest manuscripts we have of the entire Septuagint are from the 4th century. If Jesus used the Septuagint, it may or may not have included the extra books. Also remember that although the 4th century copies do include the Apocryphal books, none include the same list of books. Second, F. F. Bruce argues that instead of using the Septuagint, which was probably available at the time, Jesus and his disciples actually used the Hebrew text during His ministry. Bruce writes, "When Jesus was about to read the second lesson in the Nazareth synagogue . . . it was most probably a Hebrew scroll that he received." [\[7\]](#) It was later, as the early church formed and the gospel was carried to the Greek-speaking world, that the Septuagint became the text often used by the growing church.

Bruce agrees that all the writers of the New Testament made use of the Septuagint. However, none of them gives us an exact list of what the canonical books are. While it is possible that New Testament writers like Paul allude to works in the Apocrypha, that alone does not give those works scriptural status. The problem for those advocating a wider canon is that the New Testament writers allude to, or even quote many works that no one claims to be inspired. For instance, Paul may be thinking of the book of Wisdom when he wrote the first few chapters of Romans. But what of the much clearer reference in Jude 14 to 1 Enoch 1:9, which no one claims to be inspired? How about the possible use of a work called the *Assumption of Moses* that appears to be referenced in Jude 9? Should this work also be part of the canon? Then there is Paul's occasional use of Greek authors to make a point. In Acts 17 Paul quotes line five from Aratus' *Phaenomena*, and in 1 Corinthians he quotes from Menander's comedy, *Thais*. No one claims that these works are inspired.

Recognizing the fact that the Septuagint was probably available to both Jesus and his disciples, it becomes even more remarkable that there are no direct quotes from any of

the Apocryphal books being championed for canonicity. Jesus makes clear reference to all but four Old Testament books from the Hebrew canon, but he never directly refers to the apocryphal books.

## The Church Fathers

Those who support the canonicity of the Apocrypha argue that the early church Fathers accepted the books as Scripture. In reality, their support is anything but unanimous. Although many of the church Fathers held the books in high esteem, they often refused to include them in their list of inspired books.

In the Eastern Church, the home of the Septuagint, one would expect to find unanimous support for the canonicity of the "Septuagint plus," the Greek OT and the Apocrypha among the early Fathers. However, such is not the case. Although the well-known Justin Martyr rejected the Hebrew OT, accusing it of attempting to hide references to Christ, many others in the East accepted the Hebrew canon's shorter list of authoritative books. Melito of Sardis, the Bishop of Sardis in 170 A.D., listed the OT books in a letter to a friend. His list was identical to the Hebrew canon except for Esther. Another manuscript, written about the same time as Melito's by the Greek patriarchate in Jerusalem, listed the twenty-four (see footnote on how the books were counted) books of the Hebrew OT as the canon.[\[8\]](#)

Origen, who is considered to be the greatest Bible scholar among the Greek Fathers, limited the accepted OT scriptures to the twenty-four books of the Hebrew canon. Although he defends the use of such books as the History of Susanna, he rejects their canonicity. Both Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus limited the OT canon to the books of the Hebrew tradition. Athanasius, the defender of the Trinitarian view at the Council of Nicea, wrote in his thirty-ninth festal letter (which announced the date of Easter in 367) of his concern about the introduction of "apocryphal" works into the list of

holy scripture. Although he agreed that there are other books “to be read to those who are recent converts to our company and wish to be instructed in the word of true religion,” his list of OT agrees with the Hebrew canon. Gregory of Nazianzus is known for arranging the books of the Bible in verse form for memorization. He did not include the “Septuagint plus” books in his list. Eventually, in the 1600’s, the Eastern Church did officially accept the Septuagint with its extra books as canon, along with its claim that the Septuagint is the divinely inspired version of the OT.

In the Latin West, Tertullian was typical of church leaders up until Jerome. Tertullian accepted the entire “Septuagint plus” as canon and was willing to open the list even wider. He wanted to include 1 Enoch because of its mention in Jude. He also argued for the divine nature of the *Sibylline Oracles* as a parallel revelation to the Bible.[\[9\]](#)

However, Jerome is a pivotal person for understanding the relationship between the early church and the OT canon. Having mastered both Greek and eventually Hebrew, Jerome realized that the only satisfactory way to translate the OT is to abandon the Septuagint and work from the original Hebrew. Eventually, he separated the Apocryphal books from the rest of the Hebrew OT saying that “Whatever falls outside these (Hebrew texts) . . . are not in the canon.”[\[10\]](#) He added that the books may be read for edification, but not for ecclesiastical dogmas.

Although Augustine included the “Septuagint plus” books in his list of the canon, he didn’t know Hebrew. Jerome later convinced him of the inspired nature of the Hebrew OT, but Augustine never dropped his support for the Apocrypha. The early church Fathers were anything but unanimous in their support for the inspiration of the Apocrypha.

# The Question of Canonicity

The relationship between the church and the Bible is a complex one. The question of canonicity is often framed in an either/or setting. Either the infallible Roman Catholic Church, having absolute authority, decides the issue, or we have absolute chaos with no possible guidance whatsoever regarding the limits of what is inspired and what isn't.

In a recent meeting of Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox theologians called the Rose Hill conference, evangelical theologian Harold O. J. Brown asks that we hold a dynamic view of this relationship between the church and the Bible. He notes that Catholics have argued "that the church—the Catholic Church—gave us the Bible and that church authority authenticates it."[\[11\]](#) Protestants have responded with the view that "Scripture creates the church, which is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles."[\[12\]](#) However, he admits that there is no way to make the New Testament older than the church. Does this leave us then bowing to church authority only? Brown doesn't think so. He writes, "[I]t is the work of the Spirit that makes the Scripture divinely authoritative and preserves them from error. In addition the Holy Spirit was active in the early congregations and councils, enabling them to recognize the right Scriptures as God's Word." He adds that even though the completed canon is younger than the church, it is not in captivity to the church. Instead, "it is the 'norm that norms' the church's teaching and life."[\[13\]](#)

Many Catholics argue that the additional books found in the Apocrypha (Septuagint plus) which they call the deuterocanon, were universally held by the early church to be canonical. This is a considerable overstatement. However, Protestants have acted as if these books never existed or played any role whatsoever in the early church. This too is an extreme position. Although many of the early church fathers recognized

a distinction between the Apocryphal books and inspired Scripture, they universally held them in high regard. Protestants who are serious students of their faith cannot ignore this material if they hope to understand the early church or the thinking of its earliest theologians.

On the issue of canonicity, of the Old Testament or the New, Norman Geisler lists the principles that outline the Protestant perspective. Put in the form of a series of questions he asks, "Was the book written by a spokesperson for God, who was confirmed by an act of God, who told the truth in the power of God, and was accepted by the people of God?"[{14}](#) If these can be answered in the affirmative, especially the first question, the book was usually immediately recognized as inspired and included in the canon. The Old Testament Apocrypha lacks many of these characteristics. None of the books claim to be written by a prophet and Maccabees specifically denies being prophetic.[{15}](#) Others contain extensive factual errors.[{16}](#) Most importantly, many in the early church including Melito of Sardis, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Jerome rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha, although retaining high regards for its devotional and inspirational value.

A final irony in this matter is the fact that even Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Luther at Augsburg in 1518, published a *Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament* (1532) in which he did not include the Apocrypha.[{17}](#)

## Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 43.
2. Ibid., 45.
3. Gleason L Archer., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974), 73.
4. Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament*



(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p 99.

5. Archer, 73.

6. Romans 3:2 (NIV)

7. Bruce, 49.

8. Ibid., 72. Ezra and Nehemiah were often combined into one book, as were Lamentations and Jeremiah and the twelve minor prophets.

9. Ibid., 87.

10. Ibid., 90.

11. Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture With The Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 187.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1999) 85.

15. Ibid., 32.

16. Unger, 109-111.

17. Geisler, 31

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# The Bible Code

Written by Richard Milne

*How should thinking Christians respond to purported information embedded in the Bible's original language? There is more to "The Bible Code" than meets the eye.*

## What Is a Bible Code?

There is no way to ignore the clear fact that a computerized code in the Bible . . . accurately predicted the Gulf War,

the collision of a comet with Jupiter, and the assassination of [Israeli Prime Minister] Rabin, also seems to state that the Apocalypse starts now, that within a decade, we may face the real Armageddon, a nuclear World War.[\(1\)](#)

So ends Michael Drosnin's best-seller *The Bible Code*. On the *New York Times* bestseller list for months, the book has created a small industry of people selling books about secret codes, and a huge audience of people reading about and discussing codes. And what are these "codes" that are so fascinating and how does the Bible fit into all of this? Those are just a few of the questions we will address in this essay as we try to reach some balanced conclusions about a very controversial topic.

People have written codes since at least 400 B.C., and Jewish scholars have looked for codes in the text of the Old Testament for approximately a thousand years. *Gematria*, the discipline of changing portions of text into numbers to look for a deeper meaning, has been part of Jewish Cabalistic tradition since at least the 13th century. But it is only in the last twenty years that computers have extended the range of text searches to almost unimaginable lengths.

At the heart of the current controversy is a scientific paper by three Israeli mathematicians with the helpful title of: "Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis." A quite technical paper, it was published in *Statistical Science* in 1994.[\(2\)](#) As is typical in scientific publications, it was peer reviewed. In fact, three other qualified statisticians read the paper, and while confounded by the results, each agreed that the mathematics and data used seemed legitimate. So what did Doron Witztum, Eliyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg write that has caused so much excitement?

In the 1980s Eliyahu Rips, an Orthodox Jew and well-known Israeli mathematician, came across the writings of Rabbi Michael Weismandel. The book is so rare that Rips found only

one copy, at the National Library in Israel. Rabbi Weismandel discovered that by starting with the first Hebrew letter "T" in the book of Genesis and counting forward 49 letters to find an "O" as the 50th letter, and then another 49 letters to an "R," another 49 letters to an "A," and finally another 49 letters to an "H," the word TORAH was spelled out. "Torah" is the Hebrew name for the books Moses wrote. This same pattern happens in the book of Exodus. But in Numbers and Deuteronomy one must count backwards beginning at either the first or fifth verse. But why 50?[\(3\)](#)

In Jewish rabbinic tradition, most numbers are symbolic. For example, 50 is the year of Jubilee, the year that all land goes back to its original owner, when all debts are canceled, when the land rests for the whole year. It is also said that there are fifty gates of wisdom in the Torah.

Rabbi Weismandel is reputed to have found many patterns like this in the Torah as he laboriously counted by hand again and again in the most holy of all Jewish books. Rips was fascinated by these patterns and wondered what a computer could do to find more patterns.

Now, let's see what Eli Rips discovered as he looked at the text with a computer.

## **Bible Codes Are Demonstrated by Mathematics and Computers**

Michael Drosnin's book, *The Bible Code*, describes the discovery by Eli Rips and others, of messages they claim are coded into the text of the Hebrew Old Testament, and only discoverable in our own time by using computers. These codes warn of dire events in the near future that could affect the whole world. But how are these messages hidden in a book that has been read for more than 2,000 years?

What Rips uncovered was that if he used Rabbi Weismandel's

idea of counting off equal intervals between letters, he could find many words in the Hebrew text. The technical name for this method is quite a mouthful: Equidistant Letter Sequences, or ELS. A computer program finds the first letter of a word, and then begins counting until it finds the next letter of the word. This becomes the "skip code." Then, using that skip code, it counts to see if the third letter of the word is found at that same interval. So it would start by skipping every other letter, then every two letters, then every three letters until it finds a "skip" that spells out the word. Thus, as mentioned earlier, the Hebrew word for the first five books of the Bible, "Torah," is spelled out with an ELS of 50 in the book of Genesis.

This might be the answer to an interesting trivia question, but why is *The Bible Code* selling thousands of copies? That's because Michael Drosnin has made some astounding claims about the ELS codes: that one code anticipated, weeks in advance, the exact day the Gulf War would start; that another code predicted Yitzhak Rabin's assassination by a man named Amir; that a code anticipated, within two years of the actual events, earthquakes in Japan; and that in the year 2000 or 2006 an atomic holocaust, beginning in Israel, is likely. This is great millennial material!

Drosnin's book is based on a paper published in *Statistical Science* in 1994 by Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg. With great statistical rigor, the authors show that the 78,064 Hebrew letters of the Book of Genesis, when set out with no spaces or punctuation, can be searched by a computer for specific words spelled out by ELS codes. Specifically, they set out to see if they could find the names of 32 famous rabbis in Genesis. Not only did they find ELS codes that spelled out all 32 rabbis, but near their names were coded their birth dates or death dates, or sometimes both. How could any author have known these details 2000 years before these men lived?

This is amazing enough. The odds are said to be one in ten

million! But in his book, Drosnin claims the same kind of codes revealed that Prime Minister Rabin would be assassinated a year before it happened. Drosnin even got a letter delivered through a friend to Rabin, but it was ignored. He also shows dozens of other historic events and how details about them are encoded all around where an ELS code finds the main name or event.

As you might guess, the response to the book has been mixed—to say the least. Most people say, “How could a three-thousand-year-old book possibly say anything about the future?” Others see this as proof that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God. And some are just interested but very skeptical.

Next, we’ll look at the reaction to *The Bible Code* and why some are so critical.

## Critical Reactions to the Bible Codes

A book making claims to “foretell” the future is almost certain to become a target for both eager followers and cynical scholars. In particular, a rift has developed between the original writers of the mathematical paper, and how Drosnin has used their work.

Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg, while maintaining the accuracy of their original paper, say that Drosnin’s attempts to state what may happen in the future are “futile,” and that Drosnin’s book “employs no scientific methodology.” [\(4\)](#) Witztum categorically states “predicting the future is impossible.” Seems like a strange statement from a man who claims in his own paper that the ELS codes found the names, birth dates, death dates, and cities of residence of 32 rabbis thousands of years before any of them had been born. What the original authors of the *Statistical Science* paper claim is that the ELS codes they have discovered can only give information about what one has a place or name for already. In this view, codes can tell us about death camps in Germany because we know what

to look for. Witxtum uses this to demonstrate ELS codes at work.

What can we find out about Auschwitz? First, we must have mathematical tools to measure whether a specific ELS and the words found near it are statistically significant. This is provided by the calculations laid out in the 1994 paper, *Statistical Science*. Then one must have a prepared list of words one is looking for.

So, Witztum begins with the words “of Auschwitz” and a list of all of the subcamps of this World War II death camp. Once an ELS for Auschwitz is found, Witztum claims, “We find something very unexpected that [the names of all the subcamps] consistently appear in the area of the words ‘of Auschwitz.’” This, he says, is all that Bible codes can do. Codes cannot predict the future.[\(5\)](#)

But when Genesis was written, all 32 rabbis found in Genesis were still far in the future. The earliest rabbi found lived in the eighth century A.D. This is nearly 2,000 years after Moses. Isn’t that predicting the future, at least from the author’s point of view?

Michael Drosnin himself has been ambivalent about what the codes tell us. His book says, “I found the Bible code’s *prediction* of [Rabin’s] assassination myself. . . . When he was killed, as *predicted*, where *predicted*, my first thought was, ‘Oh my God, it’s real’”[\(6\)](#) (emphasis mine). But in a CNN interview he said, “I don’t think the code makes predictions. I think it might tell us about possible futures.”[\(7\)](#) Either Drosnin has changed his mind, or he is disingenuous in his book.

Harold Gans, a retired senior mathematician for the U.S. Department of Defense, and an expert at making and breaking codes, was one of the first mathematicians to look at the Bible codes. Highly skeptical at first, he duplicated their

experiment, finding the same information. Still suspicious, Gans made up his own test: find the rabbis' cities of birth and death. Again the information appeared in close connection with their ELS codes. His conclusion: "The information was deliberately placed in the Bible by its author. . . . Logic would dictate that the author could not be human, could not be bound by the limits of time. It would be natural to conclude that the author is a divine being." [\(8\)](#)

Is there finally "proof" that the Bible was written by a divine being? That is our next subject.

## **Do the Bible Codes Prove Divine Inspiration?**

Have codes hidden in the Bible finally proved it to be written by God? As we stated earlier, mathematician and code expert Harold Gans thinks so. What about *The Bible Code's*, Michael Drosnin? His own response is quite remarkable: "Everyone I met with seemed to assume that if the code was real, it must be from God. I did not. I could easily believe that it was from someone good, who wanted to save us, but was not our Creator. Clearly it was not someone omnipotent, or he would simply prevent the danger, instead of encoding a warning." [\(9\)](#)

On the other hand, a Jewish group called Aish HeTorah has developed a Discovery Seminar that has been given to nearly 70,000 people in the last ten years. To help attendees develop an "appreciation of the relevance and value of Torah and Judaism in their lives," roughly 20% of the Discovery Seminar features the work of Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg. Harold Gans, the Defense Department code specialist mentioned earlier, is an advisor for this group, so compelling has this evidence become for him. [\(10\)](#)

Christians, too, have started looking for ELS codes, claiming to find the Hebrew for Jesus in all sorts of interesting passages about the coming Messiah. Two books by Christians are

already out, and surely more will follow. So is this finally “the most important evidence that proves to this generation that the Bible is truly inspired by God” [\(11\)](#) as one Christian writer says?

Brendan McKay is a man with a sense of humor. He also has a mission: to show that even the mathematical uses of ELS codes prove nothing. McKay is an Australian mathematician who has published the first statistical critique of the WRR paper. But at his Web site he has accumulated a most interesting series of what he calls “pictures,” much like the diagrams Drosnin published in *The Bible Code*. In these “pictures” he does exactly what Drosnin does: he looks for a word by ELS codes, and then sees what other words occur nearby. He has also taken up Drosnin’s challenge in *Newsweek* magazine: “When my critics find a message about the assassination of a prime minister encrypted in *Moby Dick*, I’ll believe them.” [\(12\)](#)

Undoubtedly Drosnin felt he had nothing to fear: hadn’t Rips and his colleagues tried to find information in the Hebrew version of *War and Peace* and found nothing? But published on McKay’s web page are the diagrams from *Moby Dick* of predictions of the death of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India, Lebanese President Moawad, Marxist Leon Trotsky, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, and even Princess Diana. For Lady Diana, not only is her boyfriend Dodi spelled out across her name, but even the name of their chauffeur, Henri Paul is there! And more are added regularly. But by far the most ironic “discovery” concerns the death of Drosnin himself. The place, method, and motive for his death are all spelled out. [\(13\)](#)

McKay’s technical paper claims to duplicate the WRR paper but finds the 32 rabbis encoded in the Hebrew of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. [\(14\)](#) McKay and his co-author use the same statistical methods, and have Jewish authorities to back their spellings for the rabbis names, just as WRR had. So what does this tell us? At this point, no one knows for certain.



Finally, let's consider how Christians might want to think about this whole controversy.

## How Should Christians Respond to the Bible Codes?

How should thinking Christians respond to these seemingly incredible findings of future events foretold in the Bible, but hidden in codes only a computer can find? Undoubtedly, it is too early to say very much, as even the specific methods and mathematical checks have yet to be agreed upon. But certain things appear to be clear.

We know very little about how sequences of letters behave when not written by an author, but rather put together by a program within a computer. Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg make certain assumptions about what would and would not be a significantly close connection between two sets of words to rule out random placement. But these are, in the end, arbitrary. What McKay and Dror Bar-Natan have done in their own paper, "Equidistant Letter Sequences in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*," is demonstrate to their satisfaction that whatever phenomena occurs in the Hebrew text of Genesis can also be found in the Hebrew text of *War and Peace*.[\(15\)](#)

The scholarly arguing about method and mathematics is still going on, but what seems to be emerging is the fact that almost any "message" can be found if a sufficiently long text is used. If this is true, then we have learned something new about how humans who can program computers can find non-random messages in random texts, but we have not shown that a divine intelligence wrote the Bible.

An important question to ask ourselves is, "Why are we so fascinated by codes and mysterious messages in a book as clear as the Bible?" Do we not trust that God has given us all we need to know, both for ourselves and to evangelize the world, in the text that all of us can read? Perhaps for His own

pleasure, God has indeed hidden certain things in the text of the Bible, but surely they are not the main message. God has given us the Bible so that we might know Him and make Him known. ELS codes in the Bible do not seem to do much more than pique curiosity.

Our responsibility is to read the text for what it says, not for what may be hidden under the surface. We know from the Book of Revelation that some great cataclysm is coming, and as it draws nearer, we are warned not to be misled. Jesus vividly portrayed how obvious His return would be: "Just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be." [\(16\)](#) So as you watch the news and the millennium approaches, keep your "[baloney detectors](#)" alert!

Will Bible codes become an important tool in the apologetic toolkit of evangelical Christians? We should be very cautious when we do not use God's Word as He wrote it. Merely studying the Bible codes will not necessarily result in Christian faith. For example, Michael Drosnin, after years of research for his book, *The Bible Code*, was still an atheist: "I had proof there was a code, but not proof there was a God. . . . I don't believe in God. . . . The message of the Bible code is that we can save ourselves." [\(17\)](#) If that is all that Drosnin came to believe after working with these codes for five years, we are probably better off having people read the Bible and encountering the real God through His own words. One needs no codes to read and understand John 3:16.

## Notes

1. Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 179.
2. Doron Witztum, Eliyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg, "Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis," *Statistical Science*, 1994, vol. 9, no. 3, 429-438.
3. Drosnin, 20-21.

4. <http://www.discoveryseminar.org/cgi-bin/var/aishdisc/witztum.html>
5. Ibid.
6. Drosnin, 14.
7. Interview on CNN www page, "Meet Michael Drosnin the Author, *The Bible Code*.'" "
8. Harold Gans, "Bible Codes," <http://www.discoveryseminar.org/bc.html>
9. Drosnin, 79.
10. Aish HaToreh, "Discovery" web page.
11. Yocov Rembsel, *Yeshua* (Toronto, Ontario: Frontier Research Publications, 1996), vi.
12. *Newsweek*, 9 June 1997.
13. [Http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/moby.html](http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/moby.html)
14. "Equidistant Letter Sequences in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*," [bdm@cs.anu.edu.au](mailto:bdm@cs.anu.edu.au)
15. Ibid.
16. Matthew 24:27.
17. Drosnin, 103, 179.

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## The Christian Canon

*Don Closson provides a summary of the process through which the books of the New Testament were selected by the early church fathers and brought down to modern times. Understanding how the books of the Bible were determined according to important criteria of authorship, wide acceptance and relevance, help give us an appreciation for the wonder of God's word to us.*

# The Early Church Fathers

Some Christians are unnerved by the fact that nowhere does God itemize the sixty-six books that are to be included in the Bible. Many believers have at best a vague notion of how the church arrived at what we call the Canon of Scripture. Even after becoming more aware, some believers are uncomfortable with the process by which the New Testament Canon was determined. For many, it was what appears to be a haphazard process that took far too long.

Furthermore, whether talking with a Jehovah's Witness, a liberal theologian, or a New Ager, Christians are very likely to run into questions concerning the extent, adequacy, and accuracy of the Bible as God's revealed Word.

In this essay, therefore, we will consider the development of the doctrine of the Scriptures in the Church Age. Just how did the church decide on the books for inclusion in the New Testament? This discussion will include both how the Canon was established and the various ways theologians have viewed the Bible since the Canon was established.

The period immediately following the passing of the Apostles is known as the period of the Church Fathers. Many of these men walked with the Apostles and were taught directly by them. Polycarp and Papias, for instance, are considered to have been disciples of the Apostle John. Doctrinal authority during this period rested on two sources, the Old Testament (O.T.) and the notion of Apostolic succession, being able to trace a direct association to one of the Apostles and thus to Christ. Although the New Testament (N.T.) Canon was written, it was not yet seen as a separate body of books equivalent to the O.T. Six church leaders are commonly referred to: Barnabas, Hermas, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Papias, and Ignatius (Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 37). Although these men lacked the technical sophistication of today's theologians, their correspondence confirmed the teachings of

the Apostles and provides a doctrinal link to the N.T. Canon itself. Christianity was as yet a fairly small movement. These Church Fathers, often elders and bishops in the early Church, were consumed by the practical aspects of Christian life among the new converts. Therefore, when Jehovah's Witnesses argue that the early church did not have a technical theology of the Trinity, they are basically right. There had been neither time nor necessity to focus on the issue. On the other hand these men clearly believed that Jesus was God as was the Holy Spirit, but they had yet to clarify in writing the problems that might occur when attempting to explain this truth.

The early Church Fathers had no doubt about the authority of the O.T., often prefacing their quotes with "For thus saith God" and other notations. As a result they tended to be rather moralistic and even legalistic on some issues. Because the N.T. Canon was not yet settled, they respected and quoted from works that have generally passed out of the Christian tradition. The books of Hermas, Barnabas, Didache, and 1 and 2 Clement were all regarded highly (Hannah, *Lecture Notes for the History of Doctrine*, 2.2). As Berkhof writes concerning these early Church leaders, "For them Christianity was not in the first place a knowledge to be acquired, but the principle of a new obedience to God" (Berkhof, *History of the Christian Church*, 39).

Although these early Church Fathers may seem rather ill-prepared to hand down all the subtle implications of the Christian faith to the coming generations, they form a doctrinal link to the Apostles (and thus to our Lord Jesus Christ), as well as a witness to the growing commitment to the Canon of Scripture that would become the N.T. As Clement of Rome said in first century, "Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit" (Geisler, *Decide For Yourself*, 11).

# The Apologists

After the early Church Fathers comes the era of the Apologists and Theologians, roughly including the second, third, and fourth centuries. It is during this period that the Church takes the initial steps toward establishing a “rule of faith” or Canon.

During this period both internal and external forces caused the church to begin to systematize both its doctrines and its view of revelation. Much of the systemization came about as a defense against the heresies that challenged the faith of the Apostles. Ebionitism humanized Jesus and rejected the writings of Paul, resulting in a more Jewish than Christian faith. Gnosticism attempted to blend oriental theosophy, Hellenistic philosophy, and Christianity into a new religion that saw the physical creation as evil and Christ as a celestial being with secret knowledge to teach us. It often portrayed the God of the O.T. as inferior to the God of the N.T. Marcion and his movement also separated the God of the Old and New Testaments, accepting Paul and Luke as the only writers who really understood the Gospel of Christ (Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 54). Montanus, responding to the gnostics, ended up claiming that he and two others were new prophets offering the highest and most accurate revelation from God. Although they were basically orthodox, they exalted martyrdom and a legalistic asceticism that led to their rejection by the Church.

Although the term *canon* was not used in reference to the N.T. texts until the fourth century by Athanasius, there were earlier attempts to list the acceptable books. The Muratorian Canon listed all the books of the Bible except for 1 John, 1 and 2 Peter, Hebrews, and James around A.D. 180 (Hannah, Notes, 2.5). Irenaeus, as bishop of Lyon, mentions all of the books except Jude, 2 Peter, James, Philemon, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. The Syriac Version of the Canon, from the third

century, leaves out Revelation.

It should be noted that although these early Church leaders differed on which books should be included in the Canon, they were quite sure that the books were inspired by God. Irenaeus, in his work *Against Heresies*, argues that, "The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God [Christ] and His Spirit" (Geisler, *Decide For Yourself*, 12). By the fourth century many books previously held in high regard began to disappear from use and the apocryphal writings were seen as less than inspired.

It was during the fourth century that concentrated attempts were made both in the East and the West to establish the authoritative collection of the Canon. In 365, Athanasius of Alexandria listed the complete twenty-seven books of the New Testament which he regarded as the "only source of salvation and of the authentic teaching of the religion of the Gospel" (Hannah, *Notes*, 2.6). While Athanasius stands out in the Eastern Church, Jerome is his counterpart in the West. Jerome wrote a letter to Paulinus, bishop of Nola in 394 listing just 39 O.T. books and our current 27 N.T. ones. It was in 382 that Bishop Damasus had Jerome work on a Latin text to standardize the Scripture. The resulting Vulgate was used throughout the Christian world. The Synods of Carthage in 397 and 418 both confirmed our current twenty-seven books of the NT.

The criteria used for determining the canonicity of the books included the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in general, and specifically Apostolic origin or sanction, usage by the Church, intrinsic content, spiritual and moral effect, and the attitude of the early church.

## **The Medieval and Reformation Church**

In the fourth century Augustine voiced his belief in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the N.T. text, as did Justin

Martyr in the second. This meant that every part of the Scriptures, down to the individual word, was chosen by God to be written by the human writers. But still, the issue of what should be included in the Canon was not entirely settled. Augustine included the Book of Wisdom as part of the Canon and held that the Septuagint or Greek text of the O.T. was inspired, not the Hebrew original. The Church Fathers were sure that the Scriptures were inspired, but they were still not in agreement as to which texts should be included.

As late as the seventh and eighth centuries there were church leaders who added to or subtracted from the list of texts. Gregory the Great added Tobias and Wisdom and mentioned 15 Pauline epistles, not 14. John of Damascus, the first Christian theologian who attempted a complete systematic theology, rejected the O.T. apocrypha, but added the Apostolic Constitution and 1 and 2 Clement to the N.T. One historian notes that "things were no further advanced at the end of the fourteenth century than they had been at the end of the fourth" (Hannah, *Notes*, 3.3). This same historian notes that although we would be horrified at such a state today, the Catholicism of the day rested far more on ecclesiastical authority and tradition than on an authoritative Canon. Thus Roman Catholicism did not find the issue to be a critical one.

The issue of canonical authority finally is addressed within the bigger battle between Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation. In 1545 the Council of Trent was called as a response to the Protestant heresy by the Catholic Church. As usual, the Catholic position rested upon the authority of the Church hierarchy itself. It proposed that all the books found in Jerome's Vulgate were of equal canonical value (even though Jerome himself separated the Apocrypha from the rest) and that the Vulgate would become the official text of the Church. The council then established the Scriptures as equivalent to the authority of tradition.

The reformers were also forced to face the Canon issue.



Instead of the authority of the Church, Luther and the reformers focused on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Luther was troubled by four books, Jude, James, Hebrews, and Revelation, and though he placed them in a secondary position relative to the rest, he did not exclude them. John Calvin also argued for the witness of the Spirit (Hannah, *Notes*, 3.7). In other words, it is God Himself, via the Holy Spirit who assures the transmission of the text down through the ages, not the human efforts of the Catholic Church or any other group. Calvin rests the authority of the Scripture on the witness of the Spirit and the conscience of the godly. He wrote in his *Institutes*,

*Let it therefore be held as fixed, that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture; that Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit. Enlightened by him, we no longer believe, either on our own judgment or that of others, that the Scriptures are from God; but, in a way superior to human judgment, feel perfectly assured as much so as if we beheld the divine image visibly impressed on it that it came to us, by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God.*

He goes on to say, "We ask not for proofs or probabilities on which to rest our judgment, but we subject our intellect and judgment to it as too transcendent for us to estimate."

## **Modern Views**

Although the early church, up until the Reformation, was not yet united as to which books belonged in the Canon, they were certain that the books were inspired by God and contained the Gospel message that He desired to communicate to a fallen world. After the Reformation, the books of the Canon were

widely agreed upon, but now the question was, Were they inspired? Were they God breathed as Paul declared in 2 Timothy 3:16?

What led to this new controversy? A great change began to occur in the way that learned men and women thought about the nature of the universe, God, and man's relationship to both. Thinking in the post-Reformation world began to shift from a Christian theistic worldview to a pantheistic or naturalistic one. As men like Galileo and Francis Bacon began to lay the foundation for modern science, their successes led others to apply their empirical methodology to answering philosophical and theological questions.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), although a believer, began his search for knowledge from a position of doubt, assuming only that he exists because he is able to ask the question. Although he ends up affirming God, he is able to do this only by assuming God's existence, not via rational discovery (Hannah, *Notes*, 4.2). Others that followed built upon his system and came to different conclusions. Spinoza (1633-77) arrived at pantheism, a belief that all is god, and Leibnitz (1646-1716) concluded that it is impossible to acquire religious knowledge from a study of history.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) took another step away from the notion of revealed truth. He attempted to build a philosophy using only reason and sense perception; he rejected the idea that God might have imprinted the human mind with knowledge of Himself. Another big step was taken by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Attempting to protect Christian thinking from the attacks of science and reason, he separated knowledge of God or spirit and knowledge of the phenomenal world. The first was unknowable, the second was knowable. Christianity was reduced to a set of morals, the source of which was unknowable by humanity.

The 1800s brought with it the fruit of Kant's separation of

truth from theology. German theologians built upon Kant's foundation resulting in man becoming the source of meaning and God fading into obscurity. Frederick Schleiermacher (1768-1834) replaced revelation with religious feeling, and salvation by grace with self-analysis. The Scriptures have authority over us only if we have a religious feeling about them first. The faith that leads to this religious feeling may come from a source completely independent of the Scriptures.

David Strauss (1808-74) completely breaks from the earlier high view of Scripture. He affirms a naturalistic worldview by denying the reality of a supernatural dimension. In his book, *Leben Jesu* ("The Life of Jesus"), he completely denies any supernatural events traditionally associated with Jesus and His apostles, and calls the Resurrection of Christ "nothing other than a myth" (Hannah, *Notes*, 4.5). Strauss goes on to claim that if Jesus had really spoken of Himself as the N.T. records, He must have been out of His mind. In the end, Strauss argues that the story we have of Christ is a fabrication constructed by the disciples who added to the life of Christ what they needed to in order for Him to become the Messiah. Strauss's work would be the foundation for numerous attacks on the accuracy and authenticity of the N.T. writers, and of the ongoing attempt, even today, to demythologize the text and find the so-called "real Jesus of history."

## What Now?

As one reviews the unfolding story of how the Canon of Christian Scriptures has been formed and then interpreted, we can get a fairly accurate picture of the changes that have taken place in the thinking of Western civilization. Two thousand years ago men walked with Christ and experienced His deity first hand. God, through the Holy Spirit, led many of these men to compose an inspired account of their experiences which revealed to the following generations what God had done to save a fallen world. This text along with the notion of

Apostolic succession was accepted as authoritative by the emerging Christian population, and would eventually come to dominate much of Western thought. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation rejected the role of tradition, mainly the Roman Catholic Church, when it had begun to supersede the authority of Scripture. Later, the Enlightenment began the process of removing the possibility of revelation by elevating man's reason and limiting our knowledge to what science could acquire. This was the birth of Modernism, attempting to answer all the questions of life without God.

The wars and horrors of the twentieth century have crushed many thinkers' trust in mankind's ability to implement a neutral, detached scientific mind to our problems and its ability to determine truth. As a result, many have rejected modernism and the scientific mind and have embraced a postmodernist position which denies anyone's ability to be a neutral collector of truth, which might be true for everyone, everywhere. This has left us with individual experience and personal truth. Which really means that truth no longer exists. What does this mean for the theologian who has accepted the conclusions of postmodern thinking? One theologian writes, "At the present, however, there is no general agreement even as to what theology is, much less how to get on with the task of systematics. . . . We are, for the most part, uncertain even as to what the options are" (Robert H. King, *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, 1-2).

This same theologian argues that Christian theology can no longer rest upon metaphysics or history. In other words, neither man's attempt to explain the causes or nature of reality nor the historical record of any texts, including the Bible can give us a sure foundation for doing theology. We have the remarkable situation of modern theologians attempting to do theology without any knowledge of God and His dealings with His creation. It is not surprising that modern

theologians are seeing Hare Krishna and Zen Buddhism, along with other Eastern traditions, as possibilities for integration with Christian thought or at least Christian ethics. These traditions are not rooted in historical events and often deny any basis in rational thinking, even to the point of questioning the reality of the self (King, *Christian Theology*, 27).

Once individuals refuse to accept the claim of inspiration that the Bible makes for itself, they are left with a set of ethics without a foundation. History has shown us that it rarely takes more than a generation for this kind of religion to lose its significance within a culture. How then do we know that Christianity is true? William Lane Craig, in his book *Reasonable Faith*, makes an important point. As believers, we know that the Scriptures are inspired, and that the Gospel message is true, by the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. We show that it is true to unbelievers by demonstrating that it is systematically consistent. We make belief possible by using both historical evidence and philosophical tools. However, it is ultimately the Holy Spirit that softens hearts and calls men and women to believe in the God of the Bible.

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