



**CHRIST COMMUNITY**  
— CHURCH —

# **The Bible is God's Word**

# We Believe the Bible is God's Word

## Introduction

The Christian faith is founded upon historical events, but not merely upon historical events. It is also founded upon the biblical explanation of the meaning of those events. The events themselves - the death, burial and resurrection of Christ - are impressive, but without explanation they would be mute and powerless to create individual Christian faith or the church. On the other hand, the biblical explanation that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has redeemed us from our sins might be novel and intriguing but, without the historical events, would amount to little more than wishful thinking. The Apostle Paul stated that the gospel is the combined proclamation of the redemptive events and their divinely revealed explanation, "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." This conviction that the Scriptures are God's Word, that the biblical explanation is God's explanation in human language and writing, is foundational to Christian faith. The Scriptures to which Paul referred are today represented to us in the various editions, versions and translations that we know collectively as the "Bible." The purpose of this paper is to offer evidence that the Bible is, in fact, God's Word.

To sustain the proposition that the Bible is God's Word involves, in turn, defending three more specific concepts: 1) that the original inspired documents have been accurately preserved and transmitted to us through the centuries. This is to argue for the accurate *transmission* of the documents. 2) that the writings of the Bible as they originally appeared were God's Word. This is to argue

for the *inspiration* of the original writings. 3) that the Bible as known to us today contains all of those inspired writings and no uninspired writings. This is to argue for the *canonization* of the inspired writings. Each of these concepts must be valid if the major premise is to be sustained. We might possess accurate copies of the original documents and an exact accounting of those documents which claimed to be inspired, but if, in fact, they were not inspired to begin with then the Bible is not God's Word. If the original documents were inspired and have been accurately transmitted to us, but we are unsure whether we have the correct writings in our Bible, then we cannot be confident that the Bible is God's Word. Again, we might have the correct writings in our collection and we might be confident that the originals of these documents were inspired, but if our copies have been transmitted poorly and the text is corrupt, then the result cannot be said to be God's Word. Since arguments for the inspiration and proper canonization of the writings depend to some degree upon the accurate transmission of the documents, this point, transmission, will be considered first.

## **The Transmission of the Biblical Text**

We do not possess the original writings of any of the biblical writers. We know their writings only through successive handwritten copies of their works or handwritten copies of copies known as manuscripts. At first glance this might seem to severely undermine our confidence in the accuracy of our modern editions. Consider, however, that: 1) This is the case for virtually all ancient writings written at or before the time the last biblical book was written. The writings of Plato, Seneca, Julius Caesar, Mohammed, Confucius and so on, do not exist as originals, but are known only through later copies. 2) The quantity and quality of the manuscript evidence for biblical texts far exceed those for any other ancient writing. 3) The biblical text is subject to the

principles of textual criticism, a well developed science which applies standard principles to reconstruct ancient texts from manuscript evidence. Textual criticism, as a scholarly discipline, is independent of religious commitment or bias. The confidence we have in our modern editions rests to a large degree upon the manuscript evidence and the analysis of that evidence under the principles and practice of textual criticism.

## **The Old Testament Manuscript Evidence**

It has been estimated that there are tens of thousands of Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts, dating from between the third century B.C. and the fourteenth century A.D., throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> The books of the Old Testament, however, are preserved for us not only in Hebrew manuscripts, including the "Samaritan Pentateuch," a separate family of manuscripts originating in the fifth or fourth century B.C., but also in manuscripts representing ancient non-Hebrew versions such the Greek Septuagint, Old Latin, Latin Vulgate, Syriac Peshitta, Aramaic Targums, Coptic, Ethiopic, Georgian, Arabic, and Slavonic. These non-Hebrew translations of the Old Testament, especially the Greek and Latin, are very valuable as independent witnesses in evaluating variant readings in the Hebrew manuscripts.

The most significant Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts for the preparation of modern critical editions date from between the ninth and eleventh centuries A.D. They were the work of a group of Jewish scribes known as the Masoretes and are referred to collectively as the Masoretic text. Some of the most important of these are:

- 1) Orientales 4445, dated by C. D. Ginsburg between A.D. 820-850, contains Gen 39:20-Deut 1:33, minus

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<sup>1</sup> Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, (Moody Press, Chicago, 1968, 1986), 357-8.

small sections of Numbers. 2) Cairo Codex written by Moses ben Asher in Tiberias in A.D. 895, contains Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, the major and minor prophets. 3) Aleppo Codex, copied by Shelomo ben Baya'a sometime before A.D. 930 when its vowel points were added by Moses ben Asher, contains the whole Old Testament. 4) Leningrad Codex,<sup>2</sup> copied in Cairo by Samuel ben Jacob in A.D. 1008, contains the whole Old Testament. 5) Babylonian Codex of the Later Prophets, copied in 916, contains Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the minor prophets. 6) Reuchlin Codex of the Prophets, copied in A.D. 1150.

Major modern discoveries of more ancient Hebrew OT manuscripts and fragments include the Cairo Geniza (1890ff), the Nash Papyrus (1903), and the Dead Sea scrolls (1947ff). The Cairo Geniza, the attic storeroom of an ancient synagogue (literally a "lumber room"), contained over 200,000 Hebrew manuscript fragments, approximately 10,000 of which were biblical, some predating the medieval manuscripts listed above by several hundred years.<sup>3</sup> The Nash Papyrus is a manuscript fragment, containing the Decalogue (Ex 20:21ff) and the Shema (Deut 6:4-9).<sup>4</sup> At the time of its discovery, it was the oldest known surviving Hebrew biblical fragment, dating to the second century BC. The Dead Sea scrolls and fragments, recovered in the Qumran caves of the Judean dessert, are a veritable library of Jewish documents, dating from the third century BC to AD 68. The caves contained tens of thousands of

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<sup>2</sup> A Codex is a bound book, containing separate pages or leaves.

<sup>3</sup> The 1936 introductory essay of Paul Kahle to *Biblia Hebraica* includes a helpful account of the location, date and character of the most important of these manuscripts and fragments. The *Biblia Hebraica* and its successor the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* are regarded as the authoritative critical editions of the Old Testament text. *Biblia Hebraica*, editor Rudolf Kittel, Wurttembergische Bibelaltalt Stuttgart., 1936, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Albright, William F. "A Biblical Fragment from the Maccabean Age: The Nash Papyrus." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 56 (1937): 145-176.

scroll fragments of almost one thousand different compositions, written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The chief categories of the writings are: 1) *Biblical* All of the books of the Hebrew Bible are represented in the Dead Sea scrolls except Esther. The biblical writings include a complete scroll of the book of Isaiah and a second almost complete scroll of the same book, as well as large sections of many other Old Testament books. 2) *Apocryphal or pseudepigraphical*, scrolls and fragments containing the so-called "deuterocanonical" books. 3) *Sectarian*, scrolls produced by a pietistic community which include ordinances, biblical commentaries, apocalyptic visions, and liturgical works.

These discoveries, especially the Dead Sea Scrolls, provide an overwhelming confirmation of the accuracy of the Masoretic Text. Secondly, the relatively small number of variant readings in which these ancient materials do diverge from the Masoretic text show frequent agreement with the Septuagint (hereafter referred to as LXX)<sup>5</sup> lending support to the LXX as an independent witness to the ancient Hebrew text. In addition to this confirming evidence, the following considerations favor the accuracy of the Masoretic Text: 1) There are relatively few variants between the medieval Masoretic manuscripts. This indicates that Hebrew scribes were extremely careful and accurate copyists, a conclusion that is also supported by what we know of Masoretic scribal practices. 2) According to the Talmud the Masoretes had an almost superstitious reverence for the Bible which led them to specify scribal rituals and dress, the size of columns of text, the kind of ink used, the kind of skins used and their preparation, the spacing

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<sup>5</sup> The Septuagint was one the earliest and most widely used Greek translations of the Old Testament. The *Letter of Aristeas* (200-100 BC) reports that it was made by seventy-two translators at the request of Ptolemy II in Egypt. The LXX is preserved in the 4th and 5th century Uncial manuscripts (see below) and many other medieval manuscripts and has its own textual history and criticism.

of words, the destruction of imperfect copies, and many other details of scribal procedure. This formalism is an indication of the extreme care that the Masoretes exercised in their work. 3) The Masoretic text is in close agreement with the LXX, as represented in ancient Greek manuscripts such as the *Vaticanus* (circa. A.D. 325-350) and the *Sinaiticus* (circa. A.D. 340).

The oldest manuscript evidence for the Old Testament writings dates from the third century before Christ. This still leaves a gap of about one thousand years between the writing of the Pentateuch and our oldest manuscripts. Nevertheless, archeologists have confirmed the existence and general accuracy of the Old Testament writings for a millennia before Christ in other ways. A few examples are: 1) Many geographical, cultural, legal and linguistic aspects of the Pentateuch can be correlated with what is known of ancient near eastern life. The account given by Moses of Israel's origins and early history makes sense in its ancient near eastern setting.<sup>6</sup> 2) A silver amulet in the form of a tiny scroll, dating from the seventh century B.C. was discovered by Gabi Barkai of Bar Ilan University in 1979 on the slopes above the Hinnon Valley in Jerusalem. Written on the scroll in archaic Hebrew letters is a portion of the priestly blessing of Numbers 6.<sup>7</sup> 3) The Tel Dan Stele was discovered in 1992 by Aviram Biran and dates to the ninth century B.C. It mentions the "House of David." Another mention of the "House of David" has been proposed as a proper reading of line 31 of the "Moabite Stone," which also dates from the ninth century B.C.<sup>8</sup> 4) Solomon's fortification of "the Millo, the wall of Jerusalem, Hazor,

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<sup>6</sup> Among the many books that explore such connections are Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archeology and the Old Testament*, (Baker Books, 1998), 286-288 and the works of Kenneth Kitchen, including *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Intervarsity Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> Amihai Mazar, *Archeology of the Land of the Bible*, (Doubleday, NY: 1990), 522-524.

<sup>8</sup> "David found at Dan," *Biblical Archeology Review*, 20:2, 26f.

Megido, and Gezer" mentioned in 1 Kings 9:15-19 has been identified with gate systems of a single design discovered in these cities.<sup>9</sup> 5) Shishak's invasion of Israel recorded in 2 Chronicles 12:2-4 is confirmed by hieroglyphs carved in relief on the walls of the Karnak temple of the god Amun in Thebes.<sup>10</sup> 6) Hezekiah's Tunnel, mentioned in 2 Kings 20:20, is identified as the watercourse under present day Jerusalem that dates from the seventh century B.C. Other ancient features of Jerusalem's underground water system have been identified with the biblical record, including David's conquest of the city in the eleventh century B.C.<sup>11</sup> 7) Recent excavations led by Eilat Mazar of what is most certainly David's Palace (2 Samuel 5:11) in the northern part of the most ancient area of Jerusalem, known as the City of David.<sup>12</sup>

## The New Testament Manuscript Evidence

As in the case of the Old Testament, the manuscript evidence for the text of the New Testament books far exceeds that for other ancient writings, both in number of manuscripts and in relative brevity of time between the writing of the original document and the production of the extant copy.<sup>13</sup> The several thousand most important New Testament manuscripts and fragments generally fall into three categories: 1) the *papyri* 2) the *uncials* 3) the *miniscules*. Metzger's excellent work *The Text of the New*

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<sup>9</sup> Mazar, *ibid.*, 380-386 and Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archeology and the Old Testament*, (Baker Books, 1998), 286-288. See also "Royal Gateway to Ancient Jerusalem Uncovered," *BAR*, 15:3 (May/June 1989)

<sup>10</sup> "Shishak's Military Campaign in Israel Confirmed," *BAR*, 15:3 (May/June 1989), 32-33.

<sup>11</sup> "How They Met," and "Up the Waterspout" *BAR*, 20:4 (July/August 1994), 20-33, 34-38.

<sup>12</sup> *BAR*, "Did I Find David's Palace?" (January / February 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Geisler and Nix, *ibid.*, 408. Also Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, (Oxford University Press, 1968), 33-35. Both present comparisons of the New Testament manuscript evidence with that of other ancient works.



*Testament*, referred to above, provides descriptions of the most important of these documents.

The *papyri* are very early (circa. A.D. 100-300) fragments of documents. Papyrus was relatively inexpensive and, therefore, widely used, but also quite fragile and, so, survived only under ideal conditions. The earliest known fragment of the New Testament, the Ryland's papyri, is believed on the basis of the style of its script to date from A.D. 100-150. It contains John 18:31-33, 37-38. Two larger collections of papyri are the Chester Beatty papyri and the Bodmer papyri.

The approximately 250 *uncials* are Greek manuscripts written on parchment in formal "bookhand," each letter carefully written in something like our capital letters, completely separate from the preceding and following letters. Parchment, the specially scraped and prepared hide of an animal, was much more durable and expensive than papyrus. Uncial manuscripts, dated between A.D. 350 and A.D. 1000, are certainly the most important manuscripts for the preparation of modern critical editions of the Greek New Testament. Among the earliest and most complete uncials is the *Codex Sinaiticus*, discovered by Constantin von Tischendorf at the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai in 1853. Produced in the middle of the fourth century, this manuscript contains almost the entire Old Testament and all of the New. The *Codex Vaticanus*, as its name implies, is located in the Vatican Library at Rome. It dates from the mid-fourth century and contains most of the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha. Missing are the first forty-six chapters of Genesis, thirty Psalms, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews 9:14 onwards and Revelation. The *Codex Alexandrinus* dates from the fifth century and contains all of the Old Testament and most of the New Testament (the leaves containing Matthew's gospel and John 6:50-7:8:52 and 2 Corinthians 4:13-12:6 have perished). It is located, with

the *Sinaiticus*, in the British Museum. The *Codex Ephraemi* is one of another important group of uncial manuscripts called "palimpsests." These are manuscripts whose pages were washed and reused to copy other documents. Through the careful application of chemical agents and the use of ultraviolet light the original uncial script can be read. Other uncial (and miniscule) manuscripts, like the *Codex Bezae*, contain both the Greek text and a side-by-side or "interlinear" translations into another language, often Latin.

The majority of New Testament manuscripts are *miniscules*, produced between A.D. 800 and A.D. 1500. The minuscule Greek script used in these texts was written in cursive fashion, using smaller, connected letters which required less space. Miniscule copies could be produced more quickly and less expensively with the result that many more were produced and have survived. Although later in date than the uncials, these texts are still valuable since they allow scholars to more readily discern "families" of texts reaching back into the earlier centuries and thus better interpret the earlier evidence. One of the earliest of the miniscule manuscripts, MS. 461, bears the date in which it was copied, A.D. 835. It is also one of the smallest, its 344 leaves measuring just 6.5 by 4 inches.

In addition to these Greek manuscripts evidence for the New Testament text is drawn from: 1) manuscripts and fragments of early translations of the New Testament documents in Latin, Syriac, Gothic, Slavonic, Sahidic and other languages 2) quotations of New Testament passages in the writings of the early church fathers 3) manuscripts and fragments of early "lectionaries" with biblical passages arranged for public reading on particular days throughout the year. According to Metzger 2135 lectionaries have been catalogued. 4) short passages from the New Testament have been discovered written on ostraca (pottery shards) and

inscribed on tombs, walls, monuments, etc.

## **Textual criticism**

Both Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, and Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, give excellent descriptions of the principles and practice of textual criticism. The following summary is taken from these works.

For the most part, the multitude of Old and New Testament manuscripts agree with one another in most of the text they preserve, thus lending tremendous credibility to the authenticity of the text. Nevertheless, as one would expect in copying and recopying of the text, there are instances in which one or more manuscripts preserve different readings of specific passages. These differences are called "textual variants." Sometimes variants amount to no more than the omission or inclusion of a single letter, perhaps preserving two different spellings of the same Hebrew or Greek word. Letters or words are also transposed. Variants also arose from different division of words at the end of lines, a mistake made easier by the fact that many early manuscripts had no breaks or spaces between words. An English illustration often used is that HEISNOWHERE might become either HEISNO WHERE or HEISNOW HERE depending on which letter fell at the end of a line. More serious variants include the omission of a word or a line of text, or the inclusion of additional words or lines of text through repetition. Some changes in the text appear to have been intentional, with scribes "correcting" grammar or spelling, or trying to harmonize one passage with another. Parallel passages in the gospels or quotations from the Old Testament in the New were sometimes subject to this type of alteration. In some cases marginal notes found their way into the text. In a relatively few number of instances there are passages of several verses in length that are included in some

manuscripts and omitted from others. John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20 are well known examples and noted as such in many English Bibles.

In these and other ways, approximately 10,000 variant readings have been catalogued from the manuscripts preserving the biblical text. This sounds like a large part of the Bible. However, because many of these variants involve single letters and because there often are several different variants for the same disputed word or phrase, the total amount of the text in question for the New Testament is actually only about 40 out of 20,000 lines of text. The fraction of Old Testament text in question is even smaller. It is the task of the textual critic to deal with this part of the Old or New Testament that is in dispute. The textual critic seeks to determine the original reading of the text by evaluating the evidence and deciding which of the variants preserves the original.

The evidence for a variant reading is generally considered to be either external or internal. External evidence for a reading includes: 1) the date of the source in which the reading is found, with preference generally given to the earlier reading, 2) geographical, with preference given to readings found in sources with wide geographical distribution, 3) genealogical. Readings found in the Alexandrian text type family are generally preferred over the Caesarean, Western and Byzantine. Readings found in two or more text type families are preferred over those found in a single family. Internal evidence includes considerations such as: 1) The more difficult reading is preferred, especially if it is sensible, since copyists tend to "smooth out" difficult readings. 2) The shorter reading is preferred unless it is obviously the result of omission. Scribes, for fear of "losing" a portion of the text, often preserve longer readings. 3) The reading that best conforms to the author's style and usage elsewhere is preferred. The strongest case for a particular reading can be made when the external and

internal evidence explains how the other variants arose from that reading.

The evaluation of such evidence is as much a subjective art as an objective science and textual critics can and do disagree on specific readings. Such disagreements are, in fact, quite rare, however. Applying the principles above, most scholars reach the same conclusions regarding most variants. The result is that we may be confident that the modern critical texts of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, which include all significant variants in their footnotes along with documentation of the support for these variants, for all practical purposes, contain line for line, word for word, and even letter for letter exactly what the autographs contained.<sup>14</sup>

## **The Inspiration of the Biblical Writings**

It is not immediately apparent what criteria might be used to determine whether a particular writing is indeed "God's Word." It seems reasonable, however, that a writing that was God given would present itself as such. There are, in fact, many writings that present themselves in this way, including those of the Jewish and Christian Bible. The proposed starting point, therefore, for this discussion is what the writings of the Bible claim about themselves. This will help clarify the concept of inspiration and will also suggest criteria for determining whether these claims are believable.

2 Timothy 3:16 has been termed a "locus classicus" for the Bible's teaching about itself. "All Scripture is inspired

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<sup>14</sup> Even for those who do not read Hebrew or Greek, the critical editions with their introductions, appendices and footnote systems are worth examining. One important impression that can be gleaned from them is just how small the fraction of the text is which contains significant variants.

by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." Here Paul links two important concepts - scripture and inspiration by God. First, we note that for Paul and his readers there is a well defined body of writings known as "Scripture." Paul is certainly not saying that all writing is inspired, just because it is writing. On the contrary, it is evident that Paul, along with Christ, Judaism and Paul's readers, understood "Scripture" to include at least the writings of the Jewish canon, those books now known to Christians as the Old Testament. Paul may have also had in mind some of those more recent writings of the "apostles and prophets," including the synoptic gospels and some of his own letters. Second, Paul claims that these writings are "inspired by God" or "God-breathed." The Greek term here is compounded of the words for God and to breathe, so that it conveys something more and different than mere "inspiration" as it is often used of literature. Paul is not simply saying that the scriptures are powerful, compelling writing and so inspired, as a work of poetry might be considered inspired. He is affirming that they are inspired – powerful, true, compelling – because their source is God. Paul's expression does not specify a particular mechanism by which divine inspiration takes place, such as "dictation" in which the human author perceived the voice of God and simply recorded what he heard; nor does he imply that the normal faculties of the human authors were in any way suspended or circumvented. He simply affirms that the scripture's origin is in God.

2 Peter 1:20-21 adds something to the above in explaining how scripture is God's Word. "No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." Peter's wording conveys both the activity of God, "moved by the Holy Spirit", and the activity of the human author, "spoke from God." Like Paul, Peter does not seem to envision a

particular, rigid form of Divine control over the human writer, such as dictation. Peter states that the entire person of the writer is moved by the Spirit, rather than suggesting that the Spirit moves a specific faculty of the writer such as the mind or will. Thus, Peter's concept appears to allow for the individuality of the human writers, their unique experiences, styles, vocabularies, etc., while affirming that the resultant words, spoken or written, were "from God." This Pauline and Petrine view of the scriptures as inspired by God, written by men moved by the Holy Spirit, and therefore "God's word," is consistent with and reinforced by the view of the biblical writings found in the rest of the Bible.

In many places and in various ways specific parts of the scriptures are called God's word. Exodus 24:4 claims that "Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord." Often biblical passages are introduced or referred to with formulas such as: "And the word of the Lord came to . . ." (Gen 15:1, Deut 5:5, 1 Sam 15:10, 2 Sam 24:11, 1 Kgs 6:11, Is 38:4, Jer 1:2, Ezk 16:1, etc.); "The Lord said to . . ." (Ex 9:1, etc.); "Thus says the Lord . . ." (Ex 4:22, Nu 14:28, Jos 24:2, 2 Kgs 20:1, Ps 12:5, etc.); "Hear the word of the Lord" (Is 1:10, Jer 2:31, etc., including in all minor prophets.). Jesus referred to scripture as "every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4) and said that not even the smallest part of scripture could be broken (Mt 5:18; Lk 16:17). Jesus, James and Paul each based arguments upon a single word or phrase of the Old Testament (Mt 22:42-45; Acts 15:17; Gal 3:16), demonstrating their belief that each word of the scriptures was authoritative. Paul claimed that he proclaimed the "testimony of God" and spoke in "words . . . taught by the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:1, 13). John warned against the omission of *words* from or addition of *words* to the book of Revelation, implying that each word was inspired and therefore, inviolable (Rev 22:18-19). These and other passages make it abundantly clear that the biblical writers did not think of themselves as attempting

to proclaim inspired concepts in fallible human words, as if God had given them the thoughts but left them to their own devices to write or proclaim them. Rather the biblical writers felt that they were speaking and writing God's words. Therefore, they are said to claim *verbal* inspiration for their writings.

As in Paul and Peter, the concept of a definite body of writings, the scriptures, is assumed throughout the Old and New Testaments. Of course, this body of writings grows as various parts are added (i.e., the Law, the Prophets, the writings, the gospels and the epistles), but the writers always seem to refer to a definite authoritative group of writings. More will be said about this below in the discussion of canonization. Here the point is that the biblical writers viewed inspiration as extending to the whole body of writings equally. In the Psalms and Prophets expressions such as "Your Law," "Your commandments," "Your word," "Your testimonies," "Your precepts," clearly refer to books of Moses as a unit. Daniel's reference to "the books," which included "the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet," indicates that by the time of exile the canon had been expanded to include writings beyond the Torah, while remaining a well defined body of authoritative writings. Jesus and the writers of the New Testament recognize all of the writings of the Old Testament as a single authoritative unit in phrases such as: "the Scripture(s)" (Mt. 26:56, Mk 12:10, Ac 17:2, Ro 1:2); "It is written..." (92 instances including Mt. 4:4, 7, 10, Acts 1:20, Rm 1:17, 1 Pt 1:16; "the Law and the Prophets" Mt 7:12, Ac 13:15, Ro 3:21); "Moses" (Mt 19:7, Acts 3:22, 2 Co 3:15); "Moses and the Prophets" (Lk 16:29); "Law of Moses" (Jn 7:23); "that it might be fulfilled" (33 instances); "the oracles of God" (Rom 3:2, Heb 5:12); "prophetic writing," given by the "Spirit of Christ" (1 Pet 1:10-11, 2 Pet 1:20-21).

There is less evidence that the New Testament writers refer to the New Testament writings as part of a fixed and



definite canon, but there are certainly suggestions of this. Jesus seems to have foreseen and even authorized apostolic writings in His promise that His disciples would be taught all things and helped to remember all things by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 16:13). Peter called the New Testament writings "Scripture" and it seems that Paul held a similar view (2 Pet 3:16 mentions Paul's letters; 1 Tim 5:18, Jesus' saying is quoted here alongside Deut 25:4). Since Peter and Paul considered "Scripture" to be inspired, they clearly considered at least some of the writings of our present New Testament to be inspired. Paul and John consider portions of the New Testament to be "prophetic writing" (Eph 3:5, Rev 22:18) and, therefore, inspired. Paul's phrase "Apostles and prophets" may even refer to the New Testament writings in a way that parallels "Moses and the prophets" as a designation for the Old Testament writings. By considering particular writings to be "Scripture," the biblical writers are judging those writings in their entirety to be the inspired words of God. The idea that a writing could be partially inspired or merely contain the word of God is foreign to the thought of the biblical writers. This idea of the full inspiration of each writing equally in all its parts is often termed *plenary* inspiration.

Another important aspect of the Bible's view of itself as God's Word is the conviction that what the scriptures teach is permanently true and authoritative. This point is often made in the Psalms: "The law of the Lord is perfect" (Ps 19:7); "Every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting" (Ps 119:160). Jesus certainly held this view: "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35); "The smallest letter will not pass away" (Mt 5:18; Lk 16:17); "Your Word is truth" (John 17:17). Jesus and Paul often appealed to the Old Testament scriptures to support and sustain their teachings. Paul believed that the scriptures were "God breathed" and that God cannot err (Titus 1:2). While not explicit in the Bible's teaching about itself, the biblical writers clearly assume that the truth and authority

of the Bible are compatible with: 1) variety of expression (e.g., David's instruction to his troops in capturing Jerusalem, 2 Samuel 5:8 as opposed to 1 Chronicles 11:6; "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" in Matthew 16:16 as opposed to Mark 8:29 and Luke 9:20); 2) the individual styles of the human authors; 3) the citation or use of other documents (e.g., Book of Jasher, Joshua 10:13; Book of the Wars of the Lord, Numbers 21:14; 1 Kings 14:19; 1 Chronicles 29:29; 2 Chronicles 12:15; Acts 17:28, Jude 14)<sup>15</sup>; 4) use of non-scientific language (Joshua 10:12; Matthew 12:42; Acts 2:5), including the use of round numbers (1 Chronicles 19:18; 21:5; 2 Chronicles 4:2); 5) use of a variety of literary genres and devices, including narrative, history, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, proverbs, parables, hyperbole, metaphor, satire, allegory; 6) the limitations, but not necessarily the fallibility of human language, culture and understanding.

Several additional clarifications of this biblical concept of inspiration and authority may also be helpful. First, Christians generally affirm that inspiration and inerrancy, in the strictest sense, extends only to the original autographs and not subsequent copies which may contain errors introduced by the copyist. Likewise translations are not to be considered inspired or inerrant in this strictest sense. Nevertheless, because the science of textual criticism can establish the original text with a high degree of confidence, for practical purposes, our present critical editions can be considered inspired and inerrant.<sup>16</sup> In similar manner, faithful translations

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<sup>15</sup> Some twenty or more sources are referred to in the books of Chronicles.

<sup>16</sup> Christians often also affirm, as a matter of the Bible's teaching about itself, that God has supernaturally worked to preserve His Word without error, in spite of the loss of the original autographs. Texts such as those cited above for the permanent authority of the Scripture are used to support this idea (Ps 19:7; Ps 119:160; "Scripture cannot be broken," John 10:35; "The smallest letter will not pass away," Mt 5:18; Lk 16:17).

which incorporate the best results of linguistic and textual studies may be considered inspired and inerrant for practical purposes. Another qualification is that inspiration and inerrancy includes everything the Bible teaches. For instance, God did not inspire the lie of the serpent in the garden "You will not die." God did inspire Moses to include the lie of Satan in scripture. The lie itself is not inspired, but the Bible is inspired when it records this lie as a lie. In similar fashion, the Bible does not teach immorality, even though it records David's sin with Bathsheba. It is further noted that the spiritual and moral truths that the Bible does teach often cannot be separated from the "scientific" and historical facts that it records. The spiritual or theological truth that God is Creator depends on the Genesis account of His actually having created the universe. Paul's doctrine of man's universal sinfulness depends upon the actual fall of our common ancestor Adam (Romans 5:12). The spiritual truth that God is Israel's savior depends on the historicity of the Exodus events. The spiritual truth that Christ has made atonement for our sins depends upon the historical events of His death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:17). In this way inspiration extends to all that the Bible affirms as factual, even if touched on only incidentally (e.g. angels, creation and flood; 'leviathan'; Vashti and Esther; Gallio proconsul of Achaia, Acts 18:12). Incidental matters, taught in the Bible as fact, are considered to be inspired and inerrant.

This, in brief, is the Bible's teaching about itself, that its writings are inspired by God and are, therefore, God's words, inerrant and infallible. The question which now presents itself is "Is the Bible's view of itself correct?" or "What evidence is there that the Bible is indeed God's Word?"

As a starting point, it must be admitted that no conclusive, rational proof that the Bible is God's Word can be given. In fact, for those who hold the Bible to be

God's Word, such a proof would be self-defeating, since to appeal to human intelligence and reason to settle this issue would give ultimate authority to human intelligence and not to God or His Word. It is affirmed, rather, that the Bible is "self-authenticating." The Bible speaks to man as God's Word and the human spirit cannot help but recognize the voice of its Creator. Men recognize moral and spiritual truth as such and as having ultimate authority. Certainty that the Bible is the Word of God, in the end, is given in the experience of having definitely and unmistakably heard God speak in the Bible.

Notwithstanding this point, it is also the case that, if the Bible is God's Word, we should expect evidence that is consistent with that fact. If God did indeed create man and man's ability to reason, we can reasonably expect God's revelation of Himself to show itself to be such in evidence that appeals to our reason, as well as to our other faculties. Admittedly there are elements of God's self-revelation that seem to contradict or go beyond reason and experience, such as the resurrection of the dead or miracles, but this does not invalidate our expectation of positive evidence that the Bible is God's Word. Here is a brief summary of some of that positive evidence.

The remarkable, internal self-consistency of the Bible suggests that it is more than a human book. We would not expect God's Word to be self-contradictory. The Bible presents a consistent moral perspective, a consistent view of God, of nature, of man, of history, of Israel and other nations, etc. In fact, it is more than self-consistent; it is a unity, with a single, central theme - the revelation of God and the salvation of man in Jesus Christ. This is especially impressive in that the Bible was written over a period of 1500 years by approximately 40 different authors, in three different languages. This unity is demonstrated historically in the fact that early Christians had little difficulty in claiming the Old Testament as a "Christian" book. They recognized the

Old Testament as their Bible and, as the New Testament books were produced, they felt no difficulty in holding both to be inspired scripture. In the minds and hearts of Christians there was a seamless transition between the testaments. Matthew's Gospel and Epistle to the Hebrews give special evidence of this, as does a comparison of the Apocalypse with the Old Testament books of Genesis, Daniel and Ezekiel. Jesus' reverence for and use of the Old Testament agrees completely with His dictum "I came not to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). The Epistle to the Romans cites the Old Testament over fifty times.

Another feature of the Bible which is consistent with its being God's Word is the scope of its subject matter and themes. Simply stated – its themes are universal. It deals with the origin of the universe and all its features, the origin of man, of languages, of nations, of sin, of marriage, and of Israel in particular. The Bible's stories encompass the full range of human experience: birth, death, marriage, war, injustice, greed, murder, ecstasy, agony, torment, hope, and so on. It deals not only with the beginning of human history but also its culmination. It speaks of both heaven and hell, of judgment and of salvation. We would expect God's Word to deal with such universal themes. Moreover, its treatment of these themes, especially of man and human experience, resonates with what we know to be true. Its portrayal of man, even of its heroes like Moses and David, is unflinchingly realistic. In the creation account, for instance, the reader recognizes his or her own experiences of beauty and order, temptation, sin, shame, marriage and childbirth.

The Bible, where we have the opportunity to validate it, is an accurate historical record. It would not be reasonable to believe that a book which includes demonstrable falsehoods in relating historical events would be God's Word. Generally speaking, archeology has validated the

biblical record (the Merenptah Stele; Solomonic gate systems; Tel Dan Stela, Moabite Stone, Hezekiah's tunnel, pool of Siloam, "Gallio" inscription, etc.).<sup>17</sup> Other literary records validate the biblical record (Assyrian & Babylonian king lists, Shishak inscriptions, Plutarch, Josephus, Tacitus, etc.). Countless details in both Old and New Testaments narratives have demonstrated themselves to be authentic to the times in which the individual writings were written and of the times and places which they describe. This is not to deny that there are difficulties in specific cases. The extensive excavations at Jericho have not provided conclusive evidence of the events described in Joshua. The presence of camels in the patriarchal narratives in Genesis remains difficult to correlate with the history and archeology of Palestine. Specific proof of the events of the Exodus has proven elusive, though elements within the biblical account certainly show it to have been written by someone who was familiar with Egyptian life and culture during the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries before Christ.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, over the past century of archeological investigation and discovery, more and more details of the biblical record have been confirmed and there has been increasing evidence for earlier and earlier parts of the record. From the divided kingdom onward (931 B.C) Old Testament historical events, places, individuals, are now generally well-substantiated. The events, places and details of the New Testament have been confirmed and illustrated repeatedly by archeological discoveries such as the "Erastus" inscription from Corinth which matches Paul's mention by name of that city's "director of public works" in Romans 16:23.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Again, Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archeology and the Old Testament*, (Baker Books, 1998) is one of many helpful texts supporting this point and provides direction to many other similar works and sources.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 147ff.

<sup>19</sup> See John McCray, *Archeology and the New Testament*, (Baker Books, 1991), 331.

The book of Deuteronomy makes it clear that fulfilled prophecy is a distinguishing mark of the true prophet sent from God (Deuteronomy 18:17-22). While Christians differ in their interpretation of many of the prophetic sections of the Bible, they agree that many of the Bible's prophecies have been fulfilled. The amount of prophetic material in the Bible is extensive and includes many specific prophecies, the fulfillment of which can be easily checked.<sup>20</sup> Fulfilled prophecies include: 1) Israel's possession of the land, subsequent sin and expulsion from the land, and subsequent repentance and restoration to the land (Deuteronomy 3:21-22; 4:25-31; 28:1-68; 30:1-10) 2) The prominence of the royal line of David within Israel, culminating in Jesus Christ (2 Samuel 7) 3) the succession of four great Gentile empires - Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome (Daniel 4, 7) 4) the destruction of Edom (Obadiah); 5) the "Cyrus" passages in Isaiah (44:28; 45:1) 6) prophecies surrounding the birth, ministry, suffering and death of the Messiah such as: the city (Micah 5:2) and nature (Isaiah 7:14) of Christ's birth; the nature of his ministry (Isaiah 61:1-2); details of his death (Psalm 22:1, 6-8, 12-18; Isaiah 53:4-12; Daniel 9:24-27) 7) Jesus' prediction that Jerusalem would be destroyed (Matt 24:2). Those who are so inclined may dismiss fulfilled prophecy as written after the fact (e.g., Isaiah's mention of Cyrus) or as so general that it might admit several different fulfillments (perhaps Daniel's empires), but these arguments still leave many fulfilled prophecies unexplained (e.g., those concerning Israel and Israel's Messiah).

What we know of the integrity, honesty, sincerity of the human authors indicates that they believed that they

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<sup>20</sup> Whether one agrees with his premillennial perspective or not, John Walvoord's *Every Prophecy of the Bible* (Chariot Victor Publishing, 1999) is helpful in identifying specific prophecies as such and indicating how one school of interpretation believes these to be fulfilled. In Walvoord's judgment approximately half of the prophecies in the Bible have been fulfilled (p. 10).

were recording God's words as they claimed to be doing. They may have been mistaken, but their claims were not a deliberate deception. Their accuracy in recording other verifiable events indicates that they were reliable witnesses. The community which knew them personally and within which the events they describe took place, received them as credible witnesses. While this may not weigh heavily in favor of their writings being considered God's Word, it would certainly present a difficulty for that conclusion if this were not the case.

Because of Jesus' credibility as a spiritual and moral teacher, the confidence which he placed in the Old Testament as God's word must be considered as evidence in favor of that view. His promise that his disciples would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to teach what He had taught them, must also be recalled in this connection. Jesus exhibited such confidence in the divine authority the Old Testament that it would be difficult to maintain that he was mistaken on this point and yet correct in other moral and spiritual matters.

The miracles associated with the writers and their writings support the premise that the Bible is God's Word. The people to whom the biblical writings were first delivered accepted them as authoritative even though these writings contained accounts of miracles. Moreover, the time which elapsed between the production of the writings and the miracles to which they attest was brief enough that the account could have been contested or disproved. There are substantial reasons to believe that Moses wrote the book of Exodus as the book itself claims and as Jewish tradition has always maintained. If this is the case, Exodus was first delivered to the same generation which would have witnessed the miraculous events that it records. The books of 1 and 2 Kings, which record the miracles associated with the prophets Elijah and Elisha, appear either to be contemporaneous accounts themselves or to have been compiled from contemporaneous accounts (1 Kings 22:39; 2 Kings 1:18,



8:23; 2 Chronicles 20:34— Kings refers to Chronicles, Chronicles to the record of Jehu). The letters of Paul, the gospels and Acts were written within the lifetimes of those who would have witnessed the miracles they describe. The New Testament writers themselves appeal to miracles, especially the resurrection of Christ, as evidence for the truth of their message (Acts 2:22-24; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 14; Hebrews 2:4). If the miracles described in the biblical writings did not occur, this would have certainly weighed against their acceptance as authoritative and inspired. All evidence suggests, however, that these writings were immediately accepted as authoritative.

The uniqueness of the Bible weighs in favor of its being God's Word. Of course, in one sense, every book is unique, but the Bible is unique in ways that set it apart from other literature. No other book has been so frequently copied and diligently preserved, so widely translated, or published and distributed in such volume. The Bible's influence on the development of western and world civilization is unique. No other book has shaped so many aspects of our lives so profoundly – religion, ethics, politics, law, science, social structure and institutions and so on. The depth of the Bible's moral and spiritual teachings has been uniquely compelling to many of the greatest intellects of our civilization (e.g., Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, John Wycliffe, Isaac Newton, Jonathan Edwards, Leo Tolstoy, C. S. Lewis), while at the same time appealing to the masses. The Bible has inspired some of the West's greatest works of art and literature, as well as some of the greatest lives of charity and self-sacrifice (e.g., Francis of Assisi, William Booth, William Carey, Father Damien, Mother Teresa). The Bible's power to transform and guide seem to transcend widely different cultures and circumstances. It has been the catalyst for religious revivals and social transformations in remote tribal societies as well as in urban and industrial ones, such as England and China.

Again, it is readily admitted that the evidence cited above does not prove that the Bible is God's Word in the sense that that the only possible, rational conclusion. What is maintained here is that the conclusion that the Bible is God's Word is reasonable and consistent with these lines of evidence.

## **The Canonization of Scripture**

The idea that there should be a canon, a set of writings that were recognized as inspired by God, is implicit in the Pentateuch. As the "word of the Lord" came to Joshua and others who followed, their writings were received as authoritative and were added to the Mosaic books, sustaining the concept of a well defined set of divinely inspired, authoritative writings. The Jews used various descriptive concepts to designate those books which they recognized as having divine authority: holiness, prophecy, Law, scriptures, books that "defile the hands," etc. The Greek *kanon* probably comes from Hebrew *kaneh* ("reed," as in measuring rod, see Ezekiel 40:3; 42:16) and came to mean a standard or a norm (see 2 Corinthians 10:13-16). The Greek term seems to have first been applied to the scriptures by Athanasius in AD 367, as noted in the discussion below.

In discussing the canonization of the writings of the Bible, it is important to keep in mind that what makes a particular writing authoritative and, therefore, determines whether it is properly included in the canon, is the fact that it is inspired by God. A book that is inspired speaks with God's authority whether or not it is ever recognized by synagogue or church. A book that is not inspired can never speak with God's authority no matter how often and widely it is considered to be God's Word by Jews, Christians or others. The fundamental principle of recognizing canonicity is identical with that of recognizing inspiration and the questions "Which writings are

inspired?” and “Which writings should be considered canonical?” have the same answer. Those writings which speak definitely and persistently with God’s voice demonstrate themselves to be inspired and therefore are properly considered canonical or authoritative. The historical outworking of this principal simply meant that the writings perceived in this way were the ones that were most used, most cited, best preserved and most treasured among Jews and Christians. As in the case of inspiration, rational evidences have been and are offered for and against the inclusion of specific writings in the canon. These are, in fact, the same as the evidences for inspiration considered above (unity, historicity, integrity of writers, miracles, etc.). The decisive factor, however, in recognizing individual writings as inspired and therefore canonical is whether Jews and Christians have generally and consistently heard God speak in those writings. *The present discussion of canonicity, therefore, refers to the historical process by which the inherent, divine authority of certain books was recognized, not how those books received that authority.*

The steps by which the Old Testament canon was recognized must be inferred from the writings themselves, since there are no independent witnesses to this process. The books of Moses were evidently immediately recognized as divinely authoritative. In Exodus 24:4, 7 we are told that “Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD . . . then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of all the people.” There is a similar note in Deuteronomy 31:9 with the accompanying instruction that the leaders were to read the law to the assembled people once a year. The “book of the law” was honored and protected by being kept beside the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 31:24-26). Constant reference to “the law” or “the book of the covenant” throughout the rest of the Old Testament makes it clear that the canonicity of the books of Moses was never challenged but, on the contrary, continuously

recognized. At the close of his life, Joshua added his record to “the book of the law of God” (Joshua 24:26). Presumably the record of Judges was added in the same manner. The books of Chronicles testify to a continuous record produced by a succession of prophets during the kingdom period: Samuel, Nathan, Gad (1 Chronicles 29:29); Ahijah, Iddo (2 Chronicles 9:29, 13:22); Shemaiah (12:15); Jehu (20:34); Isaiah (32:32); unnamed seers (33:19); Jeremiah and others (35:25,27). The fact that this record was produced by recognized prophets of God insured that its preserved and edited form in Chronicles would be accepted as God’s Word alongside the Law. These books of history and the writings of the pre-exilic prophets are probably included in “the books” of Daniel 9:2, which specifically mentions Jeremiah. Daniel’s response of contrition and prayer makes it evident that he considered “the books” to be God’s Word. The respectful mention of Daniel and Job alongside Noah in Ezekiel 14:20 and 28:3 suggests that the books of Daniel and Job were already recognized as canonical during the time of the exile.

The postexilic prophets intimate that there would be no further revelation from God until the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 4:5; Zechariah 13:2-7), thus signaling the completion of the Old Testament canon. There is confirmation of this view from the Maccabean period (circa. 150 B.C.), where we find the Jews “awaiting the appearance of a prophet” (1 Maccabees 4:46) and the recognition that prophecy had “disappeared” from Israel (1 Maccabees 9:27). The Prologue to *Ecclesiasticus* (circa. 132 B.C.) mentions a three-fold division of the Old Testament of “the Law and the Prophets and other writings of the fathers,” known to the writer’s grandfather, again implying that the Jewish canon was complete by that time. The New Testament writers give ample evidence of a closed Old Testament canon in that they cite or allude to every book of the Jewish canon as scripture, but do not cite any other writings after

Malachi.<sup>21</sup> Jesus not only referred to “the law and the prophets” and the “Scriptures,” as a single authoritative body of writings, but also used the expression “from Abel to Zechariah” (Matthew 23:35) to indicate the complete series of Jewish prophets. Some have asserted that the Jewish canon was not fixed until about AD 90 at a so-called “council of Jamnia” (or Jabneh). In fact, the term “council” is really not appropriate for the discussions surrounding the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs that took place at the rabbinic academy at Jamnia, founded by Rabbi Johannon ben Zakkai. A more accurate appraisal of these discussions is that they arose when some raised questions as to whether these books should be retained in the already closed canon.<sup>22</sup> Josephus’ list of authoritative books comprises the present Jewish canon, indicating that the canon had been long established by A.D. 100.<sup>23</sup>

Within the Jewish and Christian traditions there have been scarcely any objections raised against the authority of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. The discussions of the first century AD at Jamnia regarding Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon were mentioned above. Ecclesiastes was questioned because of its seeming pessimism and the Song of Solomon because of its sensuality. In the end these objections were not convincing and those books remained a part of canonical Scripture. Even less serious were objections raised against Esther which does not mention God, Proverbs

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<sup>21</sup> It is generally agreed that Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are not explicitly cited in the New Testament. It is also agreed that the New Testament contains “passages reminiscent of all Old Testament books without exception.” Rodger Nicole, New “Testament Use of the Old Testament” in Revelation and the Bible (Baker, 1958), 142.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed appraisal of the “Synod of Jamnia” theory see Jack P. Lewis “Council of Jamnia” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York, 1992) III: 634-7.

<sup>23</sup> *Against Apion* 1:8.

which was charged with self-contradiction (see 26:4-5), and Ezekiel which a few thought to be contrary to Moses.

The situation is quite different when we address the “deutero-canonical” or “Apocryphal” books, sometimes included in the Old Testament. The Roman Catholic Church in addition to the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament, declared at the Council of Trent (AD 1546) that the following writings were canonical: The Wisdom of Solomon (c. 30 BC), Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach; 132 BC), Tobit (c. 200 BC), Judith (c. 150 BC), 1 Maccabees (c. 110 BC), 2 Maccabees (c. 110-70 BC), Baruch (c 150-50 BC), Letter of Jeremiah (or Baruch chapter 6, c. 300-100 BC), addition to Esther (140-130 BC), additions to the book of Daniel (Prayer of Azariah, 300-100 BC; Susanna, 300-100 BC), Bel and the Dragon (c. 100 BC). The Eastern Orthodox Church, since the Synod of Constantinople (AD 1638) has accepted the writings listed above and three others as canonical: 1 Esdras (c. 150-100 BC); 2 Esdras (c. AD 100); Prayer of Manasseh (300-100 BC). These writings, especially 1 and 2 Maccabees, while considered to be of some historical value by the Jews, were never considered by the Jews to be divinely authoritative or on par with the canonical books. Some early Christian writers quoted the apocrypha and some (i.e., Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine) recognized them as canonical. North African synods at Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397), under Augustine’s influence, accepted these books as canonical. The Syrian Church accepted the apocryphal books in the fourth century. Some early copies of the LXX (circa AD 400) contain some of the apocryphal books.

Nevertheless acceptance of the Apocrypha was far from uniform in the early church and, in fact, the evidence weighs decidedly in favor of the view that the earliest Christians did not recognize these books as God’s Word or use them as such. There are no clear quotations from

any of these books in the New Testament and there is no indication that Jesus held them to be authoritative. Very few quotations from these books are found in the Apostolic Fathers, whose writings date from before AD 150<sup>24</sup>. Significant Christian writers of the third and fourth centuries, including Origen, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Jerome, opposed their recognition as canonical. Jerome's (c. AD 345- c. AD 419) careful scholarship and enduring influence of his Latin translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew make his view of the Apocrypha writings worthy of special notice. He translated the books of Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus into Latin. In his preface to his translation of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, after mentioning the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, he remarks, "as then, the Church reads Judith, Tobit, and the books of Maccabees, but does not admit them among the canonical Scriptures, so let it read these two volumes for the edification of the people, not to give authority to doctrines of the Church." From the time of their writing throughout the history of the church, the apocryphal books have been used far less than the other, canonical books for theology, personal devotion, evangelism, preaching, and liturgy.

The considerable delay in the recognition of the Apocrypha and the considerable ancient and modern dissent from their acceptance themselves set the Apocrypha apart from the other sixty-six canonical books. In spite of Augustine's immense and well-deserved authority within the Latin church, his opinion regarding the Apocrypha rested upon virtual ignorance of the Hebrew sources and a heavy reliance on the Septuagint. Moreover, it should be noted that even the Roman Catholic and Eastern

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<sup>24</sup> The indices in *The Apostolic Fathers*, Michael Holmes, editor (Baker: Grand Rapids, MI, 1989) list 9 citations from 6 Apocryphal books, while listing over 300 citations from the books of the Jewish canon.

Orthodox support for the apocryphal books has not been unqualified. On the eve of the Reformation, neither Cardinal Ximenes nor Cardinal Cajetan recognized their authority. As late as 1839 the Larger Catechism of the Greek Orthodox Church excluded the Apocrypha from the canon on the grounds that these books were never a part of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>25</sup> The great Protestant Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries exclude the Apocrypha from their lists of canonical books. It is likely that the recognition of the Apocrypha by the Council of Trent in 1546 was as much a reaction to Protestantism as an assertion of genuine catholic tradition and teaching.

In addition to the canonical books of the Old Testament and the Old Testament Apocrypha there are several dozen writings, produced between 200 BC and AD 200, that claim to have been written by biblical authors or characters. These are known as the “Pseudepigrapha” or “false writings,” and were from earliest times recognized as spurious and unauthentic. Among them are: the Book of Jubilee, 1 Enoch<sup>26</sup>, the Martyrdom of Isaiah, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Assumption of Moses, Pirke Aboth, the Story of Ahikar, the Sibylline Oracle, and the Book of Adam and Eve. Many of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha are in the form of dreams, revelations and visions in the apocalyptic style of Daniel or Ezekiel and include fanciful and magical elements. Neither Jews nor Christians recognized these books as canonical at any time. Here it may be mentioned that there is also a much larger group of New Testament Pseudepigrapha, written in the second and third centuries. This group includes writings such as: the Gospel of the Nazareans, the Gospel of the Egyptians,

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<sup>25</sup> Geisler and Nix, *ibid.*, 269.

<sup>26</sup> The only possible New Testament references to any of these works are both found in Jude, where verse 9 may refer to a Jewish tradition preserved in the Assumption of Moses and verse 14 may refer to 1 Enoch.



the Gospel of Judas,<sup>27</sup> the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Truth, the Acts of John, the Acts of Andrew, the Ascension of Isaiah, the Epistle to the Laodiceans, and the Apocalypse of Thomas. Once again these books abound in fanciful, magical and heretical elements and there is no evidence that any of them were considered to be genuine or canonical by early Christians.<sup>28</sup>

As in the case of the Old Testament, the New Testament writings were recognized as authoritative and inspired immediately. Peter viewed the writings of his contemporary, Paul, as inspired Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16). The Apostolic Fathers cite every New Testament book as Scripture except Philemon, 2 John and 3 John.<sup>29</sup> The Church Fathers from AD 150 to the Council of Nicea (AD 325), regularly cite all New Testament books except Philemon, James, 2 Peter, and 3 John. There is some evidence that the Greek speaking, Eastern church hesitated in its recognition of the Apocalypse, while the western, Latin church showed some reluctance toward the Epistle to the Hebrews. By Nicea, however, it appears that the New Testament canon was all but settled. Although no formal definition was provided by a church-wide council, after the fourth century there is little dissent from or discussion of the New Testament canon as found in writings of the fourth century fathers. Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 315-386) acknowledged all of our present New Testament books except the Apocalypse. Jerome

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<sup>27</sup> A copy of the Gospel of Judas, formerly known only from discussion of it by Irenaeus and Epiphanius, has recently come to light through the efforts of the Swiss-based Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art and the National Geographic Society. The papyrus copy is approximately 80% complete and dates from about AD 300 – a spectacular find. In spite of sensational claims, however, this document in no way changes the understanding of development of the canon presented here and in no way challenges the priority and historicity of the canonical gospels.

<sup>28</sup> Geisler and Nix for a more lengthy discussion and description of these works. Ibid., 301ff.

<sup>29</sup> *The Apostolic Fathers*, op. cit.

(AD340- 420) and Augustine (AD 354-430) both recognize all of the writings of the present New Testament canon and no others. The fourth and fifth century uncial manuscripts, the Vaticanus, the Sinaiticus and the Alexandrinus, also witness the stability of the New Testament canon in the books that they include and exclude. Usage in both the East and the West after the fourth century demonstrates that all of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament and no others were considered to be Scripture by medieval Christians.

The Apostolic Fathers merit special mention at this point, since these writings are sometimes considered to be the New Testament Apocrypha.<sup>30</sup> The Apostolic Fathers, written between AD 90 and AD 150, are: 1 Clement (or the Epistle to the Corinthians), the so-called Second Epistle of Clement, the seven letters of Ignatius, the so-called Epistle of Barnabus, the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle to Diognetus, fragments of Papias, the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp. These works were held in high esteem in the early church because of their known (Polycarp, Clement, Ignatius) or presumed personal relationship with one or more of the Apostles. Some of them (i.e., 1 Clement, the Didache, Barnabus and the Shepherd of Hermas), at least in some places and for a short time, were considered to have apostolic or canonical authority.<sup>31</sup> From AD 150 on, however, Christian writers and the church made a clear distinction between these works and those they considered to be Scripture. As far as is known, no council or local synod

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<sup>30</sup> The designation "Fathers" is rather elastic in this case, in that it refers sometimes to the author, as in the cases of 1 Clement and the letters of Ignatius, and sometimes to the writing, the author being unknown as in the case of the Didache.

<sup>31</sup> This is judged to be the case from the citation of these works by others among the Apostolic Fathers themselves. See *The Apostolic Fathers*, *ibid.*, 342-344.

ever included these books in the canon of the New Testament.

In support of the above overview of the development of the New Testament canon mention should also be made of several early canonical lists. First, there is the very abbreviated “canon” of Marcion. None of Marcion’s writings have survived except those portions quoted in the works of Tertullian, Irenaeus, and other polemical writers. Marcion was excommunicated from the church at Rome in AD 144 for his Gnostic-like teachings, which emphasized grace to the exclusion of law and spirit to the exclusion of the flesh. He went so far in these distinctions to hold that the god of the Old Testament, who created the material world, was different from and inferior to the God and Father of Jesus. He rejected the Old Testament and recognized the authority of only ten of Paul’s epistles (excluding the Pastoral Epistles and Hebrews) and the gospel of Luke, and even these he edited quite severely. Marcion’s teachings and canon were soundly rejected by the church and provided a strong impetus for the wider and more explicit recognition of the authority of the writings of the orthodox canon.

Another early canonical list, dating from about AD 200, is the Muratorian Canon, a fragmentary Latin document discovered and published by L. A. Muratori in 1740. Its beginning is missing. The preserved text begins with the last line concerning the second Gospel and the notices, preserved entire, concerning the third and fourth Gospels. It then designates Acts, Paul’s Epistles (including those to Philemon, Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy, but rejecting the spurious ones to the Laodiceans and Alexandrians), the Epistle of Jude and two Epistles of John, and the Apocalypse of John as books that may be read aloud in the church. The “catholic epistles” are also approved, but it is uncertain as to what books the author included in this category. The Wisdom of Solomon, alone among the Apocrypha, is accepted as canonical. The

Apocalypse of Peter and the Shepherd of Hermas are specifically excluded from those books which should be read publicly in the church. The Latin in which the Canon is written has been described as “barbarous.” This, together with its imperfect preservation, make it difficult to draw definite conclusions from it regarding the development of the canon in the church at large.

Athanasius’ (c. AD 296-373) “canon,” is often considered a benchmark in the canonization of New Testament writings, but it should be noted that Athanasius refers to the canon as already settled by his time. It should also be noted that his judgment in this matter was not binding on Christians generally and did not formally or officially settle the canon. The bishop of Alexandria customarily wrote a “Festal” letter to the Egyptian churches and monasteries under his authority each year in which he informed them of the date of Easter and the beginning of the Lenten fast. In his 39th Festal Letter (AD 367) Athanasius explains, “I also, having been urged by true brethren and having investigated the matter from the beginning, have decided to set forth in order the writings that have been put in the canon, that have been handed down and confirmed as divine.” He then lists the scriptures of the Hebrew canon and continues,

I must without hesitation mention the scriptures of the New Testament; they are the following: the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, after them the Acts of the Apostles and the seven so-called catholic epistles of the apostles -- namely, one of James, two of Peter, then three of John and after these one of Jude. In addition there are fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul written in the following order: the first to the Romans, then two to the Corinthians and then after these the one to the Galatians, following it the one to the Ephesians, thereafter the one to the Philippians and the one to the Colossians and two

to the Thessalonians and the epistle to the Hebrews and then immediately two to Timothy, one to Titus and lastly the one to Philemon. Yet further the Revelation of John.

These are the springs of salvation, in order that he who is thirsty may fully refresh himself with the words contained in them. In them alone is the doctrine of piety proclaimed. Let no one add anything to them or take anything away from them. . . But for the sake of greater accuracy I add, being constrained to write, that there are also other books besides these, which have not indeed been put in the canon, but have been appointed by the Fathers as reading-matter for those who have just come forward and which to be instructed in the doctrine of piety: the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobias, the so-called Teaching [Didache] of the Apostles, and the Shepherd.

It is evident that Athanasius did not consider the Old Testament apocryphal books as canonical. He also mentions the Didache and Shepherd [of Hermas], two writings of the Apostolic Fathers, as worthy of reading but excluded from the canon proper.

In summary, the process of recognition of the New Testament writings as canonical was very much like that of the Old Testament: 1) Divine authority was attributed to the twenty-seven New Testament books very soon after they were written, if not immediately. 2) There was very little early dissent regarding the recognition of these books as God's Word among Christians. 3) No other writings received the same level of widespread recognition among Christians. The delay in recognition of some of the shortest and most narrowly occasional epistles (2 and 3 John, Philemon, 2 Peter), is reasonably explained by the fact that these writings probably were less copied and

circulated than the gospels, Acts, and longer epistles which had more general interest and application to the church at large.

## **Conclusion**

Is the Bible God's Word? Jews and Christians believe that it is. We believe that we have heard and continue to hear God speak in the writings of the Old and New Testaments. Beyond this immediate recognition of God's voice, this paper has offered rational evidence for the inspiration, the accurate transmission and the canonization of the biblical writings. Admittedly, this evidence does not constitute proof. It does, however, demonstrate that the belief that the Bible is God's Word is reasonable. When Jews and Christians affirm that the Bible is God's Word we may be making a claim which is beyond rational demonstration, but we are not speaking nonsense or making a claim which is obviously contrary to the facts. Still it must be remembered that the greatest power for persuading someone that the Bible is God's Word resides, not in external arguments of the kind offered here, but in the writings themselves, in the demonstration of their "Spirit and power" (1 Corinthians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:5). It is this inner power that has caused Christians to affirm persistently and with one voice that "all Scripture is inspired of God."

Rick Lum, Christ Community Church, Idaho Falls, Idaho,  
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