

# The Bible: Man's Writing and God's Word

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When we approach the Bible we are either in one of two camps. The first starts with a belief that the Bible is from God. The other starts in viewing the Bible is a book just like any other book. Who or what determines where you start? If you start with a belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, you would not look at the Bible and *then* try to determine whether it's God's word or not, for He has already spoken on that issue! C.S. Lewis once gave the helpful analogy of man trying to put God on trial rather than lowly man submitting to God as the Judge. Lewis called this putting 'God in the dock'. This is every man's tendency, to place ourselves over God to judge Him. In this case it takes the form of man examining what God has said (the Bible) and seeking to determine whether it's true or not. This is putting God in the dock.

When we speak of 'inspiration' we are talking about the belief that the words in the Bible are God's words. By 'canon', we mean the list of the books which we understand to belong in the Bible.

We might speak of the canon of Shakespeare, where we would be referring to everything that Shakespeare had written. In *our* use of ‘canon’ we are concerned with the books of which God is the author. Much of the popular literature on the canon of Scripture is focused on the history of the Bible, such as the writings of church fathers and the decisions of councils. This is a must. However, I do not believe that a reasonably good understanding of the canon can be reached with this focus alone. The doctrine of the Bible’s inspiration and the question of the canon must both *ultimately* rest in God’s authority. I will attempt to make this point a number of times in what follows.

How was the list of books in the Bible (the canon) determined? Let us first consider God’s hand in history. The error of imagining that anything has ever taken place outside of the direct plan of God often creeps into our considerations of the canon itself. Jehovah is the Lord of history not just parts of it, but all of it. There is no ‘neutral’ standpoint here. If someone wishes to forget that God is

the sovereign cause of all events, past, present or future, and then from *that* perspective takes a look at the Bible's history, he will not conclude that it is God's book. Just by looking at what certain "councils" of men thought were Scripture and which books they rejected is not going to lead to the belief in the inspiration of those books. With that perspective that individual is never going to come to the conclusion that such books must necessarily be from God. After all, it was just a bunch of men getting together to decide on the Bible, right? Whether they were wicked or godly men is irrelevant, they were just men. Maybe they had their own agenda. Maybe they made mistakes. The most one could ever get from this is that certain men *thought* those books were inspired, and then his trust ultimately rests in what those men thought, not in the highest authority, God's word.

However, if we *begin* our inquiry with the fact that God indeed controls every event in history, then our situation is greatly improved. Once the historical information is examined, we can

easily see how such was guided by Jehovah to produce what we call the Bible. Our theology must govern our view of history because the Bible tells us that He is sovereign, and he has always had complete control of everything. Certainly the compilation and preservation of His word is included here. For if not even a little sparrow falls to the ground apart from God's power and care, how much more should we consider the *Bible's* history as being under God's control? Paul tells us that we are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. There is no neutral ground to stand on morally, spiritually or intellectually. Even history itself is not neutral. History is nothing more than the unfolding of God's plan. People will sometimes say that they want to examine the facts and then they'll decide for themselves. They will come to their own conclusions after they've done the desired research. But of course the "facts" are what they are because God made them that way and a Christian should not seek to ignore that just to be more appealing to the unbeliever. At this point we ought to ask ourselves, 'Just

what kind of thinking is it that does not base itself on the authority of the Creator?’

My two primary goals in writing are these: 1) to help us think through the Christian belief that the Bible is God’s Word and 2) to shine the light of that discussion on the question of the canon of the Bible. Ultimately, this paper aims to provide confidence and clarity to such questions as, ‘How can I be sure that those early church councils chose the right books to be in the Bible?’ I have noticed that in conversations with non-Christians about my faith these issues are among the most common that get brought up. I once talked with a friend who told me he was very uncomfortable talking about canonicity because he knew it touched the core of his faith – he seemed afraid of where that road might lead. This paper was written with the conviction that any such fear is unwarranted.

## THE BIBLE'S SELF-WITNESS

The Bible addresses a lot of topics. It talks about the Garden of Eden, it talks about Pharaoh, about King David, and it talks about sin and salvation. It also has a lot to say about *itself*. What right would any Christian or church have to declare that his 66 books are divinely inspired if God Himself did not say so? Can man's opinions be elevated to God's? No man can speak for God. God must identify His own Word, and He has done so abundantly. I can remember one instance when a friend and I were talking to a professing Christian about his beliefs and we were asking him standard evangelistic questions. When I pointed out that a man gets to heaven by faith alone and not by works, he made it clear that he thought "some parts of the Bible" weren't true. Had this random high school kid done some in depth analysis of the evidence and history of the Scriptures and then come to this conclusion? Of course not. He hadn't studied anything. He got his doctrine of the Bible from his own opinions based on his personal preferences

pulled out of thin air. He got his shallow view of the Bible from his own mind. He did not get his doctrine *of* the Bible *from* the Bible and that was his problem. The reality is that the Bible disagrees with him, and this disagreement spans from Genesis to Revelation. Sometimes we can make the mistake of thinking we have to go to just a few proof texts such as 2 Timothy 3:16 to show this. “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16-17, NASB) The phrase “inspired by God” is just one word in the Greek (theopneustos) which literally means “God-breathed”. Certainly it is a profound truth to say that the Holy Scriptures are in one sense the breath of God. Ignoring this verse would be a mistake, but this doctrine does not stand or fall with this one verse.

The Bible is actually saturated with this doctrine. We find saints in the Old Testament constantly referring to their message as being from God. The Old Testament contains the phrase “Thus says

the Lord” over four hundred times. It contains the phrase “The Word of the Lord” over two hundred times. The New Testament Apostles sometimes say things like “This is the Lord’s command”. Nowhere does the Bible give the slightest indication that some parts are not true or that you need to try and figure out which are factual and which aren’t. Every time the Bible speaks on a matter it does so with explicit or implicit divine authority. I’m not saying that people don’t still believe that parts of the Bible are in error, I’m just saying *this is not an idea they are gathering from the Bible itself*. They are rather bringing their own erroneous assumptions into play.

Also in the New Testament we sometimes find the phrase “It is written”. This phrase was used to appeal to the Old Testament often to settle disputes. What the Scriptures say settles the matter, period. We find this phrase about sixty times in the New Testament. Jesus himself uses this phrase 18 times in the Gospels. One notable occasion occurs during his temptation by Satan in the wilderness (Mt 4:1-10; Luke 4:1-12). Our Lord does not go back and

forth with Satan on the same points over and over. He simply quotes Scripture and that settles it. Now if the Old Testament were nothing more than a collection of clever men's stories and sayings, Jesus doesn't seem to know it. He regards them as much more than that (Mt 22:29-32)! In Luke 24:44 He tells his disciples how he lived his life in such a way as to conform to the Scriptures. At one point in His ministry (Luke 10:25-26) Jesus was asked how one inherits eternal life and he refers to the Old Testament. In John 10:35 Jesus tells the Jews that "the Scripture cannot be broken." Whatever else this means, it certainly means that the body of literature which Jesus called 'Scripture' was authoritative and true at every point. Surely we are dealing with something that Jesus esteemed to be more than *man's* wisdom. He knew it to be God's very word. Indeed, Jesus called it God's word in Mark 7:13. Jesus also introduces a text by "[God] said" in Matthew 19:4-5. Adam and Eve failed their temptation, not handling God's word appropriately in the garden. However the second Adam, Jesus Christ, had his

own temptation and used the Word of God perfectly as being the final say-so on the matter – not allowing it to be twisted by the Tempter. If you think about it, this idea of picking and choosing which parts of the Bible to believe, no matter how it is dressed up, is just another form of the first temptation to Eve. “Has God said...?” Has God said that we’re chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world? Has God said that a man is justified by faith alone apart from the works of the Law? Indeed, has God really said that the Scriptures are His own words? “Either the Bible is a worthless fraud and Jesus was a deluded martyr, or the Bible is in truth the Word of God written.”<sup>1</sup>

When the Lord first saved me I found myself in a lot of doctrinal disputes with my friends at the time. Most them were probably unwise, but I noticed that sometimes if they disagreed with something I quoted, I would hear, “Yeah, but is that in *red* letters? Because the red letters is where Jesus is talking” Much to

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Clark, *God’s Hammer: The Bible and its Critics* (New Mexico: The Trinity Foundation, 1995), 13.

my disappointment most of the verses I was quoting weren't red! Looking back on those encounters with a little more understanding, their question was completely misguided and irrelevant. Jesus quotes a verse from the middle of the book of Psalms and says, "the Scripture cannot be broken." I'm pretty sure there are no red letters in Psalms, so it seems to me that if someone wants to believe the red letters, he must believe more because the red letters tell you to believe the black ones! The New Testament regarded the Old Testament as perfect with no errors even to the minutest detail. Hear our Lord in Matthew 22:31-32: "But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." (NASB). Jesus here proves to the Sadducees that there is a resurrection from the dead, because God is *still* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He was and *is* currently their God. Jesus' whole argument rests on the *tense* of the verb: 'I am' as

opposed to 'I was'. In Galatians chapter three a small part of the text is again made the pivotal point of an argument. Here Paul argues that the promises God made to Abraham's seed were made in the truest sense to just one of his seed, Jesus of Nazareth. "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is, Christ." *Paul and Jesus both hinged some critical doctrines on a letter or two of the text.*<sup>2</sup> Every book, every word, every letter of this book is from God who is truth itself.

The Bible (God's Word) is authoritative for determining every Christian doctrine. Whenever it speaks on any doctrine it assumes a unique role for itself, one that cannot be questioned. It can't be questioned because it is the Lord who speaks. Most of us are willing to add our 'amen' to this type of reasoning when we're dealing with other doctrines, but what about when we talk about the Bible? Is the fact that the Bible validates itself a good enough reason for you

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<sup>2</sup> This point is made all the stronger when we consider that both are quoting from the Pentateuch, which was written over one thousand years prior to Paul or Jesus speaking here.

to believe it is God's Word? It should be. When these remarks are made to someone who *doesn't* believe the Bible, Gordon Clark says, "almost always his immediate reaction is derision. To him it is very much like putting a liar on the witness stand and having him swear to tell the truth." This analogy helps put the unbeliever's real problem in a clearer light. He thinks the Bible is a liar and lies when it speaks about itself. "But why a liar? Do not honest witnesses also swear to tell the truth?"<sup>3</sup> The average unbeliever approaches the Bible questioning its truthfulness from the beginning. They do exactly what the Bible says they'll do. They seek to suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Regardless of what someone may or may not think of the Scripture making these claims about itself, the fact remains that it is a mistake for the Christian to ignore or avoid this important point. Suppose the Bible actually claims that it is *not* the Word of God, but merely the word of man. Would this be significant? Of course it would be. Or what if the

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<sup>3</sup> Clark, 2.

book was completely silent on the subject altogether? Surely we would be going beyond what is written then to assert that it is God's Word. I hope you see that the Bible's self-witness is crucial for our beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

## CANON

### *Men Inspired by God*

One of the biggest stumbling blocks that is perceived when we discuss the list of biblical books stems from a desire to have God Himself give us some sort of inspired list of them all as though we should receive another scroll directly from heaven with a nice neat list written on it.<sup>5</sup> This of course we do not have, yet this does not make the Christian's footing any less sure. For now let us focus on the role of men in writing the Scriptures because the Scriptures speak directly of God using man to accomplish His perfect purposes. It is often remarked by unbelievers and liberals that

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Even if we had such a divine list, we would still have to believe the list is from God, and so we would need another list containing that list et cetera. Since such a process would be endless, this question can never be answered this way.

since men wrote the Bible this somehow makes the Bible a shaky source of authority at best, because after all, everyone makes mistakes! But this rationale completely ignores what the Scripture says concerning God using men to compose it. The Scriptures, though being the very Word of God, are certainly aware that men physically wrote the books of the Bible. We have the Apostle Peter informing us of this very thing in 2 Peter 1:16-21. He does not merely acknowledge that men (such as himself) wrote the Bible, but tells us that the Holy Spirit is the author in a much more profound sense than Moses, David or Paul ever could have been. He writes:

“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased", and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we

were with Him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that *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.*" (2 Peter 1:16-21 NASB)

Peter tells his readers that the foundations of Christianity are not mere fables as some were claiming. Not only had he been with our Lord for some three years, but he himself had heard with his very own ears the Father speak about Jesus. Then he goes on to say that just because his audience had not heard what he heard, they were in no worse of a position, for not only does Scripture confirm what Peter heard, but it is just as divine because it comes from the Holy Spirit. Peter tells us that "no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation". Here we find that nothing in the Holy

Scriptures was formed because of a man's situation or circumstances. Though much of Scripture *involves* man's viewpoint (i.e. Isaiah decrying his own countrymen for what he saw going on around him), it was not man's wisdom that was the ultimate wisdom behind those books! We also hear Peter saying that prophecy is not a product of human will. The Bible was not produced simply because *man* desired to write something. In fact, it was produced because these men were "moved by the Holy Spirit".

What does it mean to be moved by the Holy Spirit? It might be mentioned here that the Greek word 'moved' is translated as 'carried along' by the NIV. Robert Reymond cites a very helpful cross-reference here<sup>6</sup> to get a mental picture of what Peter means. If we look at Acts 27 we read of Paul's sailing for Rome, and in verses 14-15 Luke writes "Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the "northeaster," swept down from the island. The

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 39-40.

ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and *were driven along*.” (Acts 27:14-15, NASB)

We can visualize a strong wind blowing against a ship and it's so strong that the ship finally just stops fighting it and goes wherever the wind takes it<sup>7</sup>. This italicized phrase “were driven along” at the end is the exact same root word as in ‘men *moved* by the Holy Spirit’. Just as the ship was carried along by a wind much stronger than itself and taken wherever the wind chose, so the holy men who wrote the word of God were carried along by the Spirit of God to write whatever they were directed to. The Holy Spirit was the ultimate author, but not in a robotic sense as if the human authors were in some sort of a trance while writing. Their personalities and styles related the ideas that came into their minds that were placed there by the sovereign Lord.

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<sup>7</sup> The KJV adds another dimension and reads “And when the ship was caught, and could not bear up into the wind, *we let her drive*.” Here the wind is personified as a force driving the boat wherever she wants.

Peter was well qualified to speak on this topic, for he knew what it was to have his own thoughts and words guided by God. When Jesus asked his disciples "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven." (Mt 16:15-17, NASB) Perhaps Peter had this encounter or one like it in mind when he penned this letter.

None can doubt that men wrote the Bible, but this notion of something being inspired by God yet written by men has been the source of much confusion and misrepresentation. Sometimes God is pictured as desiring to have his word written, and then painfully searching for the perfect man to communicate it, even if he has to force him against his will. This couldn't be further from the truth!

"A boss must take what he can get; he depends on the high school or business college to have taught the applicant shorthand and typing. But if we consider the omnipotence and

wisdom of God, a very different picture emerges. God is the Creator. He made Moses. And when God wanted Moses to speak for him, he said, “Who has made man’s mouth?...Have not I, the Lord?”<sup>8</sup>

God created the minds and tongues of men. If God wanted 13 letters from a figure like Paul, then he could certainly create a man for that purpose, give him gifts and abilities and the experiences necessary to produce the kind of letters that God had destined him to write. Surely Paul was not ignorant of this. He told the Galatians that God had set him apart *from his mother’s womb* and called him by grace.

### *The Old Testament*

In the Gospels we often see Jesus interacting with other Jews. In these dialogues there is a consistent appeal to the Scriptures from both sides. Nowhere, in any of the gospels, do we find a hint of disagreement as to what was considered Holy Scripture. This is

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<sup>8</sup> Clark, 10.

noteworthy because Jesus was often in a disagreement with others. Surely if there was any controversy about which books were given by God it would have come up at least once. Jesus referred to the Old Testament many times<sup>9</sup>, but not by that name. He usually referred to it by ‘The Law and the Prophets’, or something very similar. “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” (Luke 24:44, NASB).

The lack of controversy suggests that there must have been some body of literature that was accepted as Scripture. After all, Paul tells the Romans that the Jews “were entrusted with the oracles of God.” Do we have any idea what these books may have been? Beginning with actual evidence from the Bible, we find that the New Testament itself explicitly gives authority to the vast majority of the Old Testament. As to how the Old Testament came

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<sup>9</sup> Jesus himself quoted from approximately 24 of 39 Old Testament books.

to have such a unique place in the lives of the Jews, Bruce Metzger writes, “The Hebrew canon had been determined by long and approved usage of the books...what the most spiritually sensitive souls in Judaism had been accustomed to regard as holy Scripture.”<sup>10</sup> But just how did they make the decision to accept certain books?

It was God’s Word which came with such conviction and authority as to cause godly men and women of the day to understand what it was they were reading and hearing. Certainly there was a Jewish consensus about which writings were to be considered divine and which were not. Josephus, writing less than 100 years after Jesus was born, had this to say:

“..how firmly we have given credit to those books of our own nation, is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 8.

change in them; but it becomes natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and if occasion be, willingly to die for them.”<sup>11</sup>

So what were these books? Josephus continues:

“For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another...but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses...the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life.”<sup>12</sup>

Of the 39 books in the Old Testament, roughly eight are not quoted or strongly alluded to in the New Testament. When the New

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<sup>11</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 776.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 776

Testament was written, the books of the Jewish/Hebrew Bible were organized differently than they are today. There were 22-24 books total, depending on how you counted them, instead of 39, because many books were combined together. For example, all the Prophets were counted as one book.

So then, while it is an interesting topic to consider just *how* the Jews came to recognize certain books as being from God, that is not nearly as important as realizing that they *did* indeed see a body of writing as Jehovah's words<sup>13</sup>. Their methodology was guided by the goodness and providence of God. Hence, at the end of the day, our faith does not rest in the methods and wisdom of the Jews and *their* ability to properly choose the right books from the wrong ones. Our faith must always rest on the overarching plan and purpose of the Author of those books. This makes all the difference.

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<sup>13</sup> <sup>13</sup> We have just looked at a fraction of the evidence with Josephus, if the reader wishes to pursue this topic further he might see *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007). Another first century Jewish work called 4 Ezra (14:45-46) makes a similar allusion to the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible.

## *The New Testament*

We do not have any evidence that Jesus or his apostles wrote anything during Jesus' lifetime. In fact the first books of the New Testament weren't penned until 15-20 years after Jesus ascended. However, we do have our Lord making his disciples a remarkable promise in John 14:26, "The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you." Perhaps we have here something of a 'pre-authorizing' of the New Testament by Jesus himself, guaranteeing that the Holy Spirit will ensure the accuracy of their memories.

One thing that is helpful to keep in mind when we consider the list of books that we call the 'New Testament' is to understand that the *early* Church was not overly concerned with this topic, at least not initially. For a long time, they were much more concerned with more pressing matters, such as being able to meet together without getting arrested, beat up or executed.

When one reads the writings from some of the earliest Christians (referring here primarily to a group of men who are denoted ‘The Apostolic Fathers’) there is an obvious lack of attention given to this topic. To them it must have seemed rather simple. After all, they had the Old Testament as it was handed down to them by the Jews and which their Lord frequently used. They also had the teachings of the Lord himself along with his apostles, what’s the problem? At first there doesn’t seem to be one. But things would soon change as controversy arose. “The realization which the Church finally attained concerning the limits of the canon, and her appreciation of its completeness, was the result of a long process in which many forces were operative...”<sup>14</sup> Consider the following: You’re a Christian in the early centuries after Jesus and you have a handful of Christian books that you have been able to acquire. Some are written by Apostles and others are not, however they all mean a great deal to you and have helped you

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<sup>14</sup> Metzger, *Canon* 286.

in your faith. One day some officials from the Roman Empire show up at your door ordering that all Christian scriptures are to be surrendered for burning. Books are rare and have to be painstakingly copied out by hand, you don't just want to give them away, especially if they are inspired by God. After all, giving up sacred books at this time is considered by everyone you know as practically denying the faith. Which books are God's words and which are not? Suddenly such a question becomes an important one.<sup>15</sup>

Another major factor causing our early Christian brothers and sisters to become more definitive in compiling a 'list' is the appearance of heretics who wanted to push their own agenda. Around AD 150 a wealthy ship-owner by the name of Marcion was the first individual known to come up with a fixed collection of 'New Testament' books, and he was a very generous contributor to the churches where he lived (Rome). However, he did not exactly agree

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<sup>15</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 216-217.

with the current consensus of the day. He rejected the entire Old Testament, believing that the God of the Old Testament was different than Jesus' Father. He also believed Paul and Luke were the only disciples of the Lord who hadn't corrupted the gospel, because the rest misunderstood Jesus' message. He accepted only nine of Paul's epistles and the Gospel of Luke. Though he wasn't even faithful to these ten books, for he took out many parts of all of those books which he felt did not belong. Now what was the church to do with a guy like this and his ideas? Well they excommunicated him of course and gave him back his money. But, what of his ideas? Was the church at large so clueless at this time as to have no idea what the Scriptures were? Definitely not.

Even by this time, roughly 100-150 years after Jesus ascended, there was already near universal agreement on most of the New Testament. We learn about the history of such agreement by reading what many early Christians wrote about the books of the New Testament and their collection. As early as AD 65 we see the

Apostle Peter placing Paul's letters on the same level as the Old Testament!:

“...and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother *Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.*” (2 Peter 3:15-16)

By the middle of the 100s we have the earliest New Testament list in existence now known as the Muratorian Fragment. This ancient document in broken Latin recognizes the canonical status of every New Testament book except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter and 3 John. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John circulated together along with thirteen epistles of Paul from the earliest of days.<sup>16</sup> We see virtually no dispute regarding those 17 books. Also, the book of Acts, 1 Peter and 1 John were also recognized very early on as being

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<sup>16</sup> Other early Christian men like Tatian (ca. AD 170) make it clear that these books had long won the hearts of the church at large.

from God. It is not as if there were set criteria these early believers were using. However, some of the more important tests that were used were: Was it orthodoxy? Was the book's teaching in accordance with the basic accepted Christian tradition? Was it Apostolic? Did an Apostle of Jesus write it? Was there church consensus? What was the opinion of the majority of churches?

Recognition of the other seven books was a slower process. The other seven were: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation. It appears that the question of authorship was the main issue with most of these. In the early 300's a church historian named Eusebius sought out to describe the current state of the canon. He wrote that 22 books were generally acknowledged as canonical: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 14 letters of Paul (including Hebrews), 1 John, 1 Peter and Revelation. He said the other five books (James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John) were widely accepted, though objected to by some. However it is probable that Eusebius himself accepted these five. But as the bonds between

churches were strengthened and communication between churches improved, they slowly came to be adopted by the majority. In the middle of the 300's a famous Christian bishop by the name of Athanasius was the first we know of to name our 27 books to be the New Testament exclusively.

We need to remember the vastly different circumstances which existed at such an early stage of the church. Communication was very slow. Literacy was poor and books were rare, so if a church received a copy of James' letter from another church, it would take a considerable amount of time to evaluate the letter. This was only one letter among many which was circulating among the churches. That church would not know what the majority of other churches thought about each letter they received. Considering that they were without cell phones and text messaging, the fact that agreement on the list of books was established at all is amazing. Just try to get a majority consensus on anything among churches today. Be it about a doctrine or worship service structure, unanimity is unlikely. How

much more arriving at anything like we see in the first few centuries after Jesus! Should we call it a miracle or the providence of God? How about both? By the end of the fourth century the twenty-seven book canon of the New Testament was basically settled by long-time agreement and use, despite other competing (and inferior) ‘gospels’ and letters.

There were, to be sure, other books vying for a spot in the New Testament. The complete list would be too long for this paper, however a few of the more notable books were be: The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, The Acts of John, and The Acts of Paul et cetera. Not only is it a well known fact that most of these books were written significantly later than our New Testament books, one only needs to mention some events from these competitors to see how they stack up. From the Infancy Gospel of Thomas we read of a 5-year old Jesus getting angry at another boy for splattering some puddles Jesus was playing with. When Jesus saw what the other boy had done he said to him, “You unrighteous, irreverent idiot!

What did the pools of water do to harm you?” Jesus ends up killing him by causing him to be withered like a tree. From the Acts of John we learn that John allegedly ordered some unwanted bedbugs out of his bed only to find them obedient and standing at attention in the doorway in the morning waiting for permission to go home. Or from the Acts of Paul we might point to the giant talking lion whom Paul ends up befriending and baptizing after some nice conversation. These books were not serious competition for God’s Word at all. If one wants to compare, let him read the Bible side-by-side with these other fictional works and judge for himself. Too often we can talk about early Christians and councils including or excluding certain books from the canon. In the nature of the case, however, “it is more accurate to say that certain books excluded *themselves* from the canon.”<sup>17</sup>

God is at work in the believer to convince him/her that they are truly born again. God is also at work in the believer to provide

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<sup>17</sup> Metzger, *Canon* 286.

confidence in this book which we call the Bible. *How* does God do this? Well, Jehovah certainly does not owe his creatures an explanation of his works and ways. We do not know *how* God does this in the heart and mind of the believer. *How* did God create the universe? *How* does God dwell in our hearts by faith? What is the mechanism by which Christ took our sins upon himself? *How* could those ancient councils and church fathers make sure they were acknowledging the right books? At the end of the day, I think we can say that *God* makes it sure, he makes it known. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27, NASB) Simply because we do not know *how* God does something takes nothing away from the fact that he does it. We do not need to know all the answers; we just need to trust the One who does.

## **CONCLUSION**

Christians should understand and appreciate the high and unique place the Bible gives to itself, even though most of us are aware that those who are not saved do not agree. But of course, the

Bible tells us in advance that those who are perishing will not agree with this for it tells us that the natural man will not receive God's message to him:

“For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. *Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.*” (1 Corinthians 2:10-14, NASB)

This doctrine of the Bible, like any other Christian doctrine, is one that requires faith and a regenerate heart. Though we should strive to be able to make a defense to everyone who asks us to give an account for the hope that we have, we should always acknowledge that only those whom the Lord calls to Himself by His Spirit will be persuaded. It is a continual challenge of the child of God to listen to Paul, and take “...*every* thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5, NASB). Our Lord tells us that the greatest commandment is to love Him with all our heart, soul, *mind*, and strength. Certainly one aspect of loving him with our mind is to consider His Word a sufficient reason for *anything*. So if someone asks why *we* believe the Bible to be more than just a mere book, indeed, God’s own words, then the answer is plain; God has told us so. If they ask us why *they* should believe this, the answer is the same. When they are not convinced we should *never* surrender our beliefs and allegiance to Christ in an attempt to find a more palatable answer. The question of the Bible’s inspiration or

canonicity can *not* be settled by a simple appeal to the facts of history. We will approach the Scriptures as God's Word, or we will approach them as an ordinary book which denies God's authorship *from the outset*.

When all is said and done, the Christian has come to believe God's Word on God's own say-so, whether he realizes it or not. That is the way it has to be. For if we accept the Bible as God's word for *any other reason*, we are basing our belief on the wisdom of men. We do not want to fall back into the first sin of our parents in the Garden and question *any* aspect of what He says. Perhaps now we can better appreciate the profound theology and faith of a song many children know from kindergarten, "Jesus loves me this I know, *for the Bible tells me so.*"