

**Is the Bible Reliable?**  
**The History, Selection, and Translation of the Bible**  
**Saturday Seminar**  
**March 25, 2023**

**Session 1. Who wrote the Bible and when?**

**Writing the Old Testament (OT)**

- The Hebrew Bible is divided into three main sections: Torah, Nevi'im ("Prophets"), and the Ketuvim ("Writings"). The first letter of each section title makes an acronym "Tanak."

<b>Torah ("Instruction")</b>	<b>Nevi'im ("Prophets")</b>	<b>Ketuvim ("Writings")</b>
Genesis	Joshua	Psalms
Exodus	Judges	Job
Leviticus	1-2 Samuel	Proverbs
Numbers	1-2 Kings	Ruth
Deuteronomy	Isaiah	Song of Songs
	Jeremiah	Ecclesiastes
	Ezekiel	Lamentations
	The Book of the 12 (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)	Esther
		Daniel
		Ezra-Nehemiah
		1-2 Chronicles

- This basic layout of the Hebrew Bible goes back at least to the first century (see Luke 24:44). The order of the books vary in different manuscripts, but this basic division is very ancient. Even though the order of books is different between the Hebrew list and English list, the content is the same. We use all the books from the Hebrew Bible.

**Archaeology and the OT**

- Some events recorded in the Old Testament left behind no artifacts (e.g., What possible archaeological evidence could there be of God speaking to Moses on Mt. Sinai?) and so they can't be tested by archaeology.
- Other events (e.g., the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians in 722 BC) created many artifacts. Wherever there are artifacts, we can use archaeology to test the reliability of the OT.
- "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

**Who wrote the New Testament (NT) and when?**

- The authors were the apostles, who personally knew Jesus, or associates of the apostles.
- The NT books are the earliest Christian writings we have. They are the only access we have to Christianity during the time of the apostles. By contrast, all apocryphal writings are from the second century or later. (See "Ten Basic Facts About the NT Canon that Every Christian Should Memorize," at michaeljkruger.com for these points and more.)
- Most of the books of the NT are quoted by other authors by the middle of the second century (150s AD), so we know that they were completed before then. In fact, not even the most skeptical scholar doubts that the NT writings come from before this time.
- Set the story straight: the earliest Christians were a small group of persecuted people, always looking over their shoulders, a minority within Judaism (considered to be separatists). They had

no power or influence. Many of their key leaders were executed (Ignatius, martyred at Rome c.108 AD, Polycarp, martyred c.155 AD, etc.). This was not a group prepared to make a grab for power in the Roman Empire.

- The most significant event in 1st century Judea (besides the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus) is the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. This catastrophic event changed Judaism forever (e.g., no more temple), yet it is never referenced in any of the NT writings, creating a strong argument that most/all of the NT was completed before 70 AD.

### **What evidence do we have for the NT writings?**

- The oldest New Testament manuscript in existence is Papyrus 52 (often simply "P52"), a tiny fragment of the Gospel of John (John 18:31-34, 37-38), dated to about 130 AD and originating from Egypt. The Gospel of John was already being copied in Egypt by the early second century!
- We have more ancient copies of the NT than any other ancient writing. These copies are much closer in age to the original time of writing than other ancient documents. In addition, there are over 19,000 copies in the Syriac, Latin, Coptic, and Aramaic.

### **What about other gospels or early Christians writings?**

- As stated above, they all come from the second century, which sets them apart immediately because they don't come from the apostles. The early church was aware of these writings and rejected them because they did not believe they truly came from the apostles. Many of these books are referred to in the writings of early church leaders (e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*). The early church never tried to hide them, but responded to them openly and denounced them because they were not written by the apostles or their associates.

### **Archaeology and the NT**

- William Ramsey and the surprising accuracy of the book of Acts

### **But don't some scholars claim that...**

- Biblical maximalists - those who believe that most/all of what is written in the Bible is historically accurate
- Biblical minimalists - those who believe that most/all of what is written in the Bible is historically inaccurate
- When we look at the work done by scholars who are reconstructing history we should ask: what is the actual evidence they are using? Try to discern the difference between evidence and interpretation. There are many good scholars out there. You will know them by their data.

## **Session 2. Who picked which books got into the Bible and why?**

### **Note: "Recognition," not "Choosing"**

- These books were recognized by Israel/the church from the very beginning, not chosen.

### **Recognition of Canon of OT**

- Jewish usage of the main texts in the Hebrew Bible in the Second Temple Era was relatively well established.
  - The basic outline of the Hebrew Bible was in place (Luke 24:44)
  - Jesus quoted the OT Scriptures as the authoritative word of God (John 10:35)

### What about the Dead Sea Scrolls?

- The fact that non-canonical scrolls were included in the DSS is not surprising, we would expect the same if any Christian seminary's library today was burned and forgotten: copies of the Bible and copies of non-canonical books would be included side-by-side.
- Some copies of the Biblical texts found among the DSS differ from our Hebrew version of the text. Some scholars use this to claim that therefore the Biblical texts were fluid, and not seen as unalterable during this time period. This is unlikely based on the high regard shown for Scripture in the first century (of which Jesus's interactions with the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, etc. are the best existing evidence) and based on what we know about Jewish attitudes toward Scripture in the very next era. The textual differences are probably best explained by variant readings (errors made during copying) and scribes adding commentary to biblical texts while still understanding the difference between their own additions and the original authoritative text.
- The DSS offer helpful insights into one unique Jewish splinter group around the time of Jesus. One thing they reveal is the widespread messianic expectation among Jewish people at this time.

### Recognition of Canon of NT

- The apostles assumed that their own writings and those of the other apostles were authoritative for the early church because they were the word of God.
  - Paul assumed that his own writings were God's authoritative word (1 Corinthians 14:37; see also 1 Thes 2:13).
  - Peter equated Paul with Scripture (2 Peter 3:15–16);
  - Paul quoted Luke as Scripture (1 Timothy 5:18, quoting Luke 10:7)
- The concept of a canon was already inherent in the NT writings, and therefore we should not be surprised that the early church leaders quoted widely from the NT.
  - 1 Clement, written about 95 AD by Clement the bishop of Rome quotes from multiple NT books (~13, at least Mat, Luk, Rom, 1 Cor, Titus, Heb).
  - Irenaeus (130-200 AD), bishop of Lyon, was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John. In his famous book *Against Heresies*, he gives a brief history of the four gospels, who wrote them and when, which agrees exactly with the titles of the four gospels as we now have them. He quoted every book of the NT except Philemon, James, 2 Peter, and 3 John. He treats the NT writings as Scripture, the authoritative word of God. In contrast, he accused heretics of teaching things not found in Scripture and quoting from other books which he considered false.
- There was not always 100% agreement over the exact 27 book list that we have. Some of the books were debated (e.g., James, 2 Peter) because they weren't universally recognized. This stems from the fact that they were used in some locations but not others. However the early church leaders' debates and questions about whether to include these books should be an encouragement to us: they took great care verifying that the books they accepted had solid proof of coming from the Apostles.
- Christian leaders quoted from non-canonical books (two favorites were the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas), but they generally distinguished these books from the NT writings. This shouldn't surprise us. We do the same (e.g., a preacher quotes JI Packer or CS Lewis in the midst of a sermon assuming his audience distinguishes canonical and non-canonical writings.)
- The main group of NT writings was not debated at all, but accepted by everyone from the very earliest period. The four gospels were recognized as the only canonical gospels from the

beginning. No serious challenges arose to the letters of Paul, which appear to have been quite popular (including the book of Hebrews, which was understood by many to be a letter from Paul).

### **But I've heard that Constantine and the Council of Nicea chose the books of the NT?**

- No decision about the canon of Scripture was made at Nicaea. Period. Verifying this is as simple as reading the decisions of the council, which was focused on defining the divinity of Christ.
- "There were regional church councils that made declarations about the canon (Laodicea, Hippo, Carthage). But these regional councils did not just 'pick' books they happened to like, but affirmed the books they believed had functioned as foundational documents for the Christian faith. In other words, these councils were declaring the way things had been, not the way they wanted them to be" (Michael Kruger, "The NT Canon Was Not Decided at Nicea-Nor Any Other Church Council" at michaeljkruger.com). The fact that multiple councils did make statements about the canon shows that these were merely statements, not authoritative rulings, otherwise it wouldn't have to be made more than once.

### **Session 3. Who handed down the Bible and how did they do it?**

#### **Transmission of OT**

- A tradition of extremely high regard for Scripture in Judaism implies that the texts were faithfully handed down (Genizahs, memorization).
  - Masoretic practices to safeguard the text in the middle ages
- Self-Criticism: a sign of history not propaganda. (e.g., records of Moses' and David's failures)

#### **Transmission of NT**

- A succession of personal connections can be drawn between the early church and the original writers (Papias knew John, Irenaeus knew Polycarp knew John, etc.)
- The rapid spread of Christianity in the first century makes it nearly impossible that anyone could change all of the writings over such geographic distance.
- Self-Criticism: a sign of history not propaganda (e.g., the disciples misunderstandings of and even denial of Jesus; Paul's criticism of ongoing sin and disunity in the churches)

#### **Manuscript Discoveries**

- Constantin von Tischendorf and Codex Sinaiticus

#### **Is what we have now, what they wrote then?**

- The new manuscript discoveries in the last several centuries (mainly since the original publication of the KJV in 1611) has 1) introduced many new variants AND 2) confirmed our access to the original wording of the text beyond doubt. These two outcomes are not mutually exclusive! We have a much more accurate picture of the original wording of the NT today than was available in the 1600s.
- How many variants are there? It depends on how you count, but there are certainly hundreds of thousands, perhaps as many as half a million.
- Examples of variants:
  - Mostly minor errors in spelling, introduced by accident, which lead to nonsense statements (e.g., "statemints").
  - Minor changes, "our" ↔ "your" (Col 1:7, 12; 1 John 1:4)

- Only two longer additions: John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20. Both passages are clearly marked in all modern translations.
- The number of manuscripts of the NT available today has allowed us to reconstruct the original text (both verifying wording and exposing non original material) such that we do not expect any serious changes to arise.

### **Has the message been faithfully transmitted?**

- There is an entire scientific study committed to just that question. Textual Criticism is a field of study devoted to examining manuscript evidence in order to restore the original text of a document by comparing agreements and variants.
- Although we no longer have the autographs (that is, the original copy of each book), we have a wealth of manuscripts. This is a distinct advantage, because it provides a greater amount of material to compare in order to work back to the original wording.
- How does Textual Criticism work? “The overarching principle is that we should give preference to the reading that best explains how the others were created” (Meade and Gurry, p.91). Meade and Gurry add the following principles that are sometimes used (p.92). Preference is usually given to the reading that
  - Is less harmonized to other passages
  - (in the NT) shows influence from Hebrew
  - Is attested earlier (that is, comes from an older manuscript)
  - Is found in wider geographic locales
  - Is more awkward grammatically
  - Scribes would find more difficult
- 1 Corinthians 13:3 is a good example. Some English translations have “if I give up my body to be burned” (see ESV; KJV), others have “if I give up my body that I might boast” (see CSB; NIV). These translations differ because they are based on different original texts. Some manuscripts have *kauchēsomai* (“boast”) and others have *kauthēsomai* (“burn”). There is only one letter different in the original Greek. Many translations will alert you if there is uncertainty like this. For instance, see the footnote in the ESV. Most of the differences are not even this important.
- Most of the errors are easy to spot because of the amount of evidence we have.
- The wealth of manuscripts provides overwhelming certainty that we have the original wording with greater than 99% certainty of the exact wording.
  - But what about the other 1%? Those are given to you in footnotes. None of them are particularly significant.

### **How do we know we have the original text?**

- Summary: A reliable chain of witnesses runs all the way back to the earliest church, with personal associations connecting back to the apostles themselves. The wealth of manuscripts that we have allows us to use Textual Criticism to verify the text with near exact certainty. There is no real doubt about the original wording.

### **How do we know this is the word of God?**

- Inspiration, Jesus’s use of the OT, the resurrection of Jesus, his appointing of the apostles, the apostles testimony to the NT Scripture, the early church’s careful affirmation of the apostle’s writings
- This is the essential claim of Scripture about itself
  - OT and NT writers claim to speak God’s word: Exodus 24:7; Zech 7:12; 2 Peter 1:21.

- Therefore, it is treated as without error and authoritative: Nehemiah 8:8; Psalm 12:6; Psalm 119; John 10:35.
- This argument is circular (self-referential), but so are all arguments for ultimate authority (e.g., The fundamental scientific claim, “only things that can be verified empirically should be accepted as true,” is not empirically verifiable but is an assumption that must be accepted to proceed.)

### **How to respond to questions, objections, and doubts**

1. Our method should match our message. Our message is mercy: God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but speaking through us as ambassadors encouraging all people everywhere to be reconciled to him through Jesus. And so our method should be merciful also.
2. Distinguish honest questions from antagonism. All honest questions deserve answers.
3. When we struggle with doubt or have questions, we should search for answers.
4. Move the conversation toward the gospel.

### **Do you love the word of God?**

- Meditation as a habit of growing in the knowledge of God (“knowledge” as relationship)

### **Bibliography:**

Examples of second generation Christians who quoted extensively from the NT writings:

- *The Apostolic Fathers*, available at CCEL.org or in many printed editions. (These writers knew the apostles and provide an important connection back to the apostles and their writings.)

Christians in the early church who worked to understand challenging questions about Scripture:

- Irenaus of Lyon, *Against Heresies* (available to read or download at CCEL.org)
- Augustine of Hippo, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (available to read or download at CCEL.org)

Modern summaries of the history of the Old and New Testaments:

- Gleason Archer, *The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Addresses many questions asked about the Bible and how to understand difficult texts and apparent contradictions)
- John D. Meade and Peter J. Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture: The Amazing Story of How We Got the Bible* (Medium length, easy to read, but still quite comprehensive)
- Greg Lanier, *A Christian’s Pocket Guide to How We Got the Bible* (Very brief and helpful)
- Michael J. Kruger, “Ten Basic Facts About the NT Canon that Every Christian Should Memorize,” on the Canon Fodder blog at michaeljkruger.com

More in depth treatments of the history and development of the Bible:

- Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*
- Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*