

Origins of the Bible

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The Bible is not history. It contains historically accurate information, but its purpose is not to relate history.

- The Bible is more than history, it is God speaking to us.
- With that understood to discount the Bible because some content is alleged to be incorrect is an irrelevant criticism.

That being said, it should also be noted that not one item in the Bible has ever been found to be historically inaccurate.

- In fact every time a new archeological find is uncovered it verifies something else in the Bible. King David [Cook], Walls of Jericho falling out [Did the Walls], Polyarchs (Acts 17:6) [Overton], method of Crucifixion [Shanks], 5-sided pool of Bethsaida [Tiffany]. It should be noted that only about 5% known Biblical sites have been excavated extensively with less than 5% of the known sites have been excavated at all. [Drendel]

We come to the next question – how did the Bible come into being?

- Some may wonder why we bother discussing how the Bible came to be.
- Isn't it enough that we simply accept that we received it from God?
- The answer to that question is both Yes and No.
- For centuries nay-sayers to the Christian faith have attacked the Bible regarding its origin, its reliability and its content.
- Their attacks are based on one undeniable fact – mankind has been involved in the process of writing and compiling the Bible.
- By our own admission we are flawed and corrupt creatures in need of a savior.
- And so the argument goes that anything we touch must be flawed and corrupted. Therein lies the seed of doubt.

Old Testament

As you know the Bible was compiled in two parts: the OT and the NT.

- To understand the compiling of the OT we must first understand something of the Tribe of Levi.
- The tribe of Levi was chosen by God to serve Him upon the Israelites departure from Egypt. Aaron and Moses were Levites. Those that descended from Aaron fell to the priestly class and from Moses were of the Levitical class.
- The priest performed all the sacrifices, rituals and ceremonies at the temple.
- The Levites performed numerous other critical duties including: singing Psalms during Temple services, performing construction and maintenance for the Temple, serving as guards.

- They also served as teachers and judges, maintained the sanctity of the cities of refuge and many other functions.

But for our purposes their most critical role was that of scribe.

- A scribe was a professional writer.
- Many Israelites could read and write but scribes were a very different class or writer.
- They were trained not only to have the very best penmanship but to be diligent and scrupulous in all of their writing efforts so as to avoid mistakes.
- There were scribes in every city. They were responsible for recording judgments, writing decrees, laws, official letters and various types of legal documents.
- They kept the official record of the history of Israel. The books of Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah were all compiled by scribes either directly or by dictation.

The very best of the scribes were given over to the greatest responsibility - making copies of the Scriptures. There can be no greater responsibility.

Their process for copying Scripture was meticulous:

1. They could only use clean animal skins, both to write on, and even to bind manuscripts.
2. Each column of writing could have no less than forty-eight, and no more than sixty lines.
3. The ink had to be black, and of a special recipe.
4. They had to verbalize each word aloud while they were writing.
5. They had to wipe the pen and wash their entire bodies before writing the word "Jehovah," every time they wrote it.
6. There must be a review within thirty days, and if as many as three pages required corrections, the entire manuscript had to be redone.
7. The letters, words, and paragraphs had to be counted and must be the same as the original.
8. The middle paragraph, word and letter must correspond to those of the original document.
9. A copy became invalid if two letters touched each other.
10. The documents could be stored only in sacred places (synagogues, etc).
11. As no document containing God's Word could be destroyed, they were stored, or buried, in a "hiding place." Usually in a synagogue or Jewish cemetery.
[Manning]
12. They were buried in sealed jars designed to preserve the Scripture.

What proof do we have of their faithfulness?

- Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the oldest manuscripts available for translation dated back to the 1100's.

- The Dead Sea Scrolls contained multiple copies of every book of the OT (except for Esther) dating back to as far as 200 BC; making them 1300 years older than previously known copies
- When the two sets of Scriptures were compared scholars were amazed to find that the two sets were almost identical.
- Among the variations that were found almost all of the variations related to the way words were spelled.
- There were extremely rare instances in which a word or phrase had been added, but nothing that impacted the meaning intent or understanding at all.

Gleason Archer wrote: "...we should accord to the [scribes] the highest praise for their meticulous care [and] the most diligent attention to the accurate preservation of the Hebrew Scriptures that has ever been devoted to any ancient literature, secular or religious, in the history of human civilization...

Because of their faithfulness, we have today a form of the Hebrew text which in all essentials duplicates the [Scriptures] which was considered authoritative in the days of Christ and the apostles, if not a century earlier. ... These bring us very close in all essentials to the original autographs themselves, and furnish us with an authentic record of God's revelation. "[Dead Sea Scrolls]

It must also be remembered that we don't just have one copy of these ancient manuscripts. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls alone there are about 300 OT manuscripts.

- There are over 30,000 copies of OT manuscripts in Hebrew, Greek and various other languages which are consistent and supportive of each other and we have an irrefutable foundation unparalleled in ancient literature. [Stewart]

How then did we end up with the books that are included in the OT?

The canonization of the OT began during the 5th century BC following the Babylonian exile. The canonization was primarily led by Ezra. He is known for his pivotal role as a scribe and priest who led the Jews from the Babylonian exile back to Jerusalem, restoring Jewish religious life and enforcing the Law of Moses. Ezra's efforts were not only sparked by the return of the Jews to Jerusalem but also to combat a counterfeit worship of God that had arisen in Samaria. [Ezra]

To accomplish this, Ezra and the Great Assembly [of 120 priests] began to exercise firm authority over every aspect of worship at the temple of God in Jerusalem and in the numerous Jewish synagogues scattered throughout the Persian Empire. The Great Assembly supervised and regulated the temple rites and sacrifices, priestly laws, synagogue rituals and everything

associated with the worship of God under the Old Covenant. Every act of worship had to be thoroughly and completely scriptural, centered at the temple in Jerusalem—and approved by Ezra and the Great Assembly.

In order to preserve the true worship of God, it was essential to differentiate between the sacred Hebrew texts of the Jerusalem Jews and the Hebrew writings utilized by the apostate Samaritan Jews. The key step was to organize the sacred Levitical documents into a final, closed canon of Scripture. Then, accurate copies of the entire canonized text were made and distributed to Jewish synagogues throughout the Persian Empire. Once canonized, the Scriptures could be preserved without fear of corruption. [The Canonization] [I recommend you read the full article at the website listed in the footnote]

It was widely accepted that all inspired revelation from God had ceased with Malichi's final prophecy. The period that followed was known as the Great Silence, because there was no prophet of God Israel/Judah.

Up until the time of Martin Luther in the 1500's the Septuagint Scriptures were the generally accepted OT of the Christian Church. The Septuagint version of the Hebrew Scriptures included what were called the Apocrypha, other Hebrew writings that were accepted as authoritative but not inspired. With the reformation, the Protestant Churches accepted the Jewish view and reverted to the Canonized Hebrew Scriptures. That is how we came to possess the OT that you find in your Bibles.

One last comment on the OT - It also seems clear that if these books were not of God, Jesus would have made pains to challenge them, but rather Jesus quoted from or referred to several of these Books. If anyone would have known of their inspired nature it would have been Jesus.

New Testament

Many believe that the NT was canonized by the Council of Nicea, called by Emperor Constantine in 325AD. This is not correct.

- That Council was called to deal with the heresy of Arianism.
 - This heresy denied the divinity of Jesus. [What Criteria]
- That Council did not address the canonization of NT Scripture directly, but what came out of the Council of Nicea was the Nicene Creed.
- This creed sets out the basic beliefs of Christianity.
- It is in essence an outline of Christianity making the basic beliefs easily and readily available to everyone.

The NT was officially canonized at the Council of Carthage in 397AD. [Did Constantine]

- The process of canonization of the NT was actually fairly simple.
- Some people, however, would have you believe that there was a conspiracy to suppress the truth and push forth a political agenda.
- They would have you believe that the council sifted through dozens upon dozens of books rejecting many that did not fit their plans.
- This of course is patently untrue and is in no way supported by any evidence. The goal of canonization is to acknowledge God's revelation and preserve it for the future of the church.

The Church entered the process with four guiding principles

First - Apostolic Connection - meaning the books had to be written by the Apostles or by those in close association with them. [Pelton] Such books would have had what could be called "Apostolic influence."

- a. This would mean that all the books would have to have been written during the 1st century or the earliest part of the 2nd century.
- b. A good example would be the books of Luke and Acts, Luke was not an Apostle but his immediate association with the Apostles was very evident.

Second - The Rule of Faith. Did a given text promote the Rule of Faith?

Specifically, did it promote the ABCs of Christianity, like Jesus' bodily birth, death, and resurrection; the need for repentance; salvation through Christ; etc. (i.e. the Nicene Creed). If it didn't, then it was seen as suspect. [Pelton]

- c. At the time of the Council of Carthage there were already 21 books of the NT that were acknowledged without question throughout the Church.
- d. These included: the four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, 1 Peter, 1 John & Revelation. [Did Constantine]
- e. These would have been the Scriptures that the Council of Nicea relied upon to draft the Nicene Creed.

Third - Scope of Use There must exist **general acceptance** - Was a given text widely read in the early church? If it was widely read and popular, especially in both eastern and western cities, then that added to its authenticity.[Pelton]

- f. This would prevent the introduction of new or relatively unknown material.

Fourth - Life-changing. Was a given book edifying? Did it develop one's faith in Jesus Christ, did it change people's lives, did it add significant things to one's faith? [Pelton]

Amazingly when the churches gathered they discovered that there were only 30 books widely used in the Christian church at the time.

In addition to the 21 books already mentioned, there were: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude, Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache and 1st Clement. (Paul mentions Clement Phl 4:3). Ultimately only the last three books were excluded.

- These books were not included because their authorship or connection to the Apostles could not be substantiated and their acceptance in the Church was limited.
 - These books were seen as authoritative but not the inspired word of God.
 - Does this mean that these books are not worth reading and studying? Not at all.
 - That would be like suggesting that we should **not** read Bible commentaries, devotionals, Christian blogs, other Christian based literature or that we should **not** listen to Christian radio and TV, music or even sermons from our pastors.
- But as with all things outside the Bible we must be like the Bereans. [Acts 17:11 NIV] tells us "11 Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."
- Just as the Bereans examined the Scriptures to verify what Paul said is true, we must measure all things claiming to be true against the Bible for their truth and accuracy.
 - In reality all the Church leadership did at the Council of Carthage was to confirm and affirm what God had already established in His Church.

Reliability of the copies

- There are more than 25000 partial and complete manuscript copies of the NT.
- In addition there are 36000 quotations from the NT by the early church fathers along with several thousand lectionaries.

Dr. Ron Rhodes said, "Bottom line: the New Testament has an overwhelming amount of evidence supporting its reliability." [Rhodes]

He goes on to say, "In the many thousands of manuscript copies ... scholars have discovered that there are some 200,000 "variants." ... This may seem like a staggering figure ... To begin, we must emphasize that ... 99 percent hold virtually no significance whatsoever. Many of these variants simply involve a missing letter in a word; some involve reversing the order of two words (such as "Christ Jesus" instead of "Jesus Christ"); some may involve the absence of one or more insignificant words. ... when all the facts are put on the table, only about 50 of the variants have any real significance-- and even then, no doctrine of the Christian faith or any moral commandment is [affected] by them. For more than ninety-nine percent of the cases the original text can be reconstructed to a practical certainty." [Rhodes]

Let us always be mindful – we serve a mighty God. I believe it is fully within His power to see to it that His divine relation is preserved as He intended it to be, whether it be the NT or OT.

- Being familiar with the compilation of the Bible prepares us to confront those with doubts of its authenticity and direct them on to the path of truth.

Over the centuries various other books have been discovered all purporting to be Scripture but were not included in the New Testament. Some of the books are:

- Gospel of Thomas
- Gospel of Barnabas
- Gospel of the Nazarenes
- Acts of Andrew
- Acts of Paul
- The Letter of the Corinthians to Paul
- The Letter of Polycarp to the Phillippians
- The Apocalypse of Peter [New Testament Apocrypha]

And there are dozens more.

Just because these documents carried titles identifying them as “Gospels” or suggesting they came from an Apostle or close associate does not make them so.

- It was quite common in ancient times to name documents after well known people or to use words such as Gospel, Acts or Apocalypse to borrow credibility for the document.
- It was somewhat like a celebrity endorsement except in the case of all of these documents the “celebrities” had long since been dead and in the presence of their savior.

These have never ever been considered for numerous reasons.

- All of them have been determined to have been written in the 2nd Century or much later, well outside of Apostolic influence.
- Some of these books did not even exist at the time of the Council of Carthage.
- Their authorship is of unknown origin.
- Few copies of the manuscripts exist. In most instances there is only a single copy. Such few existing copies, compared to the NT canon, supports the understanding that these books were not well regarded and had very limited circulation.

One final note – Nothing in Archeology or any other science has ever disproved anything in the Bible. In fact the sciences continue to affirm and confirm everything the Bible tells us just as we should anticipate.

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