

this incident. The ending of Mark is different because almost every verse in it could have been reconstructed from some other passage in Scripture. This means that, whether the text was in the original Gospel or not, the message is still inspired by God.

It is often pointed out that there is no credible variation in the text of the New Testament that would require one to change one's beliefs. This is an understatement. In fact there is no credible manuscript variation that would require one to change one's understanding of a single episode in the Bible.

An alternative view

The usual method of attempting to assess the accuracy of the text of the Bible compares the various manuscripts available with one another and draws conclusions from the overwhelming similarity of the manuscripts. However, there is another approach. This is to look at the smaller details of the narrative in the Bible and discover whether these are accurately reported. By looking

at the archaeology of the Bible one can confirm minor references to people, places and events. By comparing accounts one can find undesigned coincidences between insignificant details. By looking at the way that the wording is phrased one can detect underlying linguistic patterns (linguistic fossils) that show where the account came from. The fact that even the most insignificant details of the text have been preserved with accuracy shows that there has been no major problem with the transmission of the text of the Bible through the centuries.

Useful sources

Website:

The Encyclopedia of Textual Criticism (<http://www.skypoint.com/members/waltzmn/>)

Books:

Metzger, B., *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Deutscher Bibelgesellschaft, 1995.

Abegg, M., Flint, P., Ulrich, E., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*, T. & T. Clark, 1999.

The words of the LORD are pure words

2. The canon of Scripture

John Thorpe

This important article discusses how the Word of God is to be distinguished from merely human documents. The author describes five tests that can be applied, and also discusses the Apocryphal books of the Old and New Testaments. He maintains that today we must be aware of the reasons why we accept only the sixty-six books of the Bible as being inspired by God.

THE BOOKS of the Bible are inspired by God, are authoritative, and are sufficient for salvation. It is a commonplace that there are sixty-six inspired books and that these are gathered together in the Bible. The list of authoritative books that make up the Bible is called the 'canon', from a Greek word which, among other things, means a standard or a rule.

However, the existence of a list of authoritative books poses a question: Which books should be considered to be Scripture? This is an important question. If the list of books is wrong then the authority of Scripture is undermined. Those who dislike the Bible use this question to undermine it by challenging the basis on which the canon is chosen.

For many years the Roman Catholic Church has argued that the Bible is simply the list of books approved by the Church. The 'Church' (by which they mean their own church) thus becomes the real authority and the Scripture is considered to be only secondary. This attack was pushed with some vigour in the 1990s, and many people with

Roman Catholic connections have come across the idea that the Bible is not thoroughly authoritative because of problems with the canon. The problem is made worse by the fact that the Roman Catholics have additional books in their Bibles, the Old Testament apocrypha.

A second, and now relatively common, attack on the Bible comes from the 'rationalist' camp. This attacks the New Testament with the assertion that many more gospels were written than the canonical four, and that these were as good as the real Gospels, although they contained a different view of Jesus. Several apocryphal gospels are known, and these were added to in the mid-twentieth century by the discovery of a hoard of Gnostic manuscripts at Nag Hamadi in Egypt, which included some apocryphal gospels.

The argument made by the alleged rationalists is that these gospels contain the real teaching of Jesus, but that they were suppressed by the Church from the fourth century onwards because the teachings in them conflicted with Church doctrine. This attack was made popular by Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*, and is now firmly entrenched in the public mind. It is very difficult to make a case for the historical accuracy of the Bible in a public forum without coming across this view. If we intend to proclaim the gospel in today's world we need to be able to defend the idea that the canon of Scripture is exactly that found in our Bibles. The question of the canon is thus very important.

The academic approach

Discussion of the canon of Scripture in scholarly books or on the Internet revolves around the supposed development of the canon through the writings of 'Church Fathers' and the pronouncements of various church councils. These show that the books we know in our New Testament were accepted as authentic early on in Church history; but those councils cannot be the final arbiters of the canon of Scripture.

The books did not become inspired because they were recognised by the church; they were inspired from the moment that God gave them and they were written down. The list of inspired scriptures is not determined by ecumenical councils or church fathers; it is determined by what God gave us.

The real tests

The test of whether a book is authoritative depends entirely on whether that book was inspired

by God, rather than originating with the thoughts of a human being. If a book is inspired by God then one would expect it to be part of Scripture, whereas a book which has purely human origins should not be thought of as Scriptural.

There are five obvious tests for inspiration that can be found in Scripture. They are also logically sound and can therefore be used without a need to appeal to Scripture for their validity.

- **Prophecy:** Deuteronomy 18:18,21,22 tells us that a prophet from God will show his credentials by providing a sign or a prediction. The prophet should only be considered to have Divine inspiration if that prediction is fulfilled.
- **Harmony:** For a book to be accepted as inspired by God it should be completely consistent with the rest of Scripture. This is a logical requirement: the One God will give a consistent message. It is also a test described in the Bible several times. In Deuteronomy 13:1-3 it is described as an even more important test than prophecy. In 1 John 4:1-3,6 the test of consistency with the message of the apostles is given, and in Galatians 1:8,9 Paul shows an absolute requirement that the message of the gospel should not change.
- **Accuracy:** God is all-seeing and all-knowing. He will not, therefore, give a revelation that contains errors of fact. God is able to tell what has happened, and failure to do this correctly would show that a book is not inspired. This test is described in Isaiah 41:22.
- **Citation:** This occurs when a known prophet quotes from an earlier book as Scripture. This would show that the earlier book is inspired and should be part of the canon.
- **Longevity:** According to Isaiah 55:11, God will not give a revelation unless that revelation has a purpose, and will not withdraw it until that purpose is achieved. Books which are lost are not, therefore, Scripture. There may have been inspired books which have achieved their purpose and have been withdrawn (for example the book of Iddo the seer, concerning genealogies). These are not part of the Bible for the reason that they are no longer relevant.

These tests are used in the Bible, and one can build a complete picture of Scripture by using them. The Jewish authorities demanded a sign from Jesus (Mt. 12:38-40; 16:4); his response was that his message would be authenticated by his resurrection. When Jesus refers to the Old Testament as authoritative and inspired (for example,

Mt. 22:29,43; Mk. 7:13; Lk. 16:31; Jno. 5:46,47) he is validating it as Scripture.

The New Testament apocrypha

The most common attack on the Bible at present comes from the existence of alternative gospels to the four in the New Testament. Documents such as the *Gospel of Thomas* are cited by critics as being of equal value with the canonical Gospels, and some writers with 'New Age' sympathies are prepared to claim that the Gnostic gospels are more authentic than the real ones. This is the point of view made popular by books like *The Da Vinci Code*, gaining a tremendous following among the general public.

However, the apocryphal gospels fail all of the tests for inspiration. They contain no fulfilled prophecy. They are short on historical detail, but where such detail appears it can often be shown to be in error. The teaching of the apocryphal gospels is frequently out of tune with that of the rest of Scripture. One can also show that, while the real Gospels must have been written within a few decades of the ministry of Jesus, the apocryphal gospels cannot have been written any earlier than the second half of the second century. This means that they were not written by the people whose names they bear, and hence that they are based on a lie—something that could not happen with a real gospel.

The origins of the apocryphal gospels can be seen from the way that they are written. While the real Gospels contain phrases and words which show that they came from an Aramaic- or Hebrew-speaking background, the apocryphal gospels have a Greek background. In addition, they use words culled from second-century Greek philosophy. Finally, they usually account for their late appearance by claiming to be 'hidden' gospels, kept secret to be made public in the second century (the word *apocrypha*, which often appears in them, means 'hidden'). There would be no need to produce such an explanation for the real Gospels, which simply recorded things that the ecclesia had already been hearing; there was nothing hidden about them.

The Old Testament apocrypha

A Roman Catholic or an Eastern Orthodox Bible will contain additions to the Old Testament. There are additional books, such as the books of the Maccabees or the book of Ecclesiasticus, and additional sections of text in Daniel and Esther. These are found in the Septuagint, an

early translation of the Old Testament into Greek, which was adopted as the official Old Testament for the Greek-speaking church and hence the Roman Catholic Church. The thirty-nine books of the standard Bible are the books found in the Hebrew Old Testament; the additional books are again known as the apocrypha.

In fact there are compelling reasons for accepting the thirty-nine books and rejecting the apocrypha. The evidence can be summarised as follows:

- **Prophecy:** The Old Testament contains vast amounts of prophecy. Apart from those prophecies that relate to the future Kingdom, this prophecy has been fulfilled. The Old Testament apocrypha contain no fulfilled prophecy.
- **Harmony:** The Old Testament contains teaching which is absolutely harmonious from one end to the other and which is completely consistent with the New Testament. The Old Testament apocrypha sometimes contain teachings which are out of harmony with this. For example, 2 Maccabees 12:39-45 seems to contain a reference to purgatory, a teaching which contradicts the canonical Scriptures.
- **Citation:** The Old Testament is cited comprehensively and in detail by Jesus and the apostles, and there is no doubt that they viewed it as authoritative and inspired. The apocrypha, however, is not. There is not one single place in the New Testament that contains a quotation from the apocrypha. Sometimes citations are proposed, but these are either short examples of common phrases or places where the apocrypha actually quotes the real Old Testament. In reality, Jesus and the apostles ignored the apocrypha completely.

However, there is more reason to reject the Old Testament apocrypha. The Septuagint arranges its books in the order with which we are familiar, but the Hebrew Old Testament uses a different order. The Hebrew Old Testament is divided into three sections: the Law (the five books of Moses), the Prophets (which includes the histories from Joshua to Kings as well as the prophets) and the Writings (which begins with Psalms and ends with Chronicles). Jesus refers to the three divisions of the Hebrew Old Testament in his summary of the Scripture in Luke 24:44; this excludes the apocrypha. Jesus also refers to the Old Testament in Matthew 23:35 and Luke 11:51, where he describes all the righteous who were killed from Abel to Zechariah. Zechariah is probably the prophet whose book appears in

the minor prophets, in which case he would be the last prophet to be killed in a chronological sense in the Old Testament: the apocrypha contains accounts of later killings in the books of the Maccabees. (Some take Zechariah to be the one in 2 Chronicles 24:20,21—which was the last book in the Hebrew Old Testament.¹)

A final comment on the canon of the Old Testament comes from Paul: “what advantage has the Jew? . . . First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:1,2, NASB). This declares that the Old Testament Scriptures were in the care of the Jews. It is the Jewish canon of Scripture which should be used, not the pagan Greek one. This, of course, is the canon in our standard English Bibles.

Conclusion

This is only an introduction to the study of the canon of Scripture. However, it is a study that we need to make in order to meet the challenges that are posed to our faith in the modern world.

Whether we are questioned by a Secularist, a Muslim or simply someone confused by something he has read in a novel, the Bible has the answer.

The challenge

Little is published on the canon of Scripture from a Biblical point of view.² Most of the studies that one sees are from the point of view of Church history. The challenge to us is to demonstrate that the position of every book of the Bible is assured, and that none of the apocryphal books should be accepted as Scripture. This might involve some study, but it is very important study.

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1. Matthew identifies him as Zechariah son of Berechiah (Zech. 1:1), not Zechariah son of Jehoiada (2 Chron. 24:20).—D.J.B.
 2. Writers putting a Biblical point of view are Brother John Carter in a chapter on the canon of Scripture in his book *The Oracles of God*, Derrick Banyard in his book *God's Living Word*, and Brother Edward Whittaker in *For the Study and Defence of the Holy Scripture* (chapter entitled “The canon of Scripture”).