

(You can access the entire seminar teaching at <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/why-we-believe-the-bible-part-1#WhichBooks> The below teaching manuscript is copied from the whole manuscript by Dr. Piper)

2. Which Books Make Up The Bible And Why?

The Old Testament Canon

The Meaning of "Canon"

The word "canon" means straight staff, or measuring rod, and then a guide or a model or a test of truth or beauty.

Galatians 6:16

And those who will walk by this rule (*kanon*), peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

The earliest use is the sense of a group of books that function as a rule or measuring rod of faith and life: Council of Laodicea in ad 363 (Schaff-Herzog, I, 385):

No psalms of private authorship can be read in the churches, nor *uncanonical* books, but only the *canonical* books of the Old and New Testaments.

Jewish Understanding of Canon between the Testaments

Other Jewish books besides the ones we have in our Old Testament were written after the Old Testament times. These include:

The First Book of Esdras

The Second Book of Esdras

Tobit

Judith

The Addition to the Book of Esther

The Wisdom of Solomon

Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach)

Baruch

The Letter of Jeremiah

The Prayer of Azariah
Suzanna
Bel and The Dragon
The Prayer of Manasseh
The First Book of the Maccabees
The Second Book of the Maccabees

The Jews did not accord to the Apocrypha the authority of the canonical books.

The Rabbinical literature (Babylonian Talmud, *Yomah* 9b):

After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel, but they still availed themselves of the *bath quol*.

1 Maccabees 4:45-46 (about 100 bc) on the cessation of prophecy:

So they tore down the altar and stored the stone in a convenient place on the temple hill *until there should come a prophet* to tell what to do with them.

1 Maccabees 9:27:

He refers to great distress “such as had not been *since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them.*”

Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:41 (Josephus born ad 37/38)

From Artaxerxes [end of OT era] to our own times a complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of *the failure of the exact succession of the prophets.*

Note: He knew the writings of the Apocrypha but did not regard them as canonical.

The Make-Up of the Jewish Canon

The Hebrew canon has traditionally had 24 books which include all of our 39 and no more, and these are divided into three sections: Law, Prophets, and Writings (Tanach: Torah, Nebiim, Chetuvim)

Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1/2), Kings (1/2), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Minor Prophets (= one book: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

Writings: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (= one book), Chronicles (1/2)

Thus the canon of the Jews began with Genesis and ended with 2 Chronicles, not (as we have it today) with Malachi. Our order follows the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, but the earliest Christian witnesses as well as Josephus and Philo (who used the LXX but did not accord the Apocrypha authority) show that the Apocryphal books included in the LXX were not counted as canonical.

New Testament Pointers to the Existence and Extent of the Old Testament Canon

Paul assumed the legitimacy of the "Scriptures" that were being taught to Jewish children.

2 Timothy 3:14-15

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with *the sacred writings* which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

There is no record of any dispute between Jesus and the Jewish leaders of his day over what the extent of the Scriptures was. He seemed to assume that their Bible was his Bible, and he made remarkable claims about its authority ("The Scripture cannot be broken," John 10:35).

The three-part Jewish division of the Old Testament was assumed by Jesus.

Luke 24:44

Now He said to them, "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."

The Jewish order of the closed Jewish canon is assumed by Jesus.

Luke 11:49-51

“Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute, that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary.’”

But chronologically the last martyr in the Old Testament was Uriah the Son of Shemaiah, whose death is described in Jeremiah 26:20-23. He died during the reign of Jehoiakim who reigned from 609 to 598 bc.

However in 2 Chronicles, the last book of the Jewish OT canon, there was a Zechariah killed in the temple court.

Then the Spirit of God took possession of Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest; and he stood above the people, and said to them, “Thus says God, ‘Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, he has forsaken you.’” But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the Lord. (2 Chronicles 24:20-21)

This strongly suggests that the canon Jesus was familiar with was the Jewish OT canon that includes the books we have today.

According to one count by Roger Nicole, the New Testament quotes various parts of the Old Testament as divinely authoritative over 295 times, but not once do they cite any statement from the books of the Apocrypha or any other writings as having divine authority. (“New Testament Use of the Old Testament” in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl Henry [London: Tyndale Press, 1959], pp. 137-141)

Jude 14-15 does quote 1 Enoch 60:8 and 1:9, and Paul quotes pagan authors in Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12, but these citations are not said to be from Scripture or to be authoritative because of their sources.

Early Christian Witness to the Completed OT Canon

Melito, Bishop of Sardis, about ad 170:

When I came to the east and reached the place where these things were preached and done, and learnt accurately the books of the Old Testament, I set down the facts and sent them to you. These are their names: five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kingdoms, two books of Chronicles, the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon and his Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Job, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, the

Twelve in a single book, Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra. (cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.26.14)

No Apocryphal books are mentioned, and the only missing book from our OT canon is Esther, which was controversial for some time and may have been suppressed for political reasons at the time because it spoke of a Jewish uprising.

3. The New Testament Canon

The New Testament assumed the existence of canonical Scriptures. The concept was not foreign to them or added later.

Luke 24:27

And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all *the Scriptures*.

John 5:39

“You search *the Scriptures*, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me.”

Acts 17:2

And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from *the Scriptures*.

Romans 15:4

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of *the Scriptures* we might have hope.

The point here is that for the church to begin to govern its life and doctrine by more than this authoritative canon of Scriptures (Old Testament), something similar in authority and limitation would be necessary, namely, a supplementary canon.

Jesus was recognized by the early church as having authority equal to and beyond the Old Testament Scriptures.

Matthew 7:29

He was teaching them as one having *authority*, and not as their scribes.

Matthew 5:38-39

“You have heard that it was said, ‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’ *But I say to you*, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Mark 13:31

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but *My words will not pass away.*”

Matthew 12:41-42

“The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, *something greater than Jonah is here*. The Queen of the South shall rise up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, *something greater than Solomon is here.*”

John 14:6

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and *the truth*, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.”

Matthew 28:18

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.*”

Hebrews 1:1-2

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, *in these last days has spoken to us in His Son*, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

The point here is that the teaching of Jesus would inevitably lead to an expansion of the canon of the early church. The Old Testament would be supplemented by what Jesus taught and did. The challenge is opened then for the early church how to limit what is inevitably opened by the coming and teaching of Jesus.

Theologically, a closed canon of the New Testament is what we would expect in accord with what God has inspired and preserved for us in the Old Testament.

If we accept [Jesus'] testimony to the God-given authority of the Old Testament, it would seem intrinsically unlikely that the most stupendous event in human history – in the life, death and resurrection of its incarnate Lord . . . would have been left by the God who had revealed it in advance without any authoritative record or explanation for future generations. (Norman Anderson, *God's Word for God's World* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981], p. 124)

Jesus himself pointed in this direction and prepared the early church to expect that he not only planned a canon of teaching concerning himself and his word, but that he would provide for it as well through authorized *apostles* and *inspiration*.

Luke 6:13-16

And when day came, He called His disciples to Him; and chose twelve of them, *whom He also named as apostles*: Simon, whom He also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; and James and John; and Philip and Bartholomew; and Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot; Judas *the son of* James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Acts 1:26

And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

John 14:24-26

“He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me. These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But 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.”

John 16:12-14

“I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you.”

The early church saw the teaching that emerged from Jesus and the apostles as comprising a completed body of truth about the faith.

Jude 3

Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

Paul saw the apostolic teaching as the unrepeatable foundation of the church (= canon) and saw his own teaching as the expression of the Lord's very words and commands.

Ephesians 2:19-20

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the *foundation of the apostles and prophets*, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.

2 Corinthians 13:3

You are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you.

1 Corinthians 14:37

If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment.

1 Corinthians 2:12-13

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might 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.

Peter saw Paul's writings as part of an enlarging canon of Scripture along side the Old Testament Scriptures.

2 Peter 3:16

[Paul wrote to you] 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.

With this built in trajectory toward a new canon that would give authorized record of the life and teaching of Jesus and the foundational teachings of his authoritative spokesmen, what remained for the early church to do was to discern which writings were the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to the apostles. The rise of heretical teachings and the use of distorted books (Marcion, about 140 ad) spurred the process of canonization. How did the church do that?

The main criterion was *apostolicity*. Not just, "Was the book written by an apostle," but also, "Was it written in the company of an apostle, presumably with his help and endorsement."

Matthew: apostle

Mark: Peter's interpreter and assistant (Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis 60-140: "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered" in Eusebius, *EH III*, 39.15)

Luke: close associate and partner of Paul (known from Acts)

John: apostle

13 epistles of Paul: apostle

Hebrews: from the Pauline circle (Hebrews 13:22-24, "But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. Take notice that *our brother Timothy* has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I shall see you. Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you.")

James: Jesus' brother called an apostle probably in Galatians 1:19 ("But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.")

1 & 2 Peter: apostle

1, 2, & 3 John: apostle

Jude: brother of James

Revelation: by John the apostle

The most controversial books that took the longest to confirm themselves for the whole church were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and Jude. But in the end the church discerned their harmony with the others and their antiquity and essential apostolicity.

The core list apart from the controversial books was known at the latest in the latter second century (Irenaeus, about 180 ad).

The first list known to us with all 27 books is in the Festal Letter of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in ad 367. This list was affirmed by the Synod of Hippo in 393.

Did the church create the canon?

Dr. Foakes-Jackson expresses my view:

The Church assuredly did not make the New Testament; the two grew up together. (*A History of Church History*, p. 21)

F. F. Bruce puts it like this:

What is particularly important to notice is that the New Testament canon was not demarcated by the arbitrary decree of any Church Council. When at last a Church Council – the Synod of Hippo in ad 393 – listed the 27 books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity. (*The Books and the Parchments*, pp. 112-113.)

What is the New Testament Canon?

Five Books of Narrative: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts.

Twenty-One Letters: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, and Jude.

A Book of Visions: Revelation

4. Do We Have the Very Words Written by the Biblical Authors?

Do we have any of the original manuscripts of the New Testament?

We do not have the actual piece of paper or papyrus or parchment that a Biblical writer actually wrote on.

How were the manuscripts of the New Testament preserved?

The first printed Greek New Testament was published 1516 by Erasmus. Before that, all copying was by hand. We owe our Bible to the meticulous love and care given by countless monks and scholars of the first 1500 years of the Christian era.

How many manuscripts of the New Testament writings do we possess today?

Over 5,000

As of 1967 the statistics were:

266 uncial texts

2,754 minuscule texts

2,135 lectionary portions

81 papari

5,236 TOTAL

How does this amount of evidence compare with other ancient writings of the same era?

We have no original manuscripts of any other writers from this period of history. Moreover the textual evidence of other writings cannot compare with the wealth of New Testament manuscripts. For example:

Caesar's *Gallic Wars* (composed between 58 and 50 bc). There are about 10 manuscripts available and the oldest is 900 years after the event.

Parts of the *Roman History* of Livy (composed between 59 bc and ad 17) is preserved in about 20 manuscripts, only one of which, containing only fragments, is as old as the fourth century.

The *Histories* and the *Annals* of the Roman historian Tacitus (composed around ad 100) are preserved (partially) only in two manuscripts, one from the ninth and one from the eleventh century.

The *History* of Thucydides (who lived 460-400 bc) is known to us from only eight manuscripts, the earliest belonging to ad 900, and a few papyrus scraps from the beginning of the Christian era.

The same general picture is true of Herodotus (who lived about ad 480 - 425).

Does this small number of manuscripts cause secular scholars to despair that we can know what these writers wrote?

As F. F. Bruce says:

No Classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest manuscripts of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals. (*Are the New Testament Documents Reliable*, pp. 16-17)

So are you saying that the New Testament is the unique in having so many manuscripts?

Yes. No other ancient book comes close to this kind of wealth of diverse preservation.

What are some of the oldest manuscripts?

The oldest is a papyrus and comes from about ad 130 and contains John 18:31-33, 37f.

Two of the only full early manuscripts of the New Testament comes from ad 350, called Codex Sinaiticus because it was discovered in a monastery on Mt. Sinai.

Are manuscripts the only source of our knowledge of the original wording of the New Testament Writings?

No. In addition to manuscripts, there are quotations from the New Testament in very early writers outside the New Testament. For example, in the *Didache* and *The Epistle of Barnabas* and Clement's letter to the *Corinthians* were produced around ad 100, and quote extensively from the New Testament writings.

The letters of Polycarp and Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, from about ad 120 contain many quotes from both Gospels and letters.

Do all these manuscripts create problems or solutions for getting back to the original writings?

The huge numbers of manuscripts of the New Testament results in two things: 1) there are *many variations* in wording among them because they were all copied by hand and subject to human error; 2) there are so many manuscripts that these *errors tend to be self-correcting* by the many manuscript witnesses we have to compare.

F. F. Bruce:

Fortunately, if the great number of MSS increases the number of scribal errors, it increases proportionately the means of correcting such errors, so that the margin of

doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original wording is not so large as might be feared; it is in truth remarkably small. (*The New Testament Documents*, p. 19)

Is there a branch of Biblical Studies that focuses on this problem of getting back to the wording of the original writings?

Yes. The branch of Biblical Studies that works with all these sources to determine the best manuscript of the Bible is Textual Criticism.

Illustrations of Discrepancies and How They Came About and Are Resolved:

Misreading: Revelation 1:5

Marginal glosses: 1 John 5:7

Harmonization: Acts 9:6

Does the doctrine of inerrancy in the original manuscripts matter?

From our Affirmation of Faith:

We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts. . .

Yes, it matters, because it affirms the reality of objective, historical inspiration. There is an objective measuring rod for us to return to. To the degree that we come close to the wording of the original we come close to the very words of God. We are there for all practical purposes.

B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort:

The proportion of words virtually accepted on all hands as raised above doubt is great; not less on a rough computation than 7/8ths of the whole. The remaining 1/8th ... formed in great part by changes of order and other comparative trivialities constitutes the whole area of [textual] criticism ... The words in our opinion still subject to doubt only make up about 1/60th of the whole New Testament. Substantial variation is but a small fraction of the whole residuary variation and can hardly form more than 1/100th part of the entire text. (*The New Testament in the Original Greek*, pp. 2-3)

F. F. Bruce:

The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affects no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice. (*The New Testament Documents*, p. 20)

5. **Does It Matter Whether We Affirm the Verbal Inerrancy of the Original Manuscripts?**

“We believe that the Bible is the Word of God,
fully inspired and without error *in the original manuscripts...*”
From Bethlehem’s Affirmation of Faith

To deny the verbal inerrancy of the original manuscripts would imply one of three things:

- that we do not believe in verbal inerrancy at all, or
- that we think inerrancy refers only to inerrant Biblical ideas, not to the very words of the Bible, or
- that we do not believe the doctrine of verbal inerrancy is important enough to affirm.

If we do not believe in the verbal inerrancy of the original manuscripts, then we deny the doctrine of verbal inerrancy entirely, and impugn the doctrine of inspiration.

Denying the inerrancy of the original manuscripts of the Bible means denying the inerrancy of Scripture entirely because there is no consistent way to affirm the inerrancy of our present Greek and Hebrew versions or our present English translations while denying the inerrancy of the originals. There is no reason to think that books of the Bible became inerrant in the process of being copied from errant manuscripts. So to deny the inerrancy of the original manuscripts is to deny the verbal inerrancy of Scripture entirely.

If we deny the doctrine of verbal inerrancy entirely then we also impugn the inspiration of Scripture, because it suggests that God inspired Biblical writers to say erroneous things. But since that creates a moral problem for God’s truthfulness, it suggests that God did not really inspire the books of the Bible.

Another reason for denying the *verbal* inerrancy of the original manuscripts is because we think inerrancy refers only to inerrant Biblical ideas and not to the very words of the Bible.

The first problem with this is that the Biblical teaching about inspiration is that it is an inspiration of the very words of Scripture. In other words, God's inerrant ideas were given to us in words that God himself appointed. (2 Timothy 3:16; Matthew 5:17-18; 1 Corinthians 2:13; etc.) We would go against the teaching of Scripture to say that God's *ideas* are inerrant, but the *verbal assertions* in the original manuscripts are not.

The second problem with asserting the inerrancy of ideas but not words is that it cuts ideas free from the means God has chosen to communicate them to us. I admit that a word is only a symbol for an intention. But to say that the intentions of God are true but have no sure connection with the wording of Scripture cuts us off from those intentions and makes them unknowable. God has given us access to his ideas through the words of Scripture. God's words are the anchor of our thoughts in the mind of God. If we cut our minds free from those words, we will be adrift and have no sure anchor in the knowledge of God.

A third reason for denying the verbal inerrancy of the original manuscripts is that some do not believe it is *important* enough to affirm, even though they believe it is true. This is generally asserted by saying: "We don't have the originals, so what good does it do to assert anything about them; we should make assertions about what we have."

Suppose I wrote you a letter with careful instructions how to get to my house for an important meeting. And I asked you to share this information with others who need to come. Then suppose you scanned the letter into a computer twice on two different days, and then sent out the files in two batches of e-mails to those who should come. But suppose that in one set of e-mails the scanner misread the original and converted "Fanny Street" to "Parry Street" and in the other set "Fanny Street" came through accurately. Then suppose that the original letter was lost.

The people receiving the e-mails discovered that their instructions do not agree; so they come to you and ask which is correct. But you say that you have lost the original. Does anyone say: "Oh well, it doesn't matter whether the original was correct or not; we'll just guess?" No, some research is done. For example, a computer whiz tests the scanner and discovers that in dozens of tries it never converts a P to an F but often converts an F to a P. And it never converts "rr" to "nn" but often converts "nn" to "rr." So you conclude that the original letter must have read, "Fanny Street," that got converted to "Parry Street," and not the other way around. And so you all get to the important meeting.

Now everyone getting to the meeting depended on the belief that the original letter was true and that every effort to get back to that wording was crucial – *even though the*

original letter no longer existed. If the original wording of Scripture is not affirmed as inerrant, there would be little incentive to try to get back as close as possible in our text-critical studies, which form the basis of all our translations.

There is a strange cynicism that often accompanies this assertion that affirming the inerrancy of the originals is unimportant. It sometimes expresses itself with rhetorical questions like: “Don’t you think the Bible in your hand today is inerrant?” And thus this question postures as a higher view of inerrancy.

The answer to the question is: *Our Greek and Hebrew versions and our translations are inerrant to the degree that they faithfully render the divine meaning that the words of the original manuscripts carried.*

I believe this reflects a higher (= more accurate) view of inerrancy than is reflected in saying that every translation is inerrant and that the inerrancy of the original manuscripts doesn’t matter. The reason I say this is that translations differ from each other in some matters. So to say that they are all inerrant (in spite of their differences) is to weaken the meaning of inerrancy to the point where it loses objective reality.

On the other hand, to say that the inerrancy of the original manuscripts matters elevates the objective reality of inerrancy. It is a historical reality. God really did inspire the writings of the Bible so that his ideas were inerrantly carried in the words of the original manuscripts. This historical reality is an objective standard which we can approach through textual criticism. Without this conviction the contemporary versions and translations are set adrift in a sea of subjectivism with no objective standard to measure their faithfulness. Thus affirming the inerrancy of the original manuscripts is a higher, more faithful, view of inerrancy.

Therefore, let us rejoice to affirm, “We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error *in the original manuscripts...*”