

{ Lecture 13 }

THE QUESTION OF CANONICITY

Understanding Canonicity from a Theological and Historical Perspective

* * * * *

Key Question: How do we know that the 66 books we have in our Bibles today are the complete Word of God?

This is answered by the **doctrine of canonicity**. (“Canon” refers to a measuring rod or standard.)

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS:

- By definition, the written Word of God consists of that which God has revealed through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:20–21 – “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation [creation or origination], for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

Norm Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 211: Inspiration determines canonicity. If a book was authoritative, it was so because God breathed it and made it so. How a book received authority, then, is determined by God. How men recognize that authority is another matter altogether (see discussion in chap.13). As J. I. Packer notes, “The Church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity, by His work of creation, and similarly He gave us the New Testament canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up.”

- In the Old Testament, God’s Word was revealed through His prophets. In the New Testament, God’s Word was revealed through His Son (Jesus Christ).

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 Scriptures are the written Word of God. Jesus Christ is the Incarnate Word of God.

John 1:1, 18 – “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.”

- Jesus Christ (as the Incarnate Word of God) affirmed the Jewish canon of the Old Testament. (This is the same canon found in Protestant Bibles today.)

Reasons We Believe, p. 111: Throughout His ministry, Jesus affirmed the Old Testament in its entirety (Matthew 5:17–18)—including its historical reliability (cf. Matthew 10:15; 19:3–5; 12:40; 24:38–39), prophetic accuracy (Matthew 26:54), sufficiency (Luke 16:31), unity (Luke 24:27, 44), inerrancy (Matthew 22:29; John 17:17), infallibility (John 10:35), and authority (Matthew 21:13, 16, 42). “Our Lord used historical incidents in the Old Testament in a manner that evinced His total confidence in their factual historicity” explains Charles Ryrie. “Obviously, our Lord felt He had a reliable Bible, historically true, with every word trustworthy” (Charles C. Ryrie, *What You Should Know about Inerrancy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 77–78.)

Note: Jesus clearly saw the Old Testament as the Word of God (Matt. 15:16; Mark 7:13; Luke 3:2; 5:1; etc.). This, of course, is in keeping with what the OT claimed for itself (cf. Psalm 12:5; Isaiah 1:11; Jeremiah 2:2); and is how the NT epistles view it (cf. Romans 3:2).

- Jesus Christ also promised that He would give additional revelation to His church through His authorized representatives (the Apostles).

John 14:23–26 -- “Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. 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 16:12–15 – “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 of His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you.”

- The authoritative testimony of the Incarnate Word gives us the primary reason to affirm the canonicity of the Old Testament and the canonicity of those books that bear the mark of apostolic authority (e.g. the New Testament).

***Reasons We Believe*, p. 111:** Jesus also testified to the authority and inspiration of the New Testament, predicting that the Holy Spirit would come to complete His teaching ministry. In John 16:12–13, Jesus promised His disciples: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” These teachings were pre-authenticated by Christ Himself (John 14:26), authorizing the Apostles to be His witnesses in the world (Matthew 28:18–19; Acts 1:8). The Apostles, therefore, rightly recognized their own inspired writings as being part of the biblical canon, on par with the books of the Old Testament (1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Peter 3:15–16).

- As Christians, then, we affirm the inspiration of the 39 books of the Old Testament because Jesus Christ affirmed them. Secondly, we affirm the inspiration of the 27 books of the New Testament because Jesus Christ promised that He would reveal further truth to His Apostles.

Paul Helm, “Faith, Evidence, and the Scriptures,” p. 310: How do we get to the sixty-six books from the slender base that has been established? The short answer to this is that we get to it through the authority of Christ. It is because He endorses the Old Testament and makes provision for the New that both Old and New have this authority.

- *What if someone accuses us of circular reasoning?*

Granted, this is a presuppositional argument that requires faith. (We might quickly note that all worldviews are ultimately presuppositional and require faith.)

Nonetheless, our faith is a reasonable faith—and it is more reasonable than any other worldview. (In the book *Reasons We Believe*, we present twenty reasons that affirm the trustworthiness of Scripture and the NT Gospels, and another twenty that affirm the Person and work of Jesus Christ.) Thus, we have good reasons (from both the perspective of internal consistency and external verifiability) to affirm that Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be, and that the Jesus of Scripture is the Jesus of History.

Having said that, it is the Holy Spirit who ultimately makes the truth of Christianity (and of Jesus Christ) certain in the hearts of believers (1 Corinthians 2:12–13). He gives us absolute confidence both in God’s Word and God’s Son.

As Josh McDowell and John Stewart explain, “To those outside the Christian faith, Christianity can be shown to rest on strong evidence and have a high degree of probability for its truth claims. But when a person becomes a Christian, the ‘assurance’ or ‘certainty’ becomes a reality. Christianity from a ‘morally certain’ standpoint becomes as undeniable as one’s own existence” (*Answers to Tough Questions*, 154).

- Insofar as we have believed in Jesus Christ and submitted ourselves to His lordship, we must likewise view His authority as absolute. There is no higher authority than His when it comes to establishing our own confidence in the biblical canon.

INITIAL CONCLUSIONS

1. Jesus Christ affirmed the Jewish canon of the Old Testament as Scripture. Therefore we must also do the same.
2. Jesus Christ also established the principle of apostolic authority when He promised to give further revelation through the Spirit to the Church.
3. Apostolic authorship (or authorization), then, becomes the primary principle for affirming the books of the New Testament as canonical. The church is bound to submit to the teaching of Christ’s authorized representatives.
4. Because additional revelation was only promised to the Apostles, the canon was closed when the apostolic age ended.
5. NOTE: The church did not establish the canon. Rather, the church recognized and affirmed the canon, based on whether or not a book was written under the authority of an Apostle.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- In addition to the eleven disciples, the New Testament indicates that James (the half-brother of Jesus) (Gal. 1:19; 1 Cor. 15:7), and Paul were also Apostles.
- In order to be considered an Apostle, one had to meet the following three criteria:

In order to be an apostle, one had to meet at least three necessary qualifications: **(1)** an apostle had to be an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22; 10:39–41; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:7–8); **(2)** an apostle had to be directly appointed by Jesus Christ (Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13; Acts 1:2, 24; 10:41; Gal. 1:1); **(3)** an apostle had to be

able to confirm his mission and message with miraculous signs (Matt. 10:1–2; Acts 1:5–8; 2:43; 4:33; 5:12; 8:14; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3–4). We might also note that, in choosing Matthias as a replacement for Judas, the eleven also looked for someone who had accompanied Jesus throughout His entire earthly ministry (Acts 1:21–22; 10:39–41).

Based on these qualifications alone, many continuationists agree that there are no apostles in the church today. Thus, Wayne Grudem (a continuationist) notes in his *Systematic Theology*, “It seems that no apostles were appointed after Paul, and certainly, since no one today can meet the qualification of having seen the risen Christ with his own eyes, there are no apostles today” (p. 911).

- There have been no such Apostles since the first-century of church history. (In 1 Corinthians 15:8, Paul indicates that he is the last Apostle.) The church fathers who came immediately after the Apostles saw the Apostles as a distinct group in history. They did not consider themselves to be Apostles. (Ephesians 2:20 indicates the Apostles were given by God for the foundation age of the Church.)

TAKING THE NEW TESTAMENT BOOK BY BOOK

- The Gospels of Matthew & John were both written by Apostles.
- The Gospel of Mark is the memoirs of the Apostle Peter as recorded by Mark.
- The Gospel of Luke (and the book of Acts) investigated eyewitness accounts in composing his gospel (Luke 1:2). These would have surely included Apostolic sources. Moreover, as the companion of the Apostle Paul, Luke wrote under Paul’s Apostolic oversight. (Paul even affirms Luke 10:7 as part of the Scripture in 1 Timothy 5:18.)
- The Pauline Epistles (Romans–Philemon) were written by the Apostle Paul. Paul Himself claims that his teachings are the Word of God (cf. 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Thess. 2:13) and the Apostle Peter confirms this assessment (in 2 Peter 3:15).
- The authorship of Hebrews is unknown, making it difficult to apply the test of Apostolic authorship. However, the early church clearly believed the epistle to be Apostolic (which is why they affirmed its inspiration), and a number of Christian leaders attributed the letter’s authorship to Paul (such as Clement of Alexandria and later church fathers).

* When apostolic authorship is in question, we must then consider other criteria for canonicity. These criteria will be discussed below.

- The General Epistles (James, Peter, John) were written by Apostles.

- The Epistle of Jude was likely written by the half-brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3), and not by the Apostle Jude of Luke 6:16 (in light of John 7:5). Because he was not an Apostle, Jude operated under the apostolic oversight of his brother James (cf. Jude 1).
- The Apocalypse of Revelation was written by the Apostle John.

Summary: For every book of the New Testament (with the possible exception of Hebrews), we can demonstrate clear Apostolic authorship and/or authorization. Thus, we submit to these books because they were given to us by Christ’s authorized representatives. In submitting to them, we are submitting to the Lord Himself.

* * * * *

EXCURSUS

Regarding the Authorship of the Four Gospels

(From *Reasons We Believe*, pp. 122–25)

If the Gospels were written by men distantly removed from the events they recorded, we would have reason for concern. Thankfully, however, that is not the case. Two of the Gospels, Matthew and John, were penned by disciples of Jesus and provide eye-witness testimony to the events they discuss (cf. John 1:14; 21:20–25; 1 John 1:1–4). The Gospel of Mark was written by a close friend and associate of the apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:13; cf. Acts 12:12). As the early Christian leader Papias (c. 60–c. 130) explains, “Mark became an interpreter of Peter; as many things as he remembered he wrote down accurately (though certainly not in order) the things said or done by the Lord.”¹ Thus Mark’s Gospel reflects the memoirs of Peter (who was an eye-witness to Jesus’ ministry), which Mark preserved by writing down.

Luke (who wrote both the third Gospel and the book of Acts) was the traveling companion of the apostle Paul (cf. Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16; Colossians 4:14), and was a careful researcher. Luke himself reports that he wrote his Gospel, “having investigated everything carefully from the beginning . . . so that you may know the exact truth” (Luke 1:3–4). The biblical Gospels, then, are the product of eye-witness testimony (Luke 1:1 – 4; Acts 1:21–22; Galatians 1; Hebrews 2:3; 2 Peter 1:16), either first-hand (in the case of Matthew and John) or second-hand (in the case of Mark and Luke). As those who venerated Jesus (cf. Acts 2:36; Revelation 1:17), they took special care in giving solemn testimony to His life (Acts 2:40; 8:25; 10:42; 18:5; 20:21; 28:23; 1 John 1:2; 4:14; 2 Peter 1:16–20; Revelation 1:2).

¹ *Fragments of Papias* 2.15.

Furthermore, the Gospels were not written in a vacuum. The events recorded by the Evangelists were at the heart and soul of their ministries; from the very beginnings of the church they had repeatedly recounted the details of Jesus' life and ministry, both to themselves and to those in the Christian community. That they would forget the very thing that defined them is difficult to imagine.² Yet, even if forgetting were possible, their eyewitness testimony was safeguarded by the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would help His disciples remember His teachings (John 14:26; 16:13). As Robert Gromacki points out:

. . . some have argued that even eye-witnesses would not have been able to remember the events accurately. Men, especially aging men, are prone to memory failure. If the Bible were nothing more than a mere human composition, then this argument would carry some weight. However, such critics disregard the promise of Christ to His apostles [in John 14:26].³

Thus the Holy Spirit guaranteed that what they remembered would be accurate. That Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the actual authors of the Gospels that bear their names is overwhelmingly supported by the testimony of church history, with affirmation coming from early Christian leaders such as Papias (c. 60–c. 130), Justin Martyr (100–165), Polycrates (c. 130–196), Irenaeus (c. 140–c. 202) who cites Polycarp (c. 69–160), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220), Origen (c. 185–c. 254), Eusebius (c. 263–c. 339), Jerome (c. 345–420) and others. Never is the fourfold Gospel seriously questioned.⁴ In the words of Irenaeus (c. 140–c. 202):

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the “pillar and ground” of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting

² J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2005), 143–145 explains how the Gospel writers' concern for accuracy would have been even greater in a Jewish oral tradition, where the students of leading rabbis (like Jesus) would take great care to memorize the teachings and deeds of their masters.

³ Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1992), 57. Gromacki assumes that the earliest gospels were not written until A.D. 60, a point which not all NT scholars take.

⁴ There is some discussion among scholars as to whether the fourth Gospel was penned by John the apostle or another John named “John the elder.” D.A. Carson has shown that the two individuals were probably one and the same (Carson, *John*, 69–70). Even if they were different, William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (Crossway, 1994), 204 notes that “The clear majority [of church fathers] opts for the apostle.” Craig goes on to demonstrate that, based on the internal evidence in the book, the apostle John is the only plausible candidate for authorship.

that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh. . . . And therefore the Gospels are in accord with these things, among which Christ Jesus is seated.⁵

Irenaeus continues by listing the four Gospels as we know them today: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Of course, nearly a century earlier, Papias had already given testimony to these same four books.⁶ According to the church historian Eusebius, Irenaeus also received some of his information from Polycarp, who was taught these things by the apostles (cf. 2 Timothy 2:2).⁷

Internal evidence, coming from the books themselves, is consistent with the testimony of church history. For example, Matthew's Gospel frequently references the Old Testament, and describes Jesus' interaction with the Jews in a way that suggests its author was a native Jew.⁸ Some scholars have noted that it also puts greater emphasis on numbers and on money than the other Gospels, a characteristic that would be consistent with the author's occupation as a tax collector (Matthew 9:9).⁹ In Mark's Gospel, the apostle Peter is cast in a more negative light than in the other Gospels (cf. Mark 8:32–33; 14:29–72), suggesting that he was the self-effacing source from which Mark received his information.¹⁰ The author of Luke also wrote Acts (compare Luke 1 with Acts 1) and was a traveling companion of Paul (cf. Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16; 2 Timothy 4:11). He is explicit in emphasizing that he researched his information thoroughly (Luke 1:1–4), as is seen in the many historically verifiable details he includes (some of which will be considered below). This would be fitting for one who was trained as a physician (Colossians 4:14). The author of John speaks of himself only as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:7). This corresponds to John's emphasis on love in his three epistles (1 John 3:16, 23; 4:9–10, 19; 2 John 1:6). Moreover, the author was a disciple (cf. John 21:2, 20, 24), one of the Twelve (John 13:23–24; cf. Mark 14:17; Luke

⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8. Cited from Schaeff, *AnteNicene Fathers*.

⁶ John Chapman, “St. Papias” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911).

⁷ Eusebius, *Church History*, 4.14.3–8.

⁸ Cf. A. Lukyn Williams, *St. Matthew*, volume 1, *The Pulpit Commentary* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, n.d.), xi.

⁹ Cf. Daniel Wallace, “Matthew: Introduction, Argument, Outline,” accessed online at www.bible.org on August 19, 2007.

¹⁰ James A. Brooks in *Mark*, *New American Commentary* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman, 1991), notes that, “The large amount of concern for Peter and the less-than-flattering image of Peter in Mark may be an indication that Peter was one source among others” (p. 27).

22:14), an eye-witness to the events of Christ's life and death (John 1:14; 19:26,35), and among the inner circle of Christ's followers, but not Peter (John 21:20–24; cf. John 20:2–10; Mark 5:37–38; 9:2–3; 14:33).¹¹ Only John and his brother James fit these criteria. But since James was martyred early in church history (Acts 12:2) the evidence points to John as the author (cf. John 21:22–23).¹² The fact that much of John's material is unique (intended as a supplement to the other Gospels) suggests that someone with authority must have written it, otherwise the early church would probably not have accepted it as canonical.

In all four cases, the internal evidence (meaning details within the book itself such as writing style, biographical data, and historical details) and the external evidence (meaning non-biblical testimony that affirms the authorship of a given book) consistently and repeatedly affirm the authorship of the Gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. On the flip side, there is nothing beyond mere speculation that should cause us to question their authenticity.

* * * * *

SECONDARY CRITERIA

- In cases where Apostolic authorship might be in question, there are several additional criteria that we might use in the process of recognizing canonicity.
- In order to affirm the ultimate authority of Scripture (which we must if we believe it to be the inerrant Word of God), we should be careful to derive these criteria from the Bible itself.

Richard B. Gaffin, “The New Testament: How Do We Know for Sure?”
Christianity Today (February 1998, 28–29): “In the final analysis, the attempt to demonstrate criteria of canonicity seeks, from a position above the Canon, to rationalize or generalize about the Canon. . . . Instead we must recognize the New Testament canon as a self-establishing, self-validating entity.”

- Dr. Larry Pettegrew (in his Systematic Theology class notes) has suggested the following five principles (all of which are derived from Scripture).

¹¹Cf. Edwin A. Blum, “The Gospel of John,” 267–348 in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (New Testament) edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983), 267.

¹² Cf. Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, New American Commentary (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 86.

1. The Credential Principle: Namely that God revealed Himself in the Old Testament through His prophets and in the New Testament through His Apostles.

R. Laird Harris, concerning the Pentateuch: “. . . ancient Israel believed that Moses wrote it as the spokesman for God. There is no dissenting voice. And is it not clear that this is precisely why ancient Israel received it as authoritative, i.e., canonical? It was not canonized because of its antiquity, linguistic phenomena, beautiful style, royal imposition, or ecclesiastical decision. The principle for canonizing the Pentateuch which guided ancient Israel, as far as we have any evidence at all, is, Was it from God’s great spokesman, Moses? The human author, admitted by all to be a spokesman for the divine Author, guaranteed the writing. . . . Similarly, succeeding prophets were received upon due authentication and their written works were received with the same respect, being received therefore as the Word of God. . . . What was prophetic was regarded as the Word of God. What was not prophetic was . . . not regarded as the Word of God. The canon grew as the prophets succeeded one another in their ministry; it was finished, as Josephus says, when the Holy Spirit ceased speaking through prophets in Israel. . . . when all the tests [of a prophet] were applied and a prophet was acknowledged to be true, his words and writings were received forthwith by the faithful as from God, i.e., canonical.”

2. The Competency Principle: Only God is adequate to witness to Himself. Therefore, we should ultimately allow the Scripture to inform us as to how to recognize what is Scripture and what isn’t. The Bible should be our final authority in thinking about canonicity; not our own rational, externally-exposed criteria.

Hebrews 6:13 – “For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself.”

3. The Chronological Principle: God limited canonicity to the prophets in the Old Testament and the Apostles in the New Testament. (Micah 4:5–6 hints at the fact that the next true prophet from God would be the one like Elijah—namely, John the Baptist.) Moreover, any supposed Scripture written after the Apostolic age must be rejected since it cannot be authenticated by Christ’s authorized representatives.

Paul D. Wegner, “The Canon of the OT in Jesus’ Day”: “[A]ccording to Jewish tradition the voice of God had ceased following the time of Malachi (about 400 B.C.) and thus new books were no longer being added

to the sacred scriptures. In the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees, Simon Maccabees speaks of the great sorrow in Israel such as there had not been since the prophets ceased to appear to them (9:27). In the Pseudepigrapha, the author of 2 Baruch (85:3) claims that the prophets had fallen asleep.”

4. The Consistency Principle: God cannot contradict Himself. Therefore, if a book is truly from God it must be harmonious with what was previously revealed by God.

Acts 17:11 – “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.”

5. The Conviction Principle: The Holy Spirit illumines the hearts of His people to recognize the authenticity of His Word. This might be referred to as the Corporate Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 2:12–15a – “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. But he who is spiritual appraises all things.”

WHAT ABOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA?

- If we begin with the Christological principle that we are espousing here, then we might ask, “What OT canon did Jesus affirm?” And did that canon include the Apocrypha (which the Roman Catholic Church canonized at the Council of Trent in 1546)?
- There is strong evidence (from Philo, Josephus, the Babylonian Talmud, the Council of Jamnia, etc.) that the Jews of Jesus’ day affirmed an OT canon that is the same as ours. However the Jews ordered their books differently, starting with Genesis and ending with Chronicles. Also, the Minor Prophets were considered just one book, known as “The Twelve.” As a result, the Jewish canon consisted of only 22 or 24 books (in the case of twenty-two books, Judges and Ruth are combined; and Jeremiah and Lamentations are combined). But this canon consisted of the same books that make up the Protestant canon of 39 OT books.

Josephus, *Contra Apion*, 1:37–42: It therefore naturally, or rather necessarily, follows (seeing that with us it is not open to everybody to

write the records, and that there is no discrepancy in what is written; seeing that, on the contrary, the prophets alone had this privilege, obtaining their knowledge of the most remote and ancient history through the inspiration which they owed to God, and committing to writing a clear account of the events of their own time just as they occurred)—it follows, I say, that we do not possess myriads of inconsistent books conflicting with each other. Our books, those which are justly accredited, are but two and twenty, and contain the record of all time.

Of these, five are the books of Moses, comprising the laws and the traditional history from the birth of man down to the death of the lawgiver. . . . the prophets subsequent to Moses wrote the history of the events of their own times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life.

From Artaxerxes to our own time the 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.

We have given practical proof of our reverence for our own Scriptures. For, although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable; and it is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth to regard them as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them.

- Jesus affirmed this understanding of the OT canon in His teaching (cf. Matt 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Luke 11:51; 16:16). Moreover, Jesus never argued about the canon with the Jewish religious leaders of His day. Rather, His appeals to the OT assumed that both He and His hearers knew what was included in the Scriptures (cf. Matt. 21:42; 22:29; 26:54; 26:5; etc.).

Paul D. Wegner, “The Old Testament Canon in Jesus’ Day”: Jesus describes the extent of the canon in Matthew 23:34-35 and Luke 11:49-51, of which F. F. Bruce observes: “No body of literature ever had its credentials confirmed by a higher authority” [*Books and the Parchments*, 96]. Both passages state that the Jewish nation will be held responsible for the blood of the prophets from “the blood of Abel” (Gen. 4:8), the first recorded murder, “to the blood of Zechariah” (2 Chron. 24:20-22), the last recorded murder. The implication is that biblical history spans from Genesis to Chronicles, which is the same order as the oldest complete manuscripts of the Old Testament (i.e., Codex Leningradensis [1008 A.D.] and the Aleppo Codex [most likely about fifty years earlier]). There were certainly other martyrs following Zechariah, but the Jewish nation will not be held responsible for them, since they fall outside of the parameters of the Jewish authoritative sacred history. Jesus also uses the common tripartite division of the Hebrew Bible to refer to the canon in Luke 24:44: “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” (NASB). This last designation is evidently representative of the final group of Old Testament writings, of which Psalms was the first and largest book. A similar designation for the Old Testament canon was in use from the time of Philo in the early first century (“[the] laws, and oracles delivered through the mouths of prophets, and psalms, and anything else which fosters and perfects knowledge and piety” [*Contemp.* 3 §25]) until at least the tenth century (al-Masudi, an Arabian historian and geographer, describes the Hebrew canon as “the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms, which are the 24 books”). It is also interesting to note that Jesus quotes from each of the three parts of Scripture as authoritative material (e.g., Law: Mt. 4:4—Deut. 8:3; Prophets: Mt. 10:35-36—Mic. 7:6; Writings: Mt. 13:43—Dan. 12:3).

- As noted above, there are places in the apocrypha where the apocrypha itself asserts that the OT canon was already closed, and that the OT books consisted of those that correspond to the 39 books in our Old Testaments (cf. 1 Macc. 9:27, 4:46, 14:41; 2 Esdras 14:44–48).
- The Roman Catholic Apocrypha consists of The Wisdom of Solomon (c. 30 B.C.); Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) (132 B.C.); Tobit (c. 200 B.C.); Judith (c. 150 B.C.); 1 Esdras (c. 150-100 B.C.); 1 & 2 Maccabees (c. 110 B.C.); Baruch (c. 150-50 B.C.); The Letter of Jeremiah (c. 300-100 B.C.); 2 Esdras (c. A.D. 100); Additions to Esther (140-130 B.C.); The Prayer of Azariah (second or first century B.C.); Susanna (second or first century B.C.); Bel and the Dragon (c. 100 B.C.); and The Prayer of Manasseh (second or first century B.C.). Though the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament some 250 times, the NT never quotes from these apocryphal books.
- There is also evidence from early Christian leaders that many (perhaps the majority) in the ancient church did not consider the apocrypha to be on par with Scripture. Even Jerome (who translated the Vulgate) clearly states that the church of his day did not consider the apocrypha to be inspired. Nonetheless, Jerome included them in his translation since they were regarded as profitable for the church, even if they were not to be regarded as Scripture.

Origen, as recorded by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.25.1–2: “But it should be known that there are twenty-two canonical books, according to the Hebrew tradition; the same as the number of the letters of their alphabet.” When Origen lists these books they correspond to the 39 books in the Protestant Old Testament.

Athanasius, *Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter*, 3–4: In proceeding to make mention of these things, I shall adopt, to commend my undertaking, the pattern of Luke the Evangelist, saying on my own account: ‘Forasmuch as some have taken in

hand,' to reduce into order for themselves the books termed Apocryphal, and to mix them up with the divinely inspired Scripture, concerning which we have been fully persuaded, as they who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word, delivered to the fathers; it seemed good to me also, having been urged thereto by true brethren, and having learned from the beginning, to set before you the books included in the Canon, and handed down, and accredited as Divine; to the end that anyone who has fallen into error may condemn those who have led him astray; and that he who has continued steadfast in purity may again rejoice, having these things brought to his remembrance. There are, then, of the Old Testament, twenty-two books in number. . .

- Additionally, the Apocrypha contains theological and factual errors.

Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 270: “The subbiblical nature of the Apocrypha can be seen in its historical and chronological errors. It is claimed that Tobit was alive when the Assyrians conquered Israel (722 B.C.) as well as when Jeroboam revolted against Judah (931 B.C.), yet his total life-span was only 158 years (Tobit 14:11; cf. 1:3–5). Judith speaks of Nebuchadnezzar as reigning in Nineveh instead of Babylon (Judith 1:1).”

Note: Theological errors include (1) praying for the dead; (2) the worship of angels; (3) and the concept of purgatory.

- In spite of all of this, because of its inclusion in the Latin *Vulgate*, the Roman Catholic Church officially “canonized” the Apocrypha in 16th century at the Council of Trent.

Reasons for inclusion (per Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 266ff; summaries of these arguments adapted from Rodney Anderson):

1. The New Testament seems to reflect the thought of the Apocrypha in some places.

Response: There are no quotations in the New Testament from the Apocrypha. Even if there are allusions to the Apocrypha, this does not mean they are canonical.

2. The New Testament quotes mostly from the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), which contained the Apocrypha.

Response: The earliest Septuagint manuscripts are from the fourth century. There is no way of knowing if they were included in the first century manuscripts.

3. Some of the early church Fathers regarded the Apocrypha as canonical, quoted from it and used it in public worship.

Response: Even though some Church Fathers considered the Apocrypha canonical, some did not. There was no agreement on this issue.

4. Catacomb scenes depict episodes from the Apocrypha, showing it was part of the early Christian's religious life.

Response: Scenes from the catacombs do not prove canonicity.

5. The great Greek manuscripts (Ⲙ, A, and B) interpose the Apocrypha among the Old Testament books.

Response: There is no Greek manuscript that contains all of the Apocryphal books accepted at the Council of Trent.

6. The Syriac Church accepted them in the fourth century.

Response: The Syriac bible of the second century did not contain the Apocrypha.

7. Augustine and the councils he influenced at Hippo (393) and presided over at Carthage (397) accepted them.

Response: Although Augustine recognized the Apocrypha, his opinion was based on the wonderful example they provide of the martyrs and that they were a part of the Septuagint. Neither of these reasons is true grounds for canonicity.

8. The Greek Church accepts them.

Response: The acceptance of the Apocrypha by the Greek church does not constitute grounds for canonicity. Furthermore, Larger Catechism omits the Apocrypha since it did not exist as a part of the Hebrew Bible.

9. The Roman Catholic Church proclaimed them canonical at the Council of Trent (1546).

Response: The Roman Catholic Church's first official acceptance of the Apocrypha as Scripture at the Council of Trent came 1500 years after these books were written.

10. The Apocryphal books continued in the Protestant Bibles as late as the nineteenth century.

Response: Although Apocryphal books were included in Protestant Bibles prior to the Council of Trent, they were usually placed in a separate section and were not considered inspired by God. (They were not considered Scripture by the Reformers.)

11. Some Apocryphal books written in Hebrew have been found among other Old Testament canonical books in the Dead Sea community at Qumran

Response: Although Apocryphal books were discovered at Qumran, only commentaries from canonical books were found. This indicates that they scribes did not consider these Apocryphal books to be inspired.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON IN CHURCH HISTORY

- It is important to remember that, because these books are inspired, they were authoritative (and therefore canonical) from the moment they were written.
- The writer's of the New Testament themselves give testimony to the fact that their writings are the Word of God (cf. 1 Cor. 14:37; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 4:15; 1 Peter 3:15–16; 2 Peter 3:2; 1 John 4:6; etc.).
- Nonetheless, the church's recognition of the canon took time.
- In some cases, the canonicity of certain books was questioned. In such cases, the church applied the tests of canonicity in order to separate that which truly came from God from that which did not.
- The church was careful not to prematurely reject these books, but to examine them carefully (1 Thess. 5:20–21; cf. Acts 17:17). The fact that the church was careful to do its due diligence should give us greater (not lesser) confidence in their recognition of the canon.
- **In all of this, we can also trust the providential working of God, as He worked to preserve (in a providential, not miraculous, sense) the truth of His Word throughout church history. He did this through the corporate internal testimony of the Spirit.**
- Larry Pettegrew identifies three periods of circulation and recognition in church history (see below).

1. The Period of separate circulation (70–170)

During this period the individual books were being circulated. Some such as the circular epistles like Colossians, and those to churches in close proximity (Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi) were gathered in local churches and read. Others which were written to individuals (Timothy, Titus, Philemon) were less well known but gradually grew in recognition. Hebrews was frequently debated because the author was unknown.

Clement of Rome (c. AD 96) mentions at least eight New Testament books in his epistles, Ignatius of Antioch cites about seven books (c. AD 106); Polycarp mentions about 15 (c. AD 140). Irenaeus (AD 185) mentions 21; Hippolytus (AD 170-235, mentions 22.

During this time the books which were questioned but not excluded were Hebrews (unknown author), James, 2 Peter, 2, 3 John, Revelation.

2. Period of separation, the issue at this time is extent (170–303)

During this period various collections are coming together. The issue is which writings were to be excluded. Marcion (AD 140) stimulates identification because of his false canon; the Edict of Diocletian does as well. The Muratorian Canon (AD. 170) is the earliest known collection excluding only Hebrews, James, and 1, 2 Peter. Irenaeus (AD 185) mentions 21 books, Hippolytus (AD 170-235), mentions 22. The Old Syriac version excludes 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude and Revelation, and the Old Latin (AD 200) excludes 1, 2 Peter, James, and Hebrews.

3. Period of completion (303–397)

Eusebius tells us that certain books were still debated though accepted: James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2, 3 John, though most accepted them. Revelation still had not gained complete acceptance primarily because it ended with a curse on anyone who added or took away from it.

During this period the formal acceptance and recognition takes place. Council of Laodicea (AD 363) mentions the present collection of 27; Athanasius mentions 27 in his Easter letter of AD 367 and these are the recognized canon at the local Council of Hippo (AD 393) and the Third Synod of Carthage (AD 397).

WHY WERE SOME BOOKS QUESTIONED?

Hebrews – Clement of Rome and Justin Martyr both allude to the epistle in their writings, showing that they considered it to be canonical. Yet, later Christian leaders disputed its place in the New Testament. Thus, *The Pulpit Commentary* notes: “It was apparently only because its authorship was questioned that its claim to canonicity was in the first instance questioned too. And then, as time went on, the reluctance thus arising seems to have been strengthened by heretical misinterpretations of some passages contained in it” (specifically with regard to debates involving Arianism and Novatianism).

James – Hippolytus and Irenaeus quote from James, and Clement of Rome alludes to it. Eusebius notes that both James and Jude were widely used in the churches of his day, even though there were questions as to the genuineness of both books. Eusebius for his part quotes from the epistle and refers to its author as “the apostle.” Martin Luther would later question the book, but only because of a perceived discrepancy between James’ teaching on justification and Paul’s teaching on the same.

2 Peter – According to *The Pulpit Commentary*: “In considering the genuineness of this Epistle we are confronted at once with the well-known words of Eusebius. He says, in his ‘Ecclesiastical History,’ which seems to have been finished in A.D. 325, ‘One Epistle of Peter, which is called the first, is accepted; and this the presbyters of old have used in their writings as undoubted. But that which is circulated as his Second Epistle we have received to be not canonical. Nevertheless, as it appeared to many to be useful, it has been diligently read with the other Scriptures’ (Eusebius, ‘Hist. Eccl.,’ iii. 3). In the same chapter he says that he knows only one genuine Epistle among the writings attributed to St. Peter; and in bk. iii. 25 he classes the Second Epistle with those of James and Jude, as ‘disputed, indeed, but known to most men.’” Nonetheless, there are allusions to the epistle from Clement of Rome, Melito of Sardis, Theophilus of Antioch, Hippolytus of Portus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and others. According to Jerome, doubt about the genuineness of the second epistle was due in part to differences in style between the two (a point he reconciled by asserting that Peter used two different interpreters or secretaries to compose the two letters).

2, 3 John – The genuineness of these letters was recognized by early Christian leaders like Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Dionysius of Alexandria. So why was the canonicity of these letters sometimes questioned? *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “Thus it is precisely the earliest witnesses who are favorable to the apostolic authorship; and at no time do the doubts as to their apostolicity appear to have been general. And if the evidence as a whole appears to be meager, we must remember these facts. (1) These Epistles were probably written *the very last* of all the books in the New Testament. Many of the other books had acquired a considerable circulation before these were in existence. (2) They are *private* letters, addressed, not to Churches, but to individuals, and therefore were likely to remain in obscurity for a considerable time. We may compare the public and official letters of a bishop now with his private letters.

The one kind are published and generally circulated at once; the others, if published at all, not until long after his death. (3) The comparative *insignificance* of these letters would lead to their remaining generally unknown for some time. They are very short, and not of very general interest.”

Jude – Though the authenticity of its authorship was not questioned; its canonicity was debated by some. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*: “Jerome mentions the fact that it quotes the apocryphal Book of Enoch as a reason for its being rejected in some quarters. Its brevity, its peculiar contents, and the circumstance that it makes no claim to apostolic authorship, would no doubt also stand in the way of a rapid, extensive, and unhesitating acceptance.”

Revelation – Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, and many other later Church Fathers attribute the book of Revelation to the Apostle John. In this regard, Justin says, “John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied in a Revelation made to him that the believers in our Christ should spend a thousand years in Jerusalem” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 81). Questions as to its canonicity probably relate to its content, which is clearly distinct from any other book in the New Testament.

The Church Fathers and the Canon (adapted from Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 100, 205, 292; summary provided by Rodney Anderson).

Polycarp (c. A.D. 150)

The younger contemporary and disciple of the apostle John, Polycarp quotes from Matthew, John, the first ten of Paul’s epistles, Peter, and 2 John. Because most of the rest of the books were small, it could not be expected that he would refer to them. As a result, the argument from silence that Polycarp did not know or accept them is a weak one at best.

Justin Martyr (d. 165)

In his first *Apology* (c.150-155), Justin Martyr regarded the gospels as the “Voice of God” (chap. 65). Justin Martyr considered all the gospels as Scripture, plus most of Paul’s epistles, as well as Peter and Revelation. It is noteworthy that Justin had occasion to refer to Mark, Luke, John, and Revelation, not cited by Polycarp, and not to refer to Philippians or Timothy, which would tend to confirm the thesis that both men accepted more books than those from which they quoted.

Tatian (c.110-180)

The disciple of Justin, Tatian called John 1:5 “Scripture” in his *Apology* (chap. 13). . . He is also noted for his pioneer effort in writing a harmony of the gospels, *Diatessaron* (c. 150-160).

Irenaeus (c. 130-202)

In his treatise *Against Heresies* (3.1.1), Irenaeus referred to the authority of the New Testament when he stated, “For the Lord of all gave the power of the Gospel to his apostles, through whom we have come to know the truth, that is, the teaching of the Son of God This Gospel they first preached. Afterwards, by the will of God, they handed it down to us in the Scriptures, to be ‘the pillar and ground’ of our faith.” The first early Father who himself quoted almost every book of the New Testament was Irenaeus. He quoted or considered as authentic twenty-three of the twenty-seven books, omitting (but not necessarily rejecting) Philemon, James, 2 Peter, and 3 John.

The Muratorian Canon (A.D. 170).

Aside from Marcion’s heretical canon (A.D. 140), the earliest canonical list is in the Muratorian Fragment. This list coincides exactly with the Old Latin, omitting only Hebrews, James, and 1 and 2 Peter. Westcott argues for the probability of a break in this manuscript that may once have included those books. It does seem strange that Hebrews and Peter should be omitted while Philemon and 3 John were included. This feature is the opposite of the lists of Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215)

In his *Stromata* Clement notes: “There is no discord between the Law and the Gospel, but harmony, for they both proceed from the same Author, . . . differing in name and time to suit the age and culture of their hearers . . . by a wise economy, but potentially one, . . . since faith in Christ and the knowledge . . . of the Gospel is the explanation . . . and the fulfillment of the Law.” Clement has almost an identical list as Irenaeus, with the exception of his omission of 2 Timothy and 2 John. Philemon and 3 John may not have been quoted because of their brevity, leaving only 2 Peter and James in question.

Tertullian (c. 160-220)

Tertullian . . . maintained that the four gospels “are reared on the certain basis of Apostolic authority, and so are inspired in a far different sense from the writings of the spiritual Christian; all the faithful, it is true, have the Spirit of God, but all are not Apostles.”

Origen (c.185-c.254)

He believed that God “gave the law, and the prophets, and the Gospels, being also the God of the apostles and of the Old and New Testaments.” He wrote, “This Spirit inspired each one of the saints, whether prophets or apostles; and there was not one Spirit in the men of the old dispensation, and another in those who were inspired at the advent of Christ.”

Cyprian (c. 200-258)

In his treatise *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, he appeals to the gospels as authoritative, referring to them as the “commandments of Christ.” He also adds the Corinthian letters of Paul to his list of authorities and appeals to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (4:4-6).

In the same passage, Cyprian reaffirms the inspiration of the New Testament, as he writes, “When the Holy Spirit says, in the person of the Lord.” Again, he adds, “The Holy Spirit warns us through the Apostle” as he cites 1 Corinthians 11:19.

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263 or 265–340)

As a church historian, Eusebius spent much time espousing the Old and New Testaments as inspired writings that were commented upon by the successors of the apostles. He also wrote much about the canon of the New Testament in his *Ecclesiastical History*.

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 295-373)

Athanasius was the first to use the term “canon” in reference to the New Testament books, which he called “the fountains of salvation.” Athanasius clearly and emphatically listed all twenty-seven books as canonical, saying, “Again it is not tedious to speak of the books of the New Testament. These are, the four gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John.”

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313-386)

In his *Catecheses*, he informs his catechumen that he is offering a summary of “the whole doctrine of the Faith” which “has been built up strongly out of all the Scriptures.” Then he proceeds to warn others not to

change or contradict his teachings because of the Scripture's injunction as found in Galatians 1:8-9. In his treatise *Of the Divine Scriptures*, he speaks of "the divinely-inspired Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament." He then proceeds to list all of the books of the Hebrew Old Testament (twenty-two) and all of the books of the Christian New Testament except Revelation (twenty-six), saying, "Learn also diligently, and from the Church, what are the books of the Old Testament, and what are those of the New. And, pray, read none of the Apocryphal writings."

WHAT ABOUT NEW TESTAMENT "APOCRYPHA"?

(These notes adapted from Mark A. Copeland, "Can We Trust the Bible?")

The Pseudepigrapha

A. BRIEF DESCRIPTION...

1. Otherwise called "false writings"
2. There are over 280 of these writings
3. More than 50 are accounts of Christ
4. The more well-known of these are:
 - a. The Gospel of Thomas
 - b. The Gospel of Peter
 - c. The Gospel of Hebrews
 - d. The Protevangelium of James
5. Their value is limited, but they do illustrate:
 - a. Some of the ascetic and Gnostic attitudes opposed by the Apostles
 - b. The popular desire at that time for information beyond the Scriptures
 - c. The tendency to glorify Christianity by fraudulent means

REASONS FOR REJECTION...

1. They were never considered canonical by respectable leaders

2. Mainly produced by heretical groups
3. Containing exaggerated and mythical religious folklore
4. Most known only through citation or quotation by another author
5. Thus their historical connection to the Apostles is suspect

The New Testament “Apocrypha”

BRIEF DESCRIPTION...

- Not to be confused with the OT Apocrypha
- These were books written after the time of Christ (and after the time of the Apostles)
 - a. Which were initially accepted (as semi-canonical) by some in the church
 - b. Which included the writings of the early Church Fathers (the Apostolic Fathers) and appeared at times in collections along with the New Testament Scriptures
 - c. They had acceptance in some areas for a temporary period of time
 - d. They never enjoyed acceptance by the church in general (as being anything more than helpful writings)
 - e. Written after the Apostolic age had ended (with exception of Clement’s *First Epistle*)
- The NT Apocrypha include:
 - a. Clement’s *Epistle to the Corinthians* (96 A.D.)
 - b. *The Ancient Homily*, also known as the *Second Epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians* (120-140 A.D.)
 - c. *The Shepherd of Hermas* (115-140 A.D.)
 - d. *The Didache*, also known as the *Teaching of the Twelve* (100-120 A.D.)
 - e. *The Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas* (130 A.D.)

- f. *The Apocalypse of Peter* (150 A.D.)
 - g. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* (170 A.D.)
 - h. *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians* (108 A.D.)
 - i. *The Seven Epistles of Ignatius* (110 A.D.)
- These are more valuable than the Pseudepigrapha
 - a. They provide early documentation of the existence of NT books
 - b. They fill in the gap between the teaching of the Apostles and the writings of the early church of the third and fourth centuries
 - c. They provide clues to the practices, policies and future teachings of the church

REASONS FOR REJECTION...

1. They were not written by the Apostles or under Apostolic oversight
2. They never enjoyed more than a temporary and local recognition
3. Those that advocated their acceptance considered them at best to be "semi-canonical"
4. No major church council or NT collection included them as inspired books
5. The reason they had some acceptance was because they wrongly attached themselves to references in canonical books (cf. Colossians 4:16) or alleged apostolic authorship (e.g. the Acts of Paul)

* * * * *

ADDENDUM A: WHAT ABOUT THE Gnostic GOSPELS?

(From Nathan Busenitz, *Reasons We Believe*)

It sometimes surprises, or even frightens, contemporary Christians to learn that there are other “gospels” outside of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But they need not be afraid. “The apocryphal gospels, even the earliest and soberest among them, can hardly be compared with the canonical Gospels. The former are all patently secondary and legendary and obviously slanted.”¹³ Of these extra-biblical traditions about Jesus, “only a

¹³ Edwin Yamauchi, cited in Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 311.

tiny proportion have even a slight claim to being genuine. The vast majority of the material is quite worthless as a historical source for knowledge of Jesus, and their real value lies more in highlighting the quality of information preserved in the canonical Gospels themselves.”¹⁴

It is possible, of course, that we might find some factual accounts about Jesus outside of the biblical Gospels. The Gospels do not claim to be exhaustive biographies of the life of Jesus. In fact, John closes his Gospel by stating: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). What the Gospels do claim, however, is that the information they provide is both accurate and sufficient, so that when you read them “you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4).

It is also important to recognize that the New Testament continually warns against the reality of false teachers—those who would distort the truth for their own gain. In their letters, the apostles warned their readers about the danger of certain heresies, including lies that might affect their understanding of Jesus and His redemptive work (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:13–14 Galatians 1:6–10; Colossians 2:4; 1 Timothy 4:7; 1 John 4:1–3; 2 Peter 1:16; Jude 3–4). Among these heresies, Gnosticism was a growing concern. “The name *gnosticism* comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning ‘knowledge,’ and stresses the character of this heresy. Gnosticism was a philosophical system built upon Greek philosophy that stressed matter was evil but spirit was good.”¹⁵ The Gnostics’ belief that matter was evil forced them to rethink the incarnation of Christ. If Christ was good, then He could not have possessed a physical body, since matter is evil. The Gnostics invented two possible explanations: “one view was that because matter was evil, Jesus could not have actually come in human form; He only appeared in human form and only appeared to suffer. The other view suggested that the divine Logos came upon the human Jesus and departed prior to the crucifixion.”¹⁶

In either case, the Gnostic view of Jesus was incompatible with that taught by the apostles, that “the Word [meaning Christ] became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14; cf. Romans 1:3; Galatians 4:4; Philippians 2:8; Colossians 1:22; 1 Timothy 3:16). In his first epistle, John reiterated this point, “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:2–3). Paul likewise warned Timothy to “avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’ [*gnosis*]” (1 Timothy 6:20).

¹⁴ John W. Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2000), 227.

¹⁵ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody handbook of theology* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997), 415.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The Gnostic gospels, along with other grossly imaginative accounts of the life of Jesus Christ, were rightly rejected by the early Christians.¹⁷ From such gospels, “we learn not a single verifiable new fact about the historical Jesus’ ministry, and only a few new sayings that might possibly have been his.”¹⁸ Referring to extrabiblical writings like the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Gospel of Philip*, New Testament scholar George L. Borchert (a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary and University) writes:

The emergence of documents with strange fairy-tale-like stories about Jesus and skewed theological ideas . . . bear witness to the necessity in the church for authoritative Gospels to combat the growth of deviant views and fanciful legends concerning Jesus. To peruse these noncanonical documents and reflect on the stories about Jesus preserved in them and other early documents gives the reader the immediate sense of the genuine reserve and feeling of authenticity that is present in the canonical presentations concerning Jesus.¹⁹

Following the warning of the apostles, the early church rejected these gospels.²⁰ They were either so fanciful or so theologically skewed (by Gnosticism) that their historical authenticity was clearly lacking.²¹ In some cases, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, they are merely a collection of sayings, and therefore not really “gospels” at all.

¹⁷ These extra-biblical writings (such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the *Nag Hammadi Library*) are not secret, as Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* implies. They have been translated into English, and are available in book form through either a bookstore or a local library.

¹⁸ Raymond E. Brown, “The Gnostic Gospels,” *The New York Times Book Review*, (January 20, 1980), 3. Cited from Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Da Vinci Deception* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2004), 43.

¹⁹ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, 33. It should be noted that Oxford scholar Christopher Tucket has demonstrated that the synoptic gospels were written earlier than the Gnostic gospels, due to the fact that the Gnostic gospels borrow from them but not vice versa. Cf. Stephen Clark, *The Da Vinci Code on Trial* (Wales: Bryntirion Press, 2005), 36. On page 37, Clark also debunks Dan Brown’s claims (as “nonsense” and “wildly erratic”) that there were eighty gospels originally.

²⁰ Herman N. Ridderbos in *Redemptive History and the New Testament* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1988), 41 explains of the biblical Gospels that, “The [early] church never knew [or even considered] that anything else than *these* Gospels and *these* letters of Paul, among others, were what it could trust and what had been delivered to it at its foundation.”

²¹ For more on the Gnostic gospels from an apologetic standpoint, see James L. Garlow’s *The Da Vinci Codebreaker* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 2006), 85–

The “Gnostic gospels” are not gospels at all in the sense of the four canonical Gospels, which are filled with narrative, concrete details, historical figures, political activity, and details about social and religious life.²²

The New Testament Gospels are clearly superior—both in terms of being straightforward accounts of Jesus’ life, and also by being theologically consistent with what the apostles taught in the rest of the New Testament. This again affirms the trustworthiness of the biblical Gospels, and helps explain why the early Christians were able to easily identify the true Gospels from the earliest points of church history.

* * * * *

ADDENDUM B: ARE THERE ANY LOST BOOKS OF THE BIBLE?

(From Erwin Lutzer, “How Many Books Are in the Bible?”)

Occasionally we hear references to the so-called lost books of the Bible, books that some people think have been hidden from the general populace. In 1979, Bell Publishing Company of New York came out with a book entitled *The Lost Books of the Bible*. On the flyleaf it says that these books were not among those chosen to comprise the Bible, and “They were suppressed by the church, and for over fifteen hundred years were shrouded in secrecy.”

These books are not really as secret as the authors imply. New Testament scholars have been well aware of their existence throughout the centuries, though perhaps these books were not accessible to the common man. Their credibility is rejected by both Catholics and Protestants.

These books include stories about the birth of Mary and of Christ. Also there are a dozen or more stories that took place during Christ’s lifetime. Three or four purport to relate to events in the Old Testament.

These books never even vied for a place in the canon. Unlike some other books that were actually disputed (the *Shepherd of Hermas*, for example), these books were recognized as

88, 90–97. For a more academic treatment, see Darrell Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 61–124. On pages 123–24, Bock concludes his critique of a fanciful allegation made by Dan Brown. After a survey of the historical evidence, Bock writes: “Attributing the selection of the Gospels to Constantine and the Council of Nicea ignores more than a century of widespread use and recognition of these four Gospels [prior to Nicea]. . . . The four Gospels were well established before Constantine was born.”

²² Carl E. Olson and Sandra Miesel, *The Da Vinci Hoax* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 66.

legends from the beginning. These “forgotten books” are so obviously inferior to those in our Bible that they cannot be taken seriously.

Indeed, in the preface, Dr. Frank Crane admitted the point by saying that legends and apocryphal stories surround all great men such as Napoleon, Charlemagne, and Julius Caesar, so we can also expect that tales would grow up around Christ. He went on to say that Christ appealed to the “fictional minds” of his day. These writers, Crane admitted, do not pretend to write down what is strictly true, but tinge all events with their imagination.

Finally, Crane said the common man can now make his own decision as to whether the early church did right in rejecting these books. He did not hesitate to say that common sense itself will show the superiority of the accepted canonical books.

I agree. Should there be any doubt about the accepted books, the best solution would be to read these so-called lost books. And for that matter, one should also read those books that laid more serious claim to canonicity. They also are so inferior to the books of the New Testament that we become convinced that the early church did not err.

In the upper room, Christ promised that the Holy Spirit would help them recall his teachings. “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He Will bear witness of Me” (John 15:26). That was a tacit confirmation of the New Testament that still needed to be written. The early believers recognized those writings that were either written by an Apostle or by someone personally acquainted with one. After the apostolic period, no more books could claim the stamp of divine authority.

The Book of Revelation ends with a warning: “I testify to everyone who bears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them; God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book” (Rev. 22.18-19)

Although these words refer specifically to the Book of Revelation and not to the New Testament as a whole (there were still questions as to which books were properly in the New Testament when Revelation was penned), yet they are a warning to the many false cults who have claimed to add to God’s Word.

In our present New Testament we have the final word from God until our Lord returns and the Bible as we know it will no longer be necessary.