SETTING THE STAGE

EPISODE 1 - THE RIGHT BOOKS

The Christians in the first three centuries after Jesus' death came to a quick agreement regarding what books did or didn't have a direct connection with Jesus. First-century Judaism connected its understanding of scripture with God's promises of deliverance and redemption. We see within the New Testament that, at that time, they were "looking for the Messiah" (John 1:41), waiting for "the redemption of Jerusalem," and the "restoration of the Kingdom" (Luke 2:25, 38).

In other words, the Jews within Jesus' day did not view scripture as being complete. Rather, the story of Hebrew scripture (the Old Testament) was read within their day as a story in search of a conclusion. This set the stage for the writing of the New Testament books being that conclusion. Jesus established the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31), and the natural question for the Jews of his day would have been "Here is the fulfillment of the promises of deliverance and redemption, so, where are the books?"

SETTING THE STAGE

EPISODE 1 - THE RIGHT BOOKS

The Gospels and the Epistles of Paul positioned themselves at the nucleus of the New Testament scriptures. Christians did not pick or vote on which writings had the authority to grant them scriptural/canonical status but recognized the authority these documents already possessed. There was a conscious recognition that, when Jesus breathed on his disciples (John 20:22) and they received the Holy Spirit, Jesus' authority was given to the Apostles. Therefore, only the books associated with having a direct relationship with this immediate Jesus group could even begin to be considered as holding scriptural status. The 27 books we call the New Testament are those books that were recognized as possessing this unique and inspired position.

EPISODE 1 - THE RIGHT BOOKS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Wes and Andy go to Egypt to talk about the right books of the Bible?
2. From watching Episode 1, how would you explain what the Bible is?
3. Many books were not included in the Bible. What was the standard the early church used to acknowledge what was or wasn't scripture?

EPISODE 1 - THE RIGHT BOOKS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

4. In Episode 1, what arguments do Wes and Andy discuss for why the Nag Hammadi texts (such as the Gospel of Thomas) were not, and should not, be considered scripture?

5. What good reason do we have to trust that the books in our Bible today are the right ones?

EPISODE 1 - THE RIGHT BOOKS

GOING DEEPER

The main criteria of New Testament canonicity for the early Christians had to do with a writing's connection to Jesus – either someone who knew Jesus directly, or someone who knew someone who knew him personally. Given this standard, what would be the books that had obvious connections to Jesus that were included within our Bible? What canonical books might have had an indirect association? (For example, Luke was not an apostle, why would his Gospel have been considered scripture?)

**Read Philemon 1:24*

EPISODE 1 - THE RIGHT BOOKS

FURTHER READING

Greg Lanier, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to How We Got the Bible*

John Meade, *Scribes and Scripture*

William Mounce, *Why ~~Should~~ I Trust the Bible~~?~~*

F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*

Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*

SETTING THE STAGE

EPISODE 2 - THE RIGHT TEXT

The way that the Christian Bible exists today is a product of modern convenience. After the invention of the printing press in 1440, and the availability of relatively cheap and easy book production, the Bible in a single-bound volume with all 66 books included and indexed became the norm. However, the Bible for the first few centuries of its recognition as scripture existed mostly as independent and separate scrolls and books. Although there were some very early collections of Gospels (𝔓45) and the letters of Paul (𝔓46), most of the earliest copies of these documents were independent single books.

SETTING THE STAGE

EPISODE 2 - THE RIGHT TEXT

For Jews and Christians, copying and translating God's Word into the common language of the day was a key aspect in possessing and understanding these important writings. Christians were far more concerned with the *meaning* of the text being *understood* rather than preserving the exact words in their original language. The gospel *message* was just as, *if not more* important, than the physical Gospel *writings*.

At the same time, scribes were so insistent on preserving and copying all of scripture that they would even (and sometimes purposefully) include the mistakes and marginal notes made by previous copyists just in case those aspects could possibly be original.

SETTING THE STAGE

EPISODE 2 - THE RIGHT TEXT

The early Christians were very eager to spread the good news of Jesus and so copied and translated the books that we now call the Bible with great speed and regularity. Within the first three hundred years the biblical books were spread across the ancient world and were translated into multiple different languages. Given that these documents were handwritten and spread out very quickly, it should not surprise us, then, that these copies contain differences within their texts.

Nonetheless, the overwhelming number of the differences that are found within the manuscript tradition of the Bible make no difference to meaning (when translated into modern Bibles today) or affect any essential Christian doctrine. If a difference within the manuscripts is noteworthy, modern translation committees often footnote and explain why the textual issue exists.

EPISODE 2 - THE RIGHT TEXT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Wes and Andy go to Egypt to talk about the right texts of the Bible?
2. Why has copying and translating the Bible been a consistent goal of Jews and Christians from the beginning?
3. Why were so many manuscripts discovered in Oxyrhynchus and what is the significance of their discovery?

EPISODE 2 - THE RIGHT TEXT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

4. Despite the presence of copying errors and differences in the manuscript tradition, how does our knowledge of variances give us greater confidence that the Bible has been reliably preserved?
5. What good reason do we have that the text we possess has been faithfully maintained?

EPISODE 2 - THE RIGHT TEXT

GOING DEEPER

Wes and Andy mention John 5:4 as an example of a textual variant that made its way into the text based on a scribal notation in the margin (probably in the fourth century). Do these kinds of introductions into the text of the Bible over time affect its reliability as the Word of God? Why or why not?

EPISODE 2 - THE RIGHT TEXT

FURTHER READING

Peter J. Williams, *Can I Trust the Gospels?*

Richard Brash, *How is the Bible Preserved?*

Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View*

Darrel Bock, Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Truth in a Culture of Doubt*

Michael J. Kruger, *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*