



# THUS SAITH THE LORD

A STUDY OF GOD'S WORD



## Canonization – How do we know what God wrote?

The Bible is more than a book; it's a library of books written by different authors over a period of 1,500 years. Thoughtful believers sometimes look at their leather-bound copy of God's Word and ask themselves: how do I know all of these and only these books are Scripture? Most Bibles begin with a table of contents, but nowhere in the pages of Scripture itself do we get a list of approved books that belong. So how did we get these books, and how do we know we got it right? The short answer to this question is the sovereignty of God. If God wrote the Bible, then we can trust God to make sure that the Bible we have is the Bible He wants us to have. The complex answer is a long historical study of ancient Judaism and the ancient church. This lesson will give a brief peek into the question of how we got our Bible to give the believer confidence in the copy of God's Word they are holding.

### ***Why does it matter that we know this?***

Satan's first words in Scripture were "Did God really say?"<sup>1</sup> Satan loves to sow doubt about God's Word, and he would love for believers to be worried that the Bible they have is wrongly put together. A careful study of the facts will reaffirm and reassure believers that the Bible they have is the Bible God intended. The technical terms for this issue are canon<sup>2</sup> and canonization. These words come from the Greek word *kanon*, which meant "standard" or "measure." When talking about the Bible, the word canon means the official list of books that are Scripture. These books measure up to the "standard" of being God's Word. The word canonization is closely related: canonization is the process whereby the church officially recognized these books as God's Word, a process that took place over many years. God could have just handed down a book from heaven, but instead the books of the Old and New Testament were written over a long period, then passed around and used, and eventually recognized as being Scripture.

***Why do you think God didn't just hand down a list of books from heaven? Why did he allow canonization to take place in history and time?***

***Why do you think most Christians are generally unaware of this process?***

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<sup>1</sup> KJV "Yea, hath God said?" The "Yea" is a Hebrew word that suggests surprise, hence the translation "Did God really say?"

<sup>2</sup> Note that "canon" with one n is a different word from "cannon" with two n's. A *cannon* is a large artillery weapon, whereas *canon* is the word we are talking about.

Much of this process is hidden in historical places and times where we have no records. How long before other Christians got a copy of Ephesians or before Paul's letters were put together in a collection? We don't have records that answer these questions. What we do have is reliable testimony that these were the books being used by Jews and Christians.

## Do We Have the Right Old Testament?

Our current Old Testament has thirty-nine books in it and excludes seven books called the apocrypha:<sup>3</sup> Judith, Tobit, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, and Baruch. Some groups, such as the Catholics and Orthodox, include these books as Scripture, so why don't Protestants?

### Strange Content

Part of the reason these books aren't included is that they include bizarre stories and dangerous teaching. For example, in the book of Tobit,<sup>4</sup> Tobit becomes blind and sends his son Tobias to go retrieve some money for him. An angel disguises himself and joins Tobias, and along the way they come across a fellow Israelite family with a daughter who has been married seven times but had a demon kill her husband on their wedding night every time. The angel assures Tobias that by burning the liver and heart of a fish they caught earlier he can chase the demon away, and so Tobias marries the girl, chases the demon away, and brings her home to his parents. Tobit's blindness is then healed, and everyone lives happily ever after. While the Old Testament certainly tells stories of supernatural happenings, they don't sound like this.

Some of the apocrypha has dangerous teaching as well. For example, a passage used by Catholics can be found in 2 Maccabees 12:39-45:

*39 And upon the day following, as the use had been, Judas and his company came to take up the bodies of them that were slain, and to bury them with their kinsmen in their fathers' graves. 40 Now under the coats of every one that was slain they found things consecrated to the idols of the Jamnites, which is forbidden the Jews by the law. Then every man saw that this was the cause wherefore they were slain. 41 All men therefore ... 42 Betook themselves unto prayer, and besought him that the sin committed might wholly be put out of remembrance. Besides, that noble Judas ... had made a gathering throughout the company to the sum of two thousand drachms of silver, he sent it to Jerusalem to offer a sin offering, doing therein very well and honestly, in that he was mindful of the resurrection: 44 For if he had not hoped that they that were slain should have risen again, it had been superfluous and vain to pray for the dead... Whereupon he made a reconciliation for the dead, that they might be delivered from sin.*

### **What does it sound like this passage is teaching?**

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<sup>3</sup> A quick note about terms: Catholics use the term "deuterocanonical" whereas Protestants use the term "apocrypha." This is separate from another set of books that almost no one considers to be Scripture called the "pseudepigrapha," or "false-writings." The pseudepigrapha are books that claim to be written by biblical characters but were almost certainly not (e.g. *Testament of Abraham*, *Testament of Levi*, *The Book of Enoch*, etc.).

<sup>4</sup> Tobit is a short read – probably around half an hour. You could find an online version and read it for yourself if you find yourself so inclined!

This passage tells the story of a general who found that fallen soldiers had been participating in idolatry, so he and his men pray for them and send a sin offering of gold to the temple. This passage has been used by the Catholic church to argue for purgatory and indulgences.<sup>5</sup>

### **Jewish Tradition**

Paul said that the advantage of being Jewish was that “unto them were committed the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2). The Old Testament came to the Jewish people, and so we should think long and hard before we add to their list.

- **The Current Jewish Scriptures**

Currently, there is no debate that the Jews of today use the same 39 book list that we use. Modern Jews look at apocryphal books like we look at *Paradise Lost* or *Dante’s Inferno*, important ancient literature from the past, but not Scripture.

- **The Ancient Jewish Scriptures**

Some, including Catholics, will argue that there was no clear understanding of which books were Scripture at the time of Christ, and therefore we should rely on the testimony of the church. While some groups like the Samaritans and the Sadducees discounted everything but the Pentateuch, for most Jews there was a clear understanding that certain books were Scripture. The Jewish list had 24 books (or sometimes 22) rather than the 39 we have, but this results from combining several books into one.<sup>6</sup> For example, Josephus states that although other books were written after Artaxerxes (time of Ezra/Nehemiah), those were not on the same level because prophetic activity had ceased.<sup>7</sup> Philo never quotes from the apocrypha. The Dead Sea Scrolls, although they had apocryphal books, also had many pseudepigraphal books, and we don’t find any commentaries or authoritative citations from the apocrypha. Even 1 Maccabees noted that prophecy had long since ceased among the Jews (1 Maccabees 9:23-27). For these reasons, we can have confidence that the books used by Jews today have been the ones used by them for a long time.

### **Apostolic Witness**

Not only do we have the witness of the Jewish people, but we also have the witness of Jesus and the apostles. Jesus and the apostles often cited the Old Testament as the authority for what they are teaching (“as it is written”), and they never once quote from the apocrypha. Now, the New Testament does not

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<sup>5</sup> However, this still misses the point of the passage. For a good rebuttal, see <https://carm.org/roman-catholicism/purgatory-and-2-maccabees-1239-45/>

<sup>6</sup> For example, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles are one book. All the minor prophets were also combined into one book, called “The Book of Twelve.”

<sup>7</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.37-42

quote every book of the Old Testament directly, but it does quote most of them.<sup>8</sup> The fact that none of the apocrypha used by Jesus or the apostles is a strong witness against their inclusion. Pagan prophets are quoted by Paul, Jude even cites *The Book of Enoch* and possibly *The Assumption of Moses*, part of the pseudepigrapha, but there are no citations of the apocrypha.

***Why do you think that some books of the Old Testament were not quoted directly by the New Testament?***

The church debated for centuries whether the apocrypha belonged in the canon or not. The Catholic church, along with other traditions (like Orthodox, Syriac, and Ethiopian), have said yes. Protestants have said no, because of the bizarre theology, the lack of witness from the Jews, and the fact that the New Testament authors ignore them. While these books are interesting, and in some cases historically informative, they are not Scripture.

## **Do We Have the Right New Testament?**

The battle over the Old Testament addresses questions from Catholics and Orthodox, but in the New Testament these attacks come from liberal scholars. Cynics argue that the New Testament we have deleted books used by Christians because sometime around the fourth century “orthodoxy” emerged and stamped out its competitors. They also argue that some of the letters we have are forgeries, not actually written by who they claim to be written by. So why do we ignore other early writings (Gospel of Thomas, Acts of Paul) and include the letters some claim are forgeries?

The early church was careful when it came to selecting Scripture. They knew there were false gospels and fake letters and made sure the testimony they had was authentic. Early Christians used three tests to determine if a book was Scripture, and over time twenty-seven books met these criteria and were recognized by the church as Scripture. Now, the word recognizes is very important. The church does not declare something to be Scripture, it recognizes that something is Scripture. Scripture is Scripture because God inspired it, not because the church declares it to be so.

***What is the difference between saying that the church declared a book to be Scripture, rather than recognizing it as Scripture?***

***What groups would say that the church declared a book to be Scripture?***

We will briefly look at each of these three tests:

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<sup>8</sup> Books that are not clearly quoted include Joshua, Judges, Ezekiel (perhaps), Obadiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah, although the last three would have been considered part of one book with all the minor prophets (called “the book of twelve”). Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther are the five books read at the feasts (called the “Megilloth”) and are not directly quoted in the NT. Finally, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles are not directly quoted.

## 1. Was the author an apostle or a close associate of an apostle?

***Who wrote the books of the NT? See how many authors you can list out.***

Books of the New Testament were only included if they were written by an apostle (i.e. James, Matthew, Paul) or by a close associate of an apostle (i.e. Luke with Paul; Mark with Peter). Although forgeries were circulated, the church rejected such works. In one instance, a church elder wrote a letter “from Paul” called 3 Corinthians, and when it was found out was removed from office.<sup>9</sup> Another church leader said, “For we, brethren, receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ; but we reject intelligently the writings falsely ascribed to them, knowing that such were not handed down to us.”<sup>10</sup>

***What problems would there be if certain NT letters were written by someone other than who the letter claimed wrote it?***

What about the letters that were supposedly forged?<sup>11</sup> The reason why each letter is denied differs from letter to letter. The main reasons tend to be that certain letters “sound” like they were written by someone else (for example 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, or Titus) or that the theology is too developed (Ephesians). Many of these are subjective arguments and ignore the strong testimony of the early church. A solid technical commentary on a given book will normally explain the questions of authorship, and strong defenses of each book have been made by conservative theologians.

## 2. Was the book widely used?

Since it was the Holy Spirit who inspired the books of Scripture, one key test was which books were used frequently. Cynics argue that there was no official list of the books of the Bible until the late fourth century. Now, some letters took longer to be recognized (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, Revelation), but the vast majority of the New Testament was recognized long before the fourth century. Irenaeus was a prominent second century church father who quoted from the gospels, Acts, and all the letters except Philemon, 2 Peter, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. Tertullian was another second century father who listed the whole New Testament except 2 Peter, James, and 2-3 John. Eusebius in 330 gives a list that includes the New Testament but mentions James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, and Revelation as disputed.<sup>12</sup> Finally, in 393 A.D. Augustine argues for the twenty-seven books of the New Testament of today at the Synod of Hippo. Around this time Jerome translates the twenty-seven books of the New Testament into Latin in the Latin vulgate. While some letters took a while to be accepted into the canon, the later declaration about the New Testament wasn’t a radically shortened list to justify a certain theological position, but a reflection

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<sup>9</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism* 17

<sup>10</sup> Serapion, quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.12.3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1890; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 1:258.

<sup>11</sup> The following letters have seen a fair number of modern scholars question or outright deny their authenticity: Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, Jude, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Revelation. Matthew, Mark, and John do not name their author, and neither does Hebrews.

<sup>12</sup> Eusebius does not mention Hebrews, but it’s possible that he includes Hebrews in his general description of “Epistles of Paul” since the early church considered Paul the author of Hebrews.

of the books that were being commonly used by the churches and had been throughout the short history of the church.

***Why would widespread usage of the church be a helpful rubric?***

***Why do you think certain letters took longer than others to be accepted?***

### **3. Does the book match up doctrinally?**

As with the apocrypha, part of the reason we exclude many of the books we do is that they are often bizarre or have bad theology. Take for example the most famous<sup>13</sup> non-canonical gospel – the gospel of Thomas. The gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings (114 to be precise), rather than a story. Most of these sayings are 1) things we already knew Jesus said from the biblical gospels, 2) things we don't find from the gospels but seem a little random and 3) bizarre statements that make no sense. For example, the gospel of Thomas includes the following deeply profound statements:

- Jesus said, "Blessed is the lion which becomes man when consumed by man; and cursed is the man whom the lion consumes, and the lion becomes man." (7)
- Jesus said to his disciples, "Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like." Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a righteous angel." Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher." Thomas said to him, "Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like." Jesus said, "I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out." And he took him and withdrew and told him three things. When Thomas returned to his companions, they asked him, "What did Jesus say to you?" Thomas said to them, "If I tell you one of the things which he told me, you will pick up stones and throw them at me; a fire will come out of the stones and burn you up." (13)
- Jesus said, "He who knows the father and the mother will be called the son of a harlot." (105)
- Simon Peter said to him, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven. (114)

Although not all non-canonical gospels, letters, and accounts of the early church are this bizarre, as a whole what we find in them doesn't match up to the care we find in the New Testament.

There is a lot more that could be said about the issue of canon, but the basic answer is clear. How do we know that the Bibles we have are the Bibles God intended us to have? Because historically there is good evidence that the books that we are using are the ones used by the Jews (including Christ and His apostles) and are the ones that the church used and recognized as being God's Word. Ultimately, we trust that God was faithful to work through His people, both Jew and Christian, to make sure that we have the copy of

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<sup>13</sup> Some of the more extreme liberals even think this gospel is a better testimony to Christ than the canonical gospels. For example, when the Jesus Seminar went through and voted on what they thought Jesus said and didn't say, they included the gospel of Thomas along with the canonical gospels.

His Word that He intended us to have. Our faith is in our God to preserve His Word for us, and when we peek behind the curtain of history, what we see there confirms that He has done just that.

**Definition:** Canonization is the process by which Scripture came to be recognized as Scripture.