

How Did We Get the Bible?

The Canon of Scripture: *What belongs in the Bible and what does not belong?*

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

The previous chapter concluded that it is especially the written words of God in the Bible to which we are to give our attention. Before we can do this, however, we must know which writings belong in the Bible and which do not. This is the question of the canon of Scripture, which may be defined as follows: *The canon of Scripture is the list of all the books that belong in the Bible.*

We must not underestimate the importance of this question. The words of Scripture are the words by which we nourish our spiritual lives. Thus we can reaffirm the comment of Moses to the people of Israel in reference to the words of God's law: "For it is no trifle for you, but *it is your life* and thereby you shall live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess" (Deut. 32:47).

To add to or subtract from God's words would be to prevent God's people from obeying him fully, for commands that were subtracted would not be known to the people, and words that were added might require extra things of the people which God had not commanded. Thus Moses warned the people of Israel, "You shall not *add to the word* which I command you, *nor take from it*; that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you" (Deut. 4:2).

The precise determination of the extent of the canon of Scripture is therefore of the utmost importance. If we are to trust and obey God absolutely we must have a collection of words that we are certain are God's own words to us. If there are any sections of Scripture about which we have doubts whether they are God's words or not, we will not consider them to have absolute divine authority and we will not trust them as much as we would trust God himself.

A. The Old Testament Canon

Where did the idea of a canon begin—the idea that the people of Israel should preserve a collection of written words from God? Scripture itself bears witness to the historical development of the canon. The earliest collection of written words of God was the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments thus form the beginning of the biblical canon. God himself wrote on two tablets of stone the words which he commanded his people: "And he gave

to Moses, when he had made an end of speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, the two tables of the testimony, tables of stone, *written with the finger of God*" (Ex. 31:18). Again we read, "And the tables were the work of God, and *the writing was the writing of God* graven upon the tables" (Ex. 32:16; cf. Deut. 4:13; 10:4). The tablets were deposited in the ark of the covenant (Deut. 10:5) and constituted the terms of the covenant between God and his people.

This collection of absolutely authoritative words from God grew in size throughout the time of Israel's history. Moses himself wrote additional words to be deposited beside the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:24–26). The immediate reference is apparently to the book of Deuteronomy, but other references to writing by Moses indicate that the first four books of the Old Testament were written by him as well (see Ex. 17:14; 24:4; 34:27; Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:22). After the death of Moses, Joshua also added to the collection of written words of God: "Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God" (Josh. 24:26). This is especially surprising in light of the command not to add to or take away from the words which God gave the people through Moses: "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it ..." (Deut. 4:2; cf. 12:32). In order to have disobeyed such a specific command, Joshua must have been convinced that he was not taking it upon himself to add to the written words of God, but that God himself had authorized such additional writing.

Later, others in Israel, usually those who fulfilled the office of prophet, wrote additional words from God:

Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship; and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the LORD. (1 Sam. 10:25)

The acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the Chronicles of Samuel the seer, and in the Chronicles of Nathan the prophet, and in the Chronicles of Gad the seer. (1 Chron. 29:29)

Now the rest of the acts of Jehoshaphat, from first to last, are written in the chronicles of Jehu the son of Hanani, which are recorded in the Book of the Kings of Israel. (2 Chron. 20:34; cf. 1 Kings 16:7 where Jehu the son of Hanani is called a prophet)

Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last, Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz wrote. (2 Chron. 26:22)

Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and his good deeds, behold, they are written in the vision of Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz, in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel. (2 Chron. 32:32)

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. (Jer. 30:2)

The content of the Old Testament canon continued to grow until the time of the end of the writing process. If we date Haggai to 520 B.C., Zechariah to 520–518 B.C. (with perhaps more material added after 480 B.C.), and Malachi around 435 B.C., we have an idea of the approximate dates of the last Old Testament prophets. Roughly coinciding with this period are the last books of Old Testament history—Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Ezra went to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., and Nehemiah was in Jerusalem from 445–433 B.C. Esther was written sometime after the death of Xerxes I (= Ahasuerus) in 465 B.C., and a date during the reign of Artaxerxes I (464–423 B.C.) is probable. Thus, after approximately 435 B.C. there were no further additions to the Old Testament canon. The subsequent history of the Jewish people was recorded in other writings, such as the books of the Maccabees, but these writings were not thought worthy to be included with the collections of God’s words from earlier years.

When we turn to Jewish literature outside the Old Testament, we see that the belief that divinely authoritative words from God had ceased is clearly attested in several different strands of extrabiblical Jewish literature. In 1 Maccabees (about 100 B.C.) the author writes of the defiled altar, “So they tore down the altar and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them” (1 Macc. 4:45–46). They apparently knew of no one who could speak with the authority of God as the Old Testament prophets had done. The memory of an authoritative prophet among the people was one that belonged to the distant past, for the author could speak of a great distress “such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them” (1 Macc. 9:27; cf. 14:41).

Josephus (born c. A.D. 37/38) explained, “From Artaxerxes to our own times a complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets” (*Against Apion* 1.41). This statement by the greatest Jewish historian of the first century A.D. shows that he knew of the writings now considered part of the “Apocrypha,” but that he (and many of his contemporaries) considered these other writings “not ... worthy of equal credit” with what we now know as the Old Testament Scriptures. There had been, in Josephus’s viewpoint, no more “words of God” added to Scripture after about 435 B.C.

Rabbinic literature reflects a similar conviction in its repeated statement that the Holy Spirit (in the Spirit’s function of inspiring prophecy) departed from Israel. “After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel, but they still availed themselves of the קוֹל בַּת (H1426 + H7754, *Babylonian Talmud* Yomah 9b, repeated in Sota 48b, Sanhedrin 11a, and Midrash Rabbah on Song of Songs, 8.9.3).

The Qumran community (the Jewish sect that left behind the Dead Sea Scrolls) also awaited a prophet whose words would have authority to supersede any existing regulations (see 1 QS 9.11), and other similar statements are found elsewhere in ancient Jewish literature (see 2 Baruch

85:3 and Prayer 15). Thus, writings subsequent to about 435 B.C. were not accepted by the Jewish people generally as having equal authority with the rest of Scripture.

In the New Testament, we have no record of any dispute between Jesus and the Jews over the extent of the canon. Apparently there was full agreement between Jesus and his disciples, on the one hand, and the Jewish leaders or Jewish people, on the other hand, that additions to the Old Testament canon had ceased after the time of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. This fact is confirmed by the quotations of Jesus and the New Testament authors from the Old Testament. According to one count, Jesus and the New Testament authors quote various parts of the Old Testament Scriptures as divinely authoritative over 295 times, but not once do they cite any statement from the books of the Apocrypha or any other writings as having divine authority.⁶ The absence of any such reference to other literature as divinely authoritative, and the extremely frequent reference to hundreds of places in the Old Testament as divinely authoritative, gives strong confirmation to the fact that the New Testament authors agreed that the established Old Testament canon, no more and no less, was to be taken as God's very words.

What then shall be said about the Apocrypha, the collection of books included in the canon by the Roman Catholic Church but excluded from the canon by Protestantism? These books were never accepted by the Jews as Scripture, but throughout the early history of the church there was a divided opinion on whether they should be part of Scripture or not. In fact, the earliest Christian evidence is decidedly against viewing the Apocrypha as Scripture, but the use of the Apocrypha gradually increased in some parts of the church until the time of the Reformation. The fact that these books were included by Jerome in his Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible (completed in A.D. 404) gave support to their inclusion, even though Jerome himself said they were not "books of the canon" but merely "books of the church" that were helpful and useful for believers. The wide use of the Latin Vulgate in subsequent centuries guaranteed their continued accessibility, but the fact that they had no Hebrew original behind them, and their exclusion from the Jewish canon, as well as the lack of their citation in the New Testament, led many to view them with suspicion or to reject their authority. For instance, the earliest Christian list of Old Testament books that exists today is by Melito, bishop of Sardis, writing about A.D. 170:

When I came to the east and reached the place where these things were preached and done, and learnt accurately the books of the Old Testament, I set down the facts and sent them to you. These are their names: five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kingdoms, two books of Chronicles, the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon and his Wisdom,¹¹ Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Job, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Twelve in a single book, Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra.

It is noteworthy here that Melito names none of the books of the Apocrypha, but he includes all of our present Old Testament books except Esther. Eusebius also quotes Origen as affirming most of the books of our present Old Testament canon (including Esther), but no book of the

Apocrypha is affirmed as canonical, and the books of Maccabees are explicitly said to be “outside of these [canonical books].” Similarly, in A.D. 367, when the great church leader Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote his Paschal Letter, he listed all the books of our present New Testament canon and all the books of our present Old Testament canon except Esther. He also mentioned some books of the Apocrypha such as the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Judith, and Tobit, and said these are “not indeed included in the Canon, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness.” However, other early church leaders did quote several of these books as Scripture.¹⁶

There are doctrinal and historical inconsistencies with a number of these books. E.J. Young notes:

There are no marks in these books which would attest a divine origin ... both Judith and Tobit contain historical, chronological and geographical errors. The books justify falsehood and deception and make salvation to depend upon works of merit ... Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon inculcate a morality based upon expediency. Wisdom teaches the creation of the world out of pre-existent matter (Wisd. 11:17). Ecclesiasticus teaches that the giving of alms makes atonement for sin (Eccl. 3:30). In Baruch it is said that God hears the prayers of the dead (Bar. 3:4), and in I Maccabees there are historical and geographical errors.

It was not until 1546, at the Council of Trent, that the Roman Catholic Church officially declared the Apocrypha to be part of the canon (with the exception of 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh). It is significant that the Council of Trent was the response of the Roman Catholic Church to the teachings of Martin Luther and the rapidly spreading Protestant Reformation, and the books of the Apocrypha contain support for the Catholic teaching of prayers for the dead and justification by faith plus works, not by faith alone. In affirming the Apocrypha as within the canon, Roman Catholics would hold that the church has the authority to constitute a literary work as “Scripture,” while Protestants have held that the church cannot make something to be Scripture, but can only recognize what God has already caused to be written as his own words. (One analogy here would be to say that a police investigator can recognize counterfeit money as counterfeit and can recognize genuine money as genuine, but he cannot make counterfeit money to be genuine, nor can any declaration by any number of police make counterfeit money to be something it is not. Only the official treasury of a nation can make money that is real money; similarly, only God can make words to be his very words and worthy of inclusion in Scripture.)

Thus the writings of the Apocrypha should not be regarded as part of Scripture: (1) they do not claim for themselves the same kind of authority as the Old Testament writings; (2) they were not regarded as God’s words by the Jewish people from whom they originated; (3) they were not considered to be Scripture by Jesus or the New Testament authors; and (4) they contain teachings inconsistent with the rest of the Bible. We must conclude that they are merely human words, not

God-breathed words like the words of Scripture. They do have value for historical and linguistic research, and they contain a number of helpful stories about the courage and faith of many Jews during the period after the Old Testament ends, but they have never been part of the Old Testament canon, and they should not be thought of as part of the Bible. Therefore, they have no binding authority for the thought or life of Christians today.

In conclusion, with regard to the canon of the Old Testament, Christians today should have no worry that anything needed has been left out or that anything that is not God's words has been included.

B. The New Testament Canon

The development of the New Testament canon begins with the writings of the apostles. It should be remembered that the writing of Scripture primarily occurs in connection with God's great acts in redemptive history. The Old Testament records and interprets for us the calling of Abraham and the lives of his descendants, the exodus from Egypt and the wilderness wanderings, the establishment of God's people in the land of Canaan, the establishment of the monarchy, and the Exile and return from captivity. Each of these great acts of God in history is interpreted for us in God's own words in Scripture. The Old Testament closes with the expectation of the Messiah to come (Mal. 3:1–4; 4:1–6). The next stage in redemptive history is the coming of the Messiah, and it is not surprising that no further Scripture would be written until this next and greatest event in the history of redemption occurred.

This is why the New Testament consists of the writings of the apostles. It is primarily the apostles who are given the ability from the Holy Spirit to recall accurately the words and deeds of Jesus and to interpret them rightly for subsequent generations.

Jesus promised this empowering to his disciples (who were called apostles after the resurrection) in John 14:26: "But the Counselor, 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 have said to you." Similarly, Jesus promised further revelation of truth from the Holy Spirit when he told his disciples, "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. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13–14). In these verses the disciples are promised amazing gifts to enable them to write Scripture: the Holy Spirit would teach them "all things," would cause them to remember "all" that Jesus had said, and would guide them into "all the truth."

Furthermore, those who have the office of apostle in the early church are seen to claim an authority equal to that of the Old Testament prophets, an authority to speak and write words that

are God's very words. Peter encourages his readers to remember "the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles" (2 Peter 3:2). To lie to the apostles (Acts 5:2) is equivalent to lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3) and lying to God (Acts 5:4).

This claim to be able to speak words that were the words of God himself is especially frequent in the writings of the apostle Paul. He claims not only that the Holy Spirit has revealed to him "what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived" (1 Cor. 2:9), but also that when he declares this revelation, he speaks it "in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting Spiritual things in Spiritual words" (1 Cor. 2:13, author's translation).

Similarly, Paul tells the Corinthians, "If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37). The word translated "what" in this verse is a plural relative pronoun in Greek (ἃ) and more literally could be translated "*the things* that I am writing to you." Thus, Paul claims that his directives to the church at Corinth are not merely his own but a command of the Lord. Later, in defending his apostolic office, Paul says that he will give the Corinthians "proof that Christ is speaking in me" (2 Cor. 13:3). Other similar verses could be mentioned (for example, Rom. 2:16; Gal. 1:8–9; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:8, 15; 5:27; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14).

The apostles, then, have authority to write words that are God's own words, equal in truth status and authority to the words of the Old Testament Scriptures. They do this to record, interpret, and apply to the lives of believers the great truths about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

It would not be surprising therefore to find some of the New Testament writings being placed with the Old Testament Scriptures as part of the canon of Scripture. In fact, this is what we find in at least two instances. In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter shows not only an awareness of the existence of written epistles from Paul, but also a clear willingness to classify "all of his [Paul's] epistles" with "the other scriptures": Peter says, "So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, *as they do the other scriptures*" (2 Peter 3:15–16). The word translated "scriptures" here is γραφή (G1210) a word that occurs fifty-one times in the New Testament and that refers to the Old Testament Scriptures in every one of those occurrences. Thus, the word *Scripture* was a technical term for the New Testament authors, and it was used only of those writings that were thought to be God's words and therefore part of the canon of Scripture. But in this verse, Peter classifies Paul's writings with the "other Scriptures" (meaning the Old Testament Scriptures). Paul's writings are therefore considered by Peter also to be worthy of the title "Scripture" and thus worthy of inclusion in the canon.

A second instance is found in 1 Timothy 5:17–18. Paul says, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; *for the scripture* says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.” ’ The first quotation from “Scripture” is found in Deuteronomy 25:4, but the second quotation, “The laborer deserves his wages,” is found nowhere in the Old Testament. It does occur, however, in Luke 10:7 (with exactly the same words in the Greek text). So here we have Paul apparently quoting a portion of Luke’s gospel and calling it “Scripture,” that is, something that is to be considered part of the canon. In both of these passages (2 Peter 3:16 and 1 Tim. 5:17–18) we see evidence that very early in the history of the church the writings of the New Testament began to be accepted as part of the canon.

Because the apostles, by virtue of their apostolic office, had authority to write words of Scripture, the authentic written teachings of the apostles were accepted by the early church as part of the canon of Scripture. If we accept the arguments for the traditional views of authorship of the New Testament writings, then we have most of the New Testament in the canon because of direct authorship by the apostles. This would include Matthew; John; Romans to Philemon (all of the Pauline epistles); James;²⁴ 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Revelation.

This leaves five books, Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, and Jude, which were not written by apostles. The details of the historical process by which these books came to be counted as part of Scripture by the early church are scarce, but Mark, Luke, and Acts were commonly acknowledged very early, probably because of the close association of Mark with the apostle Peter, and of Luke (the author of Luke-Acts) with the apostle Paul. Similarly, Jude apparently was accepted by virtue of the author’s connection with James (see Jude 1) and the fact that he was the brother of Jesus.

The acceptance of Hebrews as canonical was urged by many in the church on the basis of an assumed Pauline authorship. But from very early times there were others who rejected Pauline authorship in favor of one or another of several different suggestions. Origen, who died about A.D. 254, mentions various theories of authorship and concludes, “But who actually wrote the epistle, only God knows.” Thus, the acceptance of Hebrews as canonical was not entirely due to a belief in Pauline authorship. Rather, the intrinsic qualities of the book itself must have finally convinced early readers, as they continue to convince believers today, that whoever its human author may have been, its ultimate author can only have been God himself. The majestic glory of Christ shines forth from the pages of the epistle to the Hebrews so brightly that no believer who reads it seriously should ever want to question its place in the canon.

This brings us to the heart of the question of canonicity. For a book to belong in the canon, it is absolutely necessary that the book have divine authorship. If the words of the book are God’s words (through human authors), and if the early church, under the direction of the apostles, preserved the book as part of Scripture, then the book belongs in the canon. But if the words of

the book are not God's words, it does not belong in the canon. The question of authorship by an apostle is important because it was primarily the apostles to whom Christ gave the ability to write words with absolute divine authority. If a writing can be shown to be by an apostle, then its absolute divine authority is automatically established. Thus, the early church automatically accepted as part of the canon the written teachings of the apostles which the apostles wanted preserved as Scripture.

But the existence of some New Testament writings that were not authored directly by apostles shows that there were others in the early church to whom Christ also gave the ability, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to write words that were God's own words and also therefore intended to be part of the canon. In these cases, the early church had the task of recognizing which writings had the characteristic of being God's own words (through human authors).

For some books (at least Mark, Luke, and Acts, and perhaps Hebrews and Jude as well), the church had, at least in some areas, the personal testimony of some living apostles to affirm the absolute divine authority of these books. For example, Paul would have affirmed the authenticity of Luke and Acts, and Peter would have affirmed the authenticity of Mark as containing the gospel which he himself preached. In other cases, and in some geographical areas, the church simply had to decide whether it heard the voice of God himself speaking in the words of these writings. In these cases, the words of these books would have been *self-attesting*; that is, the words would have borne witness to their own divine authorship as Christians read them. This seems to have been the case with Hebrews.

It should not surprise us that the early church should have been able to recognize Hebrews and other writings, not written by apostles, as God's very words. Had not Jesus said "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27)? It should not be thought impossible or unlikely, therefore, that the early church would be able to use a combination of factors, including apostolic endorsement, consistency with the rest of Scripture, and the perception of a writing as "God-breathed" on the part of an overwhelming majority of believers, to decide that a writing was in fact God's words (through a human author) and therefore worthy of inclusion in the canon. Nor should it be thought unlikely that the church would be able to use this process over a period of time—as writings were circulated to various parts of the early church—and finally to come to a completely correct decision, without excluding any writings that were in fact "God-breathed" and without including any that were not.

In A.D. 367 the Thirty-ninth Paschal Letter of Athanasius contained an exact list of the twenty-seven New Testament books we have today. This was the list of books accepted by the churches in the eastern part of the Mediterranean world. Thirty years later, in A.D. 397, the Council of Carthage, representing the churches in the western part of the Mediterranean world,

agreed with the eastern churches on the same list. These are the earliest final lists of our present-day canon.

Should we expect any more writings to be added to the canon? The opening sentence in Hebrews puts this question in the proper historical perspective, the perspective of the history of redemption: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:1–2).

The contrast between the former speaking “of old” by the prophets and the recent speaking “in these last days” suggests that God’s speech to us by his Son is the culmination of his speaking to mankind and is his greatest and final revelation to mankind in this period of redemptive history. The exceptional greatness of the revelation that comes through the Son, far exceeding any revelation in the old covenant, is emphasized again and again throughout chapters 1 and 2 of Hebrews. These facts all indicate that there is a finality to the revelation of God in Christ and that once this revelation has been completed, no more is to be expected.

But where do we learn about this revelation through Christ? The New Testament writings contain the final, authoritative, and sufficient interpretation of Christ’s work of redemption. The apostles and their close companions report Christ’s words and deeds and interpret them with absolute divine authority. When they have finished their writing, there is no more to be added with the same absolute divine authority. Thus, once the writings of the New Testament apostles and their authorized companions are completed, we have in written form the final record of everything that God wants us to know about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and its meaning for the lives of believers for all time. Since this is God’s greatest revelation for mankind, no more is to be expected once this is complete. In this way, then, Hebrews 1:1–2 shows us why no more writings can be added to the Bible after the time of the New Testament. The canon is now closed.

A similar kind of consideration may be drawn from Revelation 22:18–19:

I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

The primary reference of these verses is clearly to the book of Revelation itself, for John refers to his writing as “the words of the prophecy of this book” in verses 7 and 10 of this chapter (and the entire book is called a prophecy in Rev. 1:3). Furthermore, the reference to “the tree of life and ... the holy city, which are described in this book” indicates that the book of Revelation itself is intended.

It is, however, not accidental that this statement comes at the end of the last chapter of Revelation, and that Revelation is the last book in the New Testament. In fact, Revelation has to be placed last in the canon. For many books, their placement in the assembling of the canon is of little consequence. But just as Genesis must be placed first (for it tells us of creation), so Revelation must be placed last (for its focus is to tell us of the future and God's new creation). The events described in Revelation are historically subsequent to the events described in the rest of the New Testament and require that Revelation be placed where it is. Thus, it is not inappropriate for us to understand this exceptionally strong warning at the end of Revelation as applying in a secondary way to the whole of Scripture. Placed here, where it must be placed, the warning forms an appropriate conclusion to the entire canon of Scripture. Along with Hebrews 1:1–2 and the history-of-redemption perspective implicit in those verses, this broader application of Revelation 22:18–19 also suggests to us that we should expect no more Scripture to be added beyond what we already have.

How do we know, then, that we have the right books in the canon of Scripture we now possess? The question can be answered in two different ways. First, if we are asking upon what we should base our confidence, the answer must ultimately be that our confidence is based on the faithfulness of God. We know that God loves his people, and it is supremely important that God's people have his own words, for they are our life (Deut. 32:47; Matt. 4:4). They are more precious, more important to us than anything else in this world. We also know that God our Father is in control of all history, and he is not the kind of Father who will trick us or fail to be faithful to us or keep from us something we absolutely need.

The severity of the punishments in Revelation 22:18–19 that come to those who add to or take from God's words also confirms the importance for God's people of having a correct canon. There could be no greater punishments than these, for they are the punishments of eternal judgment. This shows that God himself places supreme value on our having a correct collection of God-breathed writings, no more and no less. In the light of this fact, could it be right for us to believe that God our Father, who controls all history, would allow all of his church for almost two thousand years to be deprived of something he himself values so highly and is so necessary for our spiritual lives?

The preservation and correct assembling of the canon of Scripture should ultimately be seen by believers, then, not as part of church history subsequent to God's great central acts of redemption for his people, but as an integral part of the history of redemption itself. Just as God was at work in creation, in the calling of his people Israel, in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and in the early work and writings of the apostles, so God was at work in the preservation and assembling together of the books of Scripture for the benefit of his people for the entire church age. Ultimately, then, we base our confidence in the correctness of our present canon on the faithfulness of God.

The question of how we know that we have the right books can, secondly, be answered in a somewhat different way. We might wish to focus on the process by which we become persuaded that the books we have now in the canon are the right ones. In this process two factors are at work: the activity of the Holy Spirit convincing us as we read Scripture for ourselves, and the historical data that we have available for our consideration.

As we read Scripture the Holy Spirit works to convince us that the books we have in Scripture are all from God and are his words to us. It has been the testimony of Christians throughout the ages that as they read the books of the Bible, the words of Scripture speak to their hearts as no other books do. Day after day, year after year, Christians find that the words of the Bible are indeed the words of God speaking to them with an authority, a power, and a persuasiveness that no other writings possess. Truly the Word of God is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

Yet the process by which we become persuaded that the present canon is right is also helped by historical data. Of course, if the assembling of the canon was one part of God’s central acts in the history of redemption (as was stated above), then Christians today should not presume to take it upon themselves to attempt to add to or subtract from the books of the canon: the process was completed long ago. Nevertheless, a thorough investigation of the historical circumstances surrounding the assembling of the canon is helpful in confirming our conviction that the decisions made by the early church were correct decisions. Some of this historical data has been mentioned in the preceding pages. Other, more detailed data is available for those who wish to pursue more specialized investigations.

Yet one further historical fact should be mentioned. Today there exist no strong candidates for addition to the canon and no strong objections to any book presently in the canon. Of those writings that some in the early church wanted to include in the canon, it is safe to say that there are none that present-day evangelicals would want to include. Some of the very early writers distinguished themselves quite clearly from the apostles and their writings from the writings of the apostles. Ignatius, for example, about A.D. 110, said, “I do not order you as did Peter and Paul; *they were apostles* I am a convict; they were free, I am even until now a slave” (Ignatius, *To the Romans* 4.3; compare the attitude toward the apostles in 1 Clement 42:1, 2; 44:1–2 [A.D. 95]; Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 7:1; 13:1–2; et al.).

Even those writings that were for a time thought by some to be worthy of inclusion in the canon contain doctrinal teaching that is contradictory to the rest of Scripture. “The Shepherd” of Hermas, for example, teaches “the necessity of penance” and “the possibility of the forgiveness of sins at least once after baptism ... The author seems to identify the Holy Spirit with the Son of God before the Incarnation, and to hold that the Trinity came into existence only after the

humanity of Christ had been taken up into heaven” (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* p. 641).

The *Gospel of Thomas* which for a time was held by some to belong to the canon, ends with the following absurd statement (par. 114):

Simon Peter said to them: “Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said: “Lo, I shall lead her, so that I may make her a male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

All other existing documents that had in the early church any possibility of inclusion in the canon are similar to these in that they either contain explicit disclaimers of canonical status or include some doctrinal aberrations that clearly make them unworthy of inclusion in the Bible.

On the other hand, there are no strong objections to any book currently in the canon. In the case of several New Testament books that were slow to gain approval by the whole church (books such as 2 Peter or 2 and 3 John), much of the early hesitancy over their inclusion can be attributed to the fact that they were not initially circulated very widely, and that full knowledge of the contents of all the New Testament writings spread through the church rather slowly. (Martin Luther’s hesitations concerning James are quite understandable in view of the doctrinal controversy in which he was engaged, but such hesitancy was certainly not necessary. The apparent doctrinal conflict with Paul’s teaching is easily resolved once it is recognized that James is using three key terms, *justification*, *faith* and *works* in senses different from those with which Paul used them.)

There is therefore historical confirmation for the correctness of the current canon. Yet it must be remembered in connection with any historical investigation that the work of the early church was not to bestow divine authority or even ecclesiastical authority upon some merely human writings, but rather to recognize the divinely authored characteristic of writings that already had such a quality. This is because the ultimate criterion of canonicity is divine authorship, not human or ecclesiastical approval.

At this point someone may ask a hypothetical question about what we should do if another one of Paul’s epistles were discovered, for example. Would we add it to Scripture? This is a difficult question, because two conflicting considerations are involved. On the one hand, if a great majority of believers were convinced that this was indeed an authentic Pauline epistle, written in the course of Paul’s fulfillment of his apostolic office, then the nature of Paul’s apostolic authority would guarantee that the writing would be God’s very words (as well as Paul’s), and that its teachings would be consistent with the rest of Scripture. But the fact that it was not preserved as part of the canon would indicate that it was not among the writings the apostles wanted the church to preserve as part of Scripture. Moreover, it must immediately be

said that such a hypothetical question is just that: hypothetical. It is exceptionally difficult to imagine what kind of historical data might be discovered that could convincingly demonstrate to the church as a whole that a letter lost for over 1,900 years was genuinely authored by Paul, and it is more difficult still to understand how our sovereign God could have faithfully cared for his people for over 1,900 years and still allowed them to be continually deprived of something he intended them to have as part of his final revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. These considerations make it so highly improbable that any such manuscript would be discovered at some time in the future, that such a hypothetical question really does not merit further serious consideration.

In conclusion, are there any books in our present canon that should not be there? No. We can rest our confidence in this fact in the faithfulness of God our Father, who would not lead all his people for nearly two thousand years to trust as his Word something that is not. And we find our confidence repeatedly confirmed both by historical investigation and by the work of the Holy Spirit in enabling us to hear God's voice in a unique way as we read from every one of the sixty-six books in our present canon of Scripture.

But are there any missing books, books that should have been included in Scripture but were not? The answer must be no. In all known literature there are no candidates that even come close to Scripture when consideration is given both to their doctrinal consistency with the rest of Scripture and to the type of authority they claim for themselves (as well as the way those claims of authority have been received by other believers). Once again, God's faithfulness to his people convinces us that there is nothing missing from Scripture that God thinks we need to know for obeying him and trusting him fully. The canon of Scripture today is exactly what God wanted it to be, and it will stay that way until Christ returns.¹

¹ Grudem, W. A. (2004). *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine* (pp. 54–68). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.