

DEFENDING SCRIPTURE

The previous three arguments that demonstrate the existence of God are powerful and sometimes necessary (depending on the person to whom we are talking), but they are not sufficient to demonstrate the existence of the God of the Bible. The cosmological argument, the design argument, and the moral argument give a general sense of God, including his power, his eternity, and his moral character. However, this does not necessarily reveal the one true, triune God. If we want to talk about God in more specific terms, we will have to turn to the Bible.

In theological terms, we call the general sense of God that we get from creation and conscience general revelation. God has revealed himself through his creation, but not in a specific way. We cannot learn about Jesus and the cross by looking at a sunset or considering our conscience. For specific revelation, we have to read the Bible.

When we share the gospel, we must turn to the pages of Scripture. The Bible tells us about God, his creation, our sin, and Jesus. It tells us how to live as God's people. Therefore, the Bible is our main tool in evangelism. After all, it is the "sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17). We know that it is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). God's Word always accomplishes his purposes (Isa. 55:11).

According to the 1689 London Baptist Confession, "The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience." Because the Bible is authoritative in these matters, and because of its amazing claims, it has often been subject to various attacks by those who seek to undermine the Christian faith. All Christians should be prepared to defend the truth of Scripture. We should also help non-Christians to understand why we stand under the Bible's authority. When we tell people about Jesus (especially when we open up our Bibles or quote Scripture from memory), we should expect that we will face both difficult and honest questions regarding the Bible's origin and authority.

The issue of the Bible is a complex one. To make discussion of it easier to understand, I will organize this section as a series of questions and answers.

WHY SHOULD A BOOK TELL ME HOW TO LIVE?

Some non-Christians will object to the very idea that a book should be authoritative. They may ask other questions, such as: Why should we trust an ancient book? Why doesn't God speak to us directly? Those are important questions. The answers to those questions are not easy, but there are answers available for us to give.

God speaks

We should first make a philosophical observation. Human beings were made to communicate. We *must* communicate. Notice how the mute, the deaf, and the blind go to great

lengths to communicate. Solitary confinement is a strict punishment because it cuts off communication. Lengthy periods of solitary confinement are considered cruel, because it denies humans something nearly as fundamental as food, water, and shelter. What is the origin of this need to communicate?

Christianity states very clearly that human beings are made in the image of God. We reflect something of God's character. If we humans are defined by our ability and need to communicate, it makes perfect sense that the God who created us is one who communicates. James White makes the following observation:

It is eminently logical to believe that the God who formed man's body, with all of its intricate biological facilities, who created the wonder of man's mind, with all of its amazing intellectual capacities, and who instilled man's very ability and desire to communicate, would Himself be capable of communication with His creatures. The very thought of a mute God is on its face absurd: The only basis upon which one might suppose God to be silent would be God purposefully choosing to remain so. But even this makes no sense, as if God would create man to be desirous of communication and then absent Himself from the scene so as to leave us wandering alone in the midst of the vast, silent creation. Such a God would hardly be worthy of praise or emulation.¹

God speaks; therefore, we speak. The idea of a God who doesn't speak is, as White comments, "absurd." We should therefore search for evidence of God's communication.

We need an objective record of God's speech

If God speaks, how does he speak? Why does he not speak to each one of us audibly and individually? Usually, people communicate in such a way. Imagine if God spoke to each individual person, perhaps audibly, or perhaps through some silent and telepathic manner. Knowing what we know about human nature, we could easily imagine people claiming that God told them all kinds of things. "God told me it was right to divorce my husband." "God told me it was okay to cheat on my taxes, because he knows I need the money." "God told me it was okay to abort the baby because now is an inconvenient time for us to raise a child." You can see where this would go. Because we tend to justify our sins, we could easily claim that "God" told us many things.

If an objective record of God's speech did not exist, it would be impossible to refute anyone's claims that God told him or her something. If the Bible did not exist, we would not be able to tell whether someone's claims aligned with God's character. We would only have our individual and subjective experience of God speaking to us. This situation would be spiritual anarchy.

Some people might wonder why God reveals himself primarily through words in a book. Why doesn't God perform miracles to get our attention? Two passages from the Gospels help us understand why God doesn't always use miracles to reveal himself. In John 6, Jesus fed five

¹ James R. White, *Scripture Alone* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 18.

thousand people with five loaves and two fish. The people were so amazed, they were ready to take Jesus by force and make him king (v.15). The crowd followed Jesus across the Sea of Galilee the next day because they liked getting fed for free. They were not interested in the sign of the miracle, which showed that Jesus was the Messiah, but they were only interested in getting their fill of bread (v. 26). Jesus then taught them some profound truths using the symbol of bread. At one point, he said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (v. 51). This caused some confusion, so they asked him what it meant to eat his flesh. Jesus didn’t make the situation any easier. Instead, he said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (v. 53). These people, who are called disciples, said, “This is hard saying; who can listen to it?” Then they walked away (vv. 61, 66). The point seems to be that many people like miracles—especially when they personally gain from them—but not everyone wants to learn from God and follow him. Learning about God requires some humility and a willingness to listen.

The other relevant passage is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). A rich man and a poor man, named Lazarus, both die. Lazarus goes to heaven and the rich man goes to hell. The rich man is able to look up from hell and he sees Lazarus at Abraham’s side. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to him, to give him a drink. (Let’s remember that this is a parable, a fictitious story meant to teach one main spiritual truth. I don’t think people in hell can see people in heaven, and vice versa.) Abraham tells the rich man it is too late to change his station. Then the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus back to his five brothers who are still alive, so that he may warn them. Abraham says, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them” (v. 29). The rich man protests: “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent” (v.30). Abraham’s final words: “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (v. 31). For people who are willing to submit to God, they will respond to his words. People who do not have faith or who will never have faith will not be moved by a miracle. Like the “disciples” who ate Jesus’ food and walked away, they will not listen to God’s words.

Therefore, we do not have God’s audible words, and we don’t rely on miracles. We have something better. Having an objective record of God’s words is a wonderful thing. It guards us against the possibility of having my subjective experience of God pitted against yours. This objective record, the Bible, tells us who God is, what he has done in history, and what he expects of us. Because the Bible has been complete for nearly two thousand years, it has been the church’s infallible rule over many generations. This fact protects Christianity from changing with the times. It guards the church from changing its doctrine to accommodate cultural trends. As Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears write, “The Bible is uniquely and solely God’s completely trustworthy revelation to us today. Scripture is the court of highest authority for Christians and their leaders, by which any alleged revelation from God is to be tested.”²

² Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 41.

We need a record of what God has done in history

The Bible records historical events as seen and reported by eyewitnesses. Moses witnessed the mighty acts of God in the exodus as well as in the wilderness wanderings. Whoever authored books such as Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings surely relied on eyewitness accounts of God's miraculous activities. More explicitly, the authors of the New Testament tell us that their reports of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection are based on eyewitness accounts.

The apostle John begins his first letter with these words:

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1-4)

John's Gospel was written to bear witness to Jesus' ministry, so that people would believe in him (John 20:30-31). His Gospel also underlines the importance of "witness," which is mentioned over twenty times. For another example of John's witness, see John 19:35. Likewise, Peter indicates his own witness of the Transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:16-8).

Though Luke was not an apostle, he used eyewitness accounts to write his Gospel, which he begins with these words:

¹ Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Some commentators believe it is possible that Luke even interviewed Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as other eyewitnesses of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. (Luke most likely wrote his Gospel roughly thirty years after the crucifixion. Therefore, many eyewitnesses would still be alive.) Acts is clearly a continuation of Luke's Gospel and it includes Luke's participation in Paul's travels. (The "we" sections of Acts begin in Acts 16:10. Luke obviously accompanied Paul on his second and third missionary journeys, as well as his trip to Rome.)

God chose to perform certain acts in history, the greatest of which is the death and resurrection of Christ. It makes perfect sense that he inspired eyewitness accounts of these miraculous events.

What the Bible says about itself

If we want to know about the Bible, we should first read what it says about itself. The Bible is God's self-revelation. In it, he reveals his character, his actions, and his purposes. Clearly, the Bible itself is part of his purposes, so it makes perfect sense that God should reveal to us the very nature of Scripture.

One of the key passages about Scripture comes from the pen of Paul. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The context suggests that Scripture refers here to the Old Testament, the "sacred writings" that Timothy learned since childhood (v. 15). As we shall see, the New Testament writings are as equally authoritative as the Old Testament, so by implication, both the Old and New Testaments are in view here. All of Scripture is inspired, or God-breathed. These verses make it clear that God is the ultimate author of the Bible. These verses also show that the Bible is useful for teaching, correcting, and training Christians so that they may be equipped for doing the good works that God prepared in advance for them (see Eph. 2:10).

God's Word is also able to lead people to salvation. In the book of Acts, when Paul spoke to the Ephesian elders, he said, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

As noted above, the Old Testament and the New Testament are both inspired Scripture. In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul writes, "For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" Paul is providing two quotes from Scripture to show that elders deserve to be compensated for their work. The first quote is from the Old Testament, specifically Deuteronomy 25:4. The second quote is apparently from the New Testament: Luke 10:7. Therefore, both Old and New Testaments are Scripture.

Peter gives us further proof that both Testaments are inspired. In 2 Peter 3:15-16, he writes, "And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures." Peter refers to Paul and says that false teachers try to twist his words, as they do to the other Scriptures. In other words, Paul's letters are Scripture. At the beginning of the same chapter, Peter mentions "the predictions of the holy prophets" of the Old Testament as well as the "commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles" of the New Testament (2 Pet. 3:2). Both the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles delivered God's Word.

The longest chapter of the Bible, Psalm 119, is an ode to God's Word. This chapter tells us some very important things about Scripture. This Psalm tells us that God's Word is eternal. "Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens" (Ps. 119:89). This idea is also presented in Isaiah 40:6-8, which is quoted in 1 Peter 1:24-25: "The word of the Lord remains forever."

Psalm 119 also tells us that God’s Word is true. The author of this Psalm refers to “the word of truth” (v. 43) and expresses to God, “your law is true” (v. 142), “all your commandments are true” (v. 151), and, “The sum of your word is truth” (v. 160). David made the same observation in 2 Samuel 7:28 when he said to God, “your words are true.” Not surprisingly, the Son of David, Jesus, says the same thing in John 17:17: “Sanctify them [the disciples] in the truth; your word is truth.” The author of Scripture, the Holy Spirit, is called the “Spirit of truth” several times (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6).

The Bible is breathed out by God—it is authored by him. It is eternal and it is true. These extraordinary claims should force anyone to approach the Bible with care. One cannot be unbiased and objective when approaching the Bible, because if its claims are true, then it makes ultimate demands on all of us.

WASN’T THE BIBLE WRITTEN BY A BUNCH OF MEN?

Those who oppose Christianity have promulgated the idea that the Bible is solely the product of human efforts. Dan Brown popularized his idea in his novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. One of his characters, Sir Leigh Teabing, makes this extraordinary claim: “More than *eighty* gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them.” Furthermore, he states, “The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.”³ Perhaps Brown was intending only to write fiction. Perhaps he had a theological axe to grind. Perhaps he was hoping that his readers wouldn’t check the facts. Regardless of his motivation and goals, he is wrong on both counts. There are fewer than thirty “gospels,” or written accounts of Jesus. And Constantine certainly did not determine the content of the Bible. The Council of Nicaea of 325 did not determine which books are in the Bible. That is simply bad history.

This bad history brings up a number of issues. One is the question of whether the Bible really is the Word of God rather than the word of man. A second issue concerns the canon of Scripture. People will question whether all of the sixty-six books of the Bible are inspired, and whether there are other books that “didn’t make the cut.”

Before we look at those issues, we have to address our role as Christians. If we are to defend the Christian faith, or present a reason for it, we need to know something about where the Bible came from. We should know why we have the sixty-six books we do, and not others. Sadly, most Christians cannot even begin to speak to this issue. According to James White,

“Being an informed person on the subject of the biblical text would seem to be a basic, fundamental aspect of being a Christian. However, again, today the vast majority of believers have little or no knowledge at all of where the Bible came from, how it was transmitted over time, or why their translation differs from any other. This lack of study . . . is also an opening through which secular

³ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 251.

enemies of the faith, especially those seeking to destroy the faith of believers in God's Word, enter in."⁴

To be fair, knowing where the Bible comes from requires studying complicated issues, including church history, foreign languages, and textual criticism, the study of how to determine the original text of the Bible. These are hard issues to grasp, but we can understand the basics with a little bit of effort.

Let's take a look at the first issue: whether the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible claims that it is not the word of man, but the Word of God. Peter, after speaking of the Transfiguration, writes the following words about Scripture:

¹⁹And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Pet. 1:19-21)

Peter claims that "the prophetic word" of Scripture is more fully confirmed than the Transfiguration. That is quite a claim. Furthermore, this prophecy of Scripture (Peter means that all of Scripture is prophetic, in the sense that prophets spoke the words of God) does not come from human interpretation or will. It is the result of the Holy Spirit, carrying men along.

Throughout the Bible, it is clear that the prophets and apostles are not delivering their own message. They never claim to be writing one of many religious documents. The prophets stated, time and again, "Thus says the LORD . . ." God told Jeremiah, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth" (Jer. 1:8). He told Ezekiel, "You shall speak my words to them" (Ezek. 2:7). This is the pattern of the Old Testament prophets.

The New Testament apostles show an awareness of sharing God's Word, not just their own. Peter, of course, acknowledges that in the passage we just looked at. To the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37). To the Thessalonians, he wrote, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13). Paul knew he was delivering God's Word.

In 2 Peter 1:19-21, quoted above, Peter is affirming verbal plenary inspiration, to use theological terms. That means that all (*plenary*) words of the Bible (*verbal*) are inspired (*inspiration*), or breathed out by God, through the agency of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that God dictated the words of the Bible to the prophets and apostles. Rather, the Holy Spirit worked through these men (who were "carried along") to produce the exact result he desired. God used the personalities and experiences of the biblical authors to produce his perfect Word.

⁴ James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009), 51.

This method of writing God’s Word might seem odd to us, but it is perfectly characteristic of God’s actions throughout history. It testifies to God’s sovereignty in using imperfect human beings as his instruments to achieve his perfect ends.

In order to understand how credible the Bible’s claims are, we should contrast the origin of the Bible with two other sacred books, *The Book of Mormon* and the Qur’an. When viewed in this light, the strength of the Bible stands out.

Mormonism, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, was founded by Joseph Smith (1805-1844). *The Book of Mormon*, one of the chief spiritual books of Mormonism, was published in 1830. Smith purportedly received a visit from the angel Moroni in upstate New York in 1823. The angel told him the location of some buried golden plates. Between 1827 and 1829, Smith “translated” the “reformed Egyptian” hieroglyphics on the plates by using a “seer stone.”⁵ Smith would look at the seer stone, placed at the bottom of a stovepipe hat (in order to block out any light), to “translate” the contents of the golden plates. He dictated what he saw to his disciple, Oliver Cowdery, who sat on the opposite side of a curtain from Smith. Shortly before *The Book of Mormon* was completed, Smith claims that John the Baptist appeared in person. Smith wrote of this event in *The Pearl of Great Price*:

68 We still continued the work of translation, when, in the ensuing month (May, 1829), we on a certain day went into the woods to pray and inquire of the Lord respecting baptism for the remission of sins, that we found mentioned in the translation of the plates. While we were thus employed, praying and calling upon the Lord, a messenger from heaven descended in a cloud of light, and having laid his hands upon us, he ordained us, saying:

69 *Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah, I confer the Priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; and this shall never be taken again from the earth until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness.*

70 He said this Aaronic Priesthood had not the power of laying on hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, but that this should be conferred on us hereafter; and he commanded us to go and be baptized, and gave us directions that I should baptize Oliver Cowdery, and that afterwards he should baptize me.

71 Accordingly we went and were baptized. I baptized him first, and afterwards he baptized me—after which I laid my hands upon his head and ordained him to the Aaronic Priesthood, and afterwards he laid his hands on me and ordained me to the same Priesthood—for so we were commanded.

⁵ It should be noted that Smith used seer stones to attempt to locate treasure. He had a reputation for being involved in magic and treasure hunting. See Richard Abanes, *One Nation Under Gods* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), particularly chapter 2, “Moroni, Magic, and Masonry.”

72 The messenger who visited us on this occasion and conferred this Priesthood upon us, said that his name was John, the same that is called John the Baptist in the New Testament, and that he acted under the direction of Peter, James and John, who held the keys of the Priesthood of Melchizedek, which Priesthood, he said, would in due time be conferred on us, and that I should be called the first Elder of the Church, and he (Oliver Cowdery) the second. It was on the fifteenth day of May, 1829, that we were ordained under the hand of this messenger, and baptized.

73 Immediately on our coming up out of the water after we had been baptized, we experienced great and glorious blessings from our Heavenly Father. No sooner had I baptized Oliver Cowdery, than the Holy Ghost fell upon him, and he stood up and prophesied many things which should shortly come to pass. And again, so soon as I had been baptized by him, I also had the spirit of prophecy, when, standing up, I prophesied concerning the rise of this Church, and many other things connected with the Church, and this generation of the children of men. We were filled with the Holy Ghost, and rejoiced in the God of our salvation.⁶

This story is extraordinary for many reasons, of course. I will point out only a few problems with Smith's story, though there are many, many more. The first problem is that in the 1851 edition of *The Pearl of Great Price*, Smith said that it was Nephi, not Moroni, who appeared to him. This "error" was "corrected" in subsequent editions. However, handwritten manuscripts from 1842 also state that it was Nephi, not Moroni, who appeared to Smith.⁷ This, I suppose, could be written off as a copyist's error—a slip of the mind or a slip of the pen.

The second problem is far more serious. Just a few verses before the above-quoted passage from *The Pearl of Great Price*, Smith writes:

63 Sometime in this month of February, the aforementioned Mr. Martin Harris came to our place, got the characters which I had drawn off the plates, and started with them to the city of New York. For what took place relative to him and the characters, I refer to his own account of the circumstances, as he related them to me after his return, which was as follows:

64 "I went to the city of New York, and presented the characters which had been translated, with the translation thereof, to Professor Charles Anthon, a gentleman celebrated for his literary attainments. Professor Anthon stated that the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian. I then showed him those which were not yet translated, and he said that they were Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic; and he said they were true characters. He gave me a certificate, certifying to the people of Palmyra that they were true

⁶ "Joseph Smith—History 1:68-73" in *The Pearl of Great Price*.

⁷ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, gen. ed. Ravi Zacharias, managing ed. Jill Martin Rische and Kevin Rische (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), 200-01.

characters, and that the translation of such of them as had been translated was also correct. I took the certificate and put it into my pocket, and was just leaving the house, when Mr. Anthon called me back, and asked me how the young man found out that there were gold plates in the place where he found them. I answered that an angel of God had revealed it unto him.

65 “He then said to me, ‘Let me see that certificate.’ I accordingly took it out of my pocket and gave it to him, when he took it and tore it to pieces, saying that there was no such thing now as ministering of angels, and that if I would bring the plates to him he would translate them. I informed him that part of the plates were sealed, and that I was forbidden to bring them. He replied, ‘I cannot read a sealed book.’ I left him and went to Dr. Mitchell, who sanctioned what Professor Anthon had said respecting both the characters and the translation.”

Smith reports that Martin Harris took a sample of the “reformed Egyptian” writing on the golden plates and brought it to Charles Anthon, a professor at Columbia University, who then affirmed the authenticity of the writing and the translation Smith had made. The only dispute came when Anthon denied that angels could have brought such a document to Smith.

All of the above sounds possible, except for one problem. Anthon never approved of the writings and the translation that were shown to him. E. D. Howe learned of Smith’s claim and wrote a letter to Anthon about it. Anthon wrote a letter back to Howe, dated February 17, 1834. In the letter, Anthon stated that the story was “perfectly false.” He wrote, “Upon examining the paper in question, I soon came to the conclusion that it was all a trick, perhaps a *hoax*.” He then described the writing on the paper as a jumble of Greek and Hebrew, as well as Roman letters inverted or placed sideways, arranged in columns. He wrote, “[I] well remember that the paper contained anything else but ‘Egyptian Hieroglyphics’.”⁸

As if that were not enough, *The Book of Mormon* has other problems. It has long passages copied out of the King James Bible and though it claims to recall the history of people living in the Americas between 600 BC and AD 421, archaeologists have not located any of these places and have no evidence of these peoples. Other details in *The Book of Mormon* do not agree with archaeological evidence. Thomas Stuart Ferguson, a professor at Brigham Young University, was given the task of finding archaeological evidence for *The Book of Mormon*. “After twenty-five years of dedicated archaeological research, Ferguson found nothing to back up the book and, in fact, he called the geography of *The Book of Mormon* ‘fictional.’”⁹

Let us compare that story to the story of the prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an. Muhammad was born in Mecca about AD 570. In 610, he supposedly began to receive a series of revelations from the angel Gabriel. Winfried Corduan describes this revelation:

⁸ E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painsville, OH: n.p., 1834), 270-72; quoted in Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 212-13.

⁹ Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 216.

The unique twists of Muhammad's spiritual experience began in A.D. 610, while he was meditating in a cave located on what is now called the Mount of Light, overlooking the plain of Arafat outside Mecca. As Muhammad fell into a trance, trembling and sweating, the angel of Gabriel spoke to him. "Recite!" the angel proclaimed to him. At this moment the brooding, introspective merchant turned into the stern prophet who refused to compromise his convictions and suffered for his steadfastness.¹⁰

The Qur'an consists of a number of revelations allegedly given to Muhammad from Gabriel between 610 and 632, the year Muhammad died. There are 114 revelations in the Qur'an, each written down in a *sura*, or chapter. Muhammad did not write down his revelations, but after his death, they were collected into one book. He would recite these revelations to those present in the community (Qur'an means "reading" or "reciting"). His followers memorized these portions of the Qur'an, and some of them wrote the revelations down.

The second Caliph (successor to Muhammad), Umar ibn Kattab, ordered Zayd ibn Thabit, one of Muhammad's secretaries, to compile these writings into the Qur'an. Later, in 651, the third Caliph, Uthman ibn Affan, noticed something problematic for the early Muslim community. Several Muslim communities were using versions of the Qur'an that varied in their readings. He was concerned that this might lead to doctrinal confusion. Therefore, he requested that an official copy of the Qur'an be made and that all other copies be burned.¹¹

The creation of the Qur'an is radically different from the origin of the Bible. Corduan explains: "The Qur'an is essentially the product of one man. Its content spans a little more than twenty years within a single cultural context. By contrast, the Bible spans about fifteen hundred years in several different languages and highly divergent cultures."¹² The approximately forty human authors of the Bible wrote its books in different places at different times. The New Testament, in particular, has multiple authors, writing from multiple locations, to multiple locations, at multiple times. James White calls this "multifocality."¹³

Obviously, the origin of the Bible is quite different from the origin of *The Book of Mormon* and the Qur'an. It was not delivered to one man. No group of conspiratorial men edited the Bible and burned all previous copies. The early Christian church was too busy growing rapidly and avoiding persecution to have the means to create a document in a centralized manner. According to James White,

Many people believe the ancient church somehow "controlled" the text of Scripture, so that if an ancient leader or group wanted to "delete" a belief they no longer held, they could do so. *This is manifestly not the case.* Never was there a time when any man, group of men, or church "controlled" the scriptural text. Even if a group had decided to alter it, they could never gather up all the copies

¹⁰ Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1998), 79.

¹¹ Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 93.

¹² Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 108.

¹³ White, *The King James Only Controversy*, 82.

already in existence; the means of travel would preclude such an attempt even if one was launched, for distribution of the copies would far exceed anyone's ability to recover them all.

The Council of Nicaea (AD 325) discussed many important issues, but they did not decide which books should be included in the Bible. The composition of the Bible was divinely superintended, not fabricated by one man or group of men, the way the facts suggest *The Book of Mormon* and the Qur'an were created.

WHY ARE THERE SIXTY-SIX BOOKS IN THE BIBLE? WHY SOME BOOKS AND NOT OTHERS?

Now we get to the question of canon, the list of books of the Bible. The word canon is derived from a Greek word, *kanōn*, which means "rule" or "standard." The Greek word itself is derived from a Semitic root, the Hebrew form of which is *qāneh*, which means "reed." (In the ancient world, reeds were sometimes used as measuring sticks.) The canon is simply a list of books that comprise the Bible, which is our standard, the tool with which we measure what is true and what is not.

The Bible has thirty-nine Old Testament books and twenty-seven New Testament books, sixty-six books in all. Why are these books included in the Bible and not others? Are there books in the Bible that really are not God's Word? Are there books not in the Bible that could be God's Word? Who decided what is in the Bible?

Before we can answer these questions, we need to know something of how the canon was formed. Let us begin with the Old Testament.

Composition of the Old Testament

The Old Testament was formed over a long period of time, from the time of the exodus (most likely 1446 BC) to the last prophetic writings (Malachi, sometime in the fifth century BC¹⁴) to the last of the writings (it would appear that 1-2 Chronicles was written last, perhaps around 350 BC¹⁵). It seems that the earliest writings of the Bible were the Ten Commandments, written by God himself (Exod. 31:18; 32:16; Deut. 4:13; 10:4). We also know that Moses wrote Scripture. Toward the end of Deuteronomy, we read these words:

²⁴ When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, ²⁵ Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, ²⁶ "Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you. (Deut. 31:24-26)

In that context, the Book of the Law is Deuteronomy itself. But there are other passages that suggest that Moses wrote the first four books of the Bible (Exod. 17:14; 24:4; 34:27; Num. 33:2;

¹⁴ Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 205-207.

¹⁵ J. A. Thompson, *1, 2 Chronicles*, The New American Commentary, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 32.

Deut. 31:22). In the New Testament, the first five books of the Bible are referred to as “Moses” (Luke 24:27; John 5:46-47) or the “Law of Moses” (Luke 24:44). Most evangelical scholars believe that the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) were written by Moses, with some details written later by others (such as some updated place names and, of course, Moses’s death).

After Moses died, Joshua assumed leadership of Israel and led them into Canaan. At the end of the book of Joshua, there is a covenant renewal ceremony. The people of Israel agreed to worship God alone and obey his voice. Of this ceremony, we read, “So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Schechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God” (Josh. 24:25-26a). Joshua thus added to the writings of Israel.

Wayne Grudem makes an interesting observation regarding Joshua and his writing. He observes that in Deuteronomy, God tells the people (through Moses) not to add to or subtract from the words he gave them (Deut. 4:2; 12:32). Joshua would seem to be ignoring that commandment. “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.”¹⁶ In other words, Joshua must have been aware that he was writing Scripture.

Many other passages throughout the rest of the Old Testament show prophets and kings writing. Sometimes, things were written in historical records—both “the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel” and “the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah” are mentioned throughout 1 and 2 Kings. Other times, prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah wrote down God’s words (Isa. 30:8; Jer. 29:1; 30:2; 36:1-32; 51:60; Ezek. 43:11; Dan. 7:1; Hab. 2:2.)

Content of the Old Testament

The Hebrew Bible consists of twenty-two books grouped in three sections: the Law (*Torah*), the Prophets (*Nebi'im*), and the Writings (*Kethubim*). Sometimes the Old Testament is referred to as the Tanak (an acronym combining the beginning letters of the Hebrew words for the three sections of the Old Testament Scriptures). You will notice that there are twenty-two or twenty-four books in the Hebrew Bible, and not thirty-nine. However, the content is the same. Judges-Ruth were sometimes considered one book, as were Jeremiah-Lamentations. The following were considered individual books: 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the twelve “minor” prophets, also known as the Book of the Twelve. (In order to compare the contents of the Hebrew Bible to the Protestant and Roman Catholic Old Testaments, see the table below.)

How do we know that these are the thirty-nine (or twenty-two or twenty-four) books of the Old Testament? There are several lines of evidence that these books—and no others—form the canon of the Old Testament. There is the internal evidence of God’s people writing down God’s words, as mentioned above. There is also evidence from the Septuagint, historians such as Philo and Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the New Testament.

¹⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 55.

BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT			
Hebrew Bible (Josephus's list)	Modern Hebrew Bible	Protestant OT	Roman Catholic OT
Law Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy Prophets <i>Former Prophets</i> Joshua Judges-Ruth Samuel Kings <i>Latter Prophets</i> Isaiah Jeremiah-Lamentations Ezekiel Book of the Twelve (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi) Writings Psalms Job Proverbs Song of Songs Ecclesiastes Esther Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah Chronicles	Law Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy Prophets <i>Former Prophets</i> Joshua Judges Samuel Kings <i>Latter Prophets</i> Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel Book of the Twelve (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi) Writings Psalms Job Proverbs Ruth Song of Songs Ecclesiastes Lamentations Esther Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah Chronicles	Law Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy Historical Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther Poetry Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs Prophets Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy 1-2 Kings (1-2 Samuel) 3-4 Kings (1-2 Kings) 1-2 Paralipomenon (1-2 Chronicles) 1 Esdras (Ezra) 2 Esdras (Nehemiah) Tobit Judith Esther [with six additions] 1-2 Maccabees Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Canticle of Canticles (Song of Songs) Wisdom of Solomon Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Baruch [Chap. 6 = Epistle of Jeremiah] Ezekiel Daniel [with three additions] Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi

The Septuagint. The Old Testament was translated from Hebrew and Aramaic¹⁷ to Greek sometime between about 250-100 BC. (Many Jews had spread out from Palestine throughout the

¹⁷ Nearly all of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; and Daniel 2:46-7:28 were written in Aramaic. A few other words appear in Aramaic in the Bible.

Mediterranean and Greek had become the *lingua franca* after Alexander the Great's conquests in the fourth century BC.) *Septuagint* means "seventy" (sometimes spelled with Roman numerals: LXX). The name comes from a legendary tale that claims that seventy-two scholars separately translated the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) into Greek and came up with the exact same translation. After the Torah was translated, the rest of the Old Testament was translated into Greek, as well as the Apocrypha. The order of the Old Testament books in the Protestant Bible was derived from the Septuagint.

The Apocrypha. The Apocrypha are those books that appear in the Roman Catholic Old Testament, but not in the Hebrew or Protestant Bibles. These books were written between 300 BC and AD 100. Catholics call these books deuterocanonical, meaning they belong to a later or second canon. The Roman Catholic Church did not formally adopt these books as Scripture until The Council of Trent in 1546. These books are not quoted by any of the New Testament authors, nor are they affirmed as Scripture by Philo, Josephus, and the Church Fathers, as we shall see.

These books contain historical, geographical, and theological inaccuracies and contradictions.¹⁸ Errors include praying for the dead in 2 Maccabees 12:38-45; a post-death visit from Jeremiah in 2 Maccabees 15:13-16; the author of Judith claiming Nebuchadnezzar was king of the Assyrians¹⁹; and claims that kindness to parents and almsgiving atone for sins²⁰. The Catholic Church adopted the Apocrypha in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. As Grudem observes, "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."²¹ The pseudonymous titles could be considered errors, too: Baruch, the Epistle of Jeremiah, the Prayer of Manasseh, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Esdras (a Greek spelling of Ezra) were written much later than the time of their namesakes.

Interestingly, the Apocrypha never claims to be inspired literature. In fact, 1 Maccabees, written in the latter part of the second century BC, acknowledges that the time of the prophets had ceased.²² The author of 2 Maccabees ends his story with the following words, which show that he was claiming to write (possibly fallible) history, not Scripture: "If it is well told and to the point, that is what I myself desired; if it is poorly done and mediocre, that was the best I could do."²³

Nevertheless, the Apocrypha does acknowledge the three parts of the Hebrew Bible. The prologue to Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach) mentions the Law, the Prophets (or Prophecies), and "the others" or "the rest of the books." Therefore, the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible were well

¹⁸ A table of chronological, theological, geographical, and logical errors (contradictions) in the Apocrypha appears in Paul Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 125.

¹⁹ Judith 1:1 states, "It was the twelfth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh."

²⁰ Sirach 3:3 states, "Those who honor their father atone for sins." Sirach 3.30 claims, "As water extinguishes a blazing fire, so almsgiving atones for sin."

²¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 59.

²² 1 Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 14:41.

²³ 2 Maccabees 15:38 (NRSV). It could also be translated, "I also will here make an end of my narration. Which if I have done well, and as it becometh the history, it is what I desired: but if not so perfectly, it must be pardoned me." White, *Scripture Alone*, 113.

known in the second century BC, when Ecclesiasticus was written. Also, the book known as 2 Esdras (and sometimes referred to as 4 Esdras) tells a fictional account of Ezra rewriting the books of Scripture after they had been destroyed, probably when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. According to the story, God told Ezra, “Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first, and let the worthy read them” (2 Esdras 14:45). Those twenty-four books are the same twenty-four in the current Hebrew Bible (see the table above).

In addition to the Apocrypha, there are other books called pseudepigrapha. Books such as the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Assumption of Moses, and 1 and 2 Enoch were not written by the biblical people whose names they bear. They were written many, many years later. Most of them are apocalyptic works written in the first century BC or AD. These books are fantastical and are obviously not Scripture.

OLD TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA	
Protestant Names	Traditional Roman Catholic Names (and category of literature)
Tobit	Tobias (Legendary)
Judith	Judith (Legendary)
Wisdom of Solomon	Wisdom (Ethical/Devotional)
Ecclesiasticus/Sirach	Ecclesiasticus (Ethical/Devotional)
1 Maccabees	1 Machabees (Historical)
2 Maccabees	2 Machabees (Historical)
Baruch	Baruch 1-5 (Prophetic)
Epistle of Jeremiah	Baruch 6 (Prophetic)
Additions to Esther	Esther 10:4-16:24 (Legendary)
Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Young Men	Daniel 3:24-90 (Legendary)
Susanna	Daniel 13 (Legendary)
Bel and the Dragon	Daniel 14 (Legendary)
1 Esdras	3 Esdras (Historical)
2 Esdras	4 Esdras (Apocalyptic)
Prayer of Manasseh	Prayer of Manasseh (Ethical/Devotional)

Philo of Alexandria. Another witness to the Old Testament canon is Philo (c. 20 BC-AD 50), a Jew who lived in Alexandria. Philo quoted from all the books of the Pentateuch, most of the books of the Prophets, and many books of the Writings. He never quoted a book of the Apocrypha.

Josephus. Flavius Josephus (c. AD 37-100) was a Jewish historian who has given us great insight into first century Judaism. In his book *Contra Apion*, he indicates that the Hebrew Bible had twenty-two books. He writes, “For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another [as the Greeks have], but only twenty-

two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death.”²⁴ He then speaks of the prophets and the remaining books, which contain “hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life.”²⁵ He acknowledges that there were books written after the time of Artaxerxes of Persia, who died in 424 BC, but these books have “not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time.”²⁶

Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1947, one of the great archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century was made when a lost shepherd boy looking for a goat in some caves in Judea stumbled upon the Dead Sea Scrolls. The story is that he was throwing some rocks into the caves to see if the goat would come running, but instead he heard the sound of pottery breaking. He found that the broken pottery contained manuscripts. Eventually, eleven caves in the vicinity of Qumran were discovered to contain manuscripts of all the Old Testament books but Nehemiah and Esther. The dates of these manuscripts range from 250 BC to 50 AD.²⁷

New Testament. Perhaps the most authoritative witness to the Old Testament canon is the New 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.”²⁸ Jesus quotes from all three of the divisions of the Hebrew Bible.²⁹ Jesus also refers to those three divisions of the Old Testament at the end of Luke’s Gospel: “Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled’” (Luke 24:44).

Another significant passage from the Gospels concerns the scope of the Old Testament canon. While rebuking the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus said, “Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar” (Matt. 23:34-35; also Luke 11:49-51). Abel was the first man killed in the Hebrew canon and Zechariah was the last (2 Chron. 24:20-22) man killed in the Hebrew canon. (We must remember that Chronicles was the last book in the Hebrew Bible.) Zechariah was not the last one killed in the history of the Old Testament era (that would probably be Uriah son of Shemaiah, described in Jer. 26:20-23), but his was the last murder written about in the Old Testament canon. Therefore, Jesus’ comment served as an “A to Z” of martyrs, covering the entire scope of the Hebrew Bible.

²⁴ Josephus, *Contra Apion* 1.38-39, in William Whiston, trans., *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.41.

²⁷ Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations*, 186-87.

²⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 57. Grudem references Roger Nicole, “New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (London: Tyndale Press, 1959, 137-41).

²⁹ Wegner has a convenient table of Jesus’ Old Testament quotations in *The Journey from Texts to Translations*, 110.

Significantly, neither Jesus nor the New Testament authors quote from the Apocrypha. When they do quote non-biblical sources, they do not refer to them as Scripture. Paul quotes Greek poets in Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12 and Jude quotes the pseudepigraphical book 1 Enoch in Jude 14-15, yet neither give the impression that they are quoting inspired sources.

Other sources. There are several other witnesses to the Old Testament canon, including Church Fathers such as Origen (c. 185-253) and Athanasius (c. 296-373), who both mention twenty-two books of the Old Testament. Another witness is Jerome (c. 347-420), who translated the Bible into Latin. His version is known as the Latin Vulgate and it was the dominant translation of the Bible for over one thousand years. He recognized that the twenty-two books (our thirty-nine) of the Old Testament were inspired Scripture. He was the first to call the non-canonical books apocryphal. Yet the Apocrypha was included in the Vulgate, though separated from the rest of the Old Testament. In 1546, the Roman Catholic Church declared the Vulgate to be their official Bible. Therefore, Catholics accept the Apocrypha as sacred Scripture, though they label it deuterocanonical.

Criteria for the Old Testament canon

The canon of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, was not determined by men. God decided the content of the Bible. We can say that men discovered the canon, but they certainly did not decide it. That distinction is significant. From what we can tell, it seems that God inspired prophets and other men of God to write down certain words, formed into books, which others recognized were inspired. At a certain point in history, it became apparent that the prophetic word had ceased. (See the comments made by Josephus and the author of 1 Maccabees, which are written above.) Eventually, it became apparent that the Old Testament consisted of certain books, and not others.

If there were specific criteria for determining (from the human perspective) the Old Testament canon, we are given certain clues by Josephus's words in *Contra Apion*, some of which appear above. It appears that there were some general criteria for any given book of the Old Testament, which we can summarize here:

1. It does not contain contradictions.
2. It was written by a prophet or someone recognized as having divine authority.
3. It originated through inspiration from God.
4. It was accepted by the Jews as authoritative material.³⁰

Composition of the New Testament

We know a bit more about how the New Testament was written because we have greater details about New Testament history and because many of the books in the New Testament are letters, which give us clues as to where the letters were written and what purpose the authors had in writing them.

The New Testament gives us four accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We call these Gospels. Two of the Gospels were written by members of the original group of

³⁰ Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations*, 117.

disciples (Matthew and John), and the other two Gospels were written by men who had close connections to apostles. Mark knew Peter (see 1 Pet. 5:13) and Luke knew Paul (Col. 4:14 and the “we” sections of Acts). It makes perfect sense that we have multiple books that focus on Jesus. It also makes sense that we should have documents that report the inauguration of the new covenant, just as we have books in the Old Testament that report the inauguration of the old covenant. (The word *testament* is equivalent to *covenant*.)

It also makes sense that we have a history of the early church, which we read in Acts. Acts is something of a sequel to Luke’s Gospel, as Luke traces what the resurrected and ascended Jesus did by the Holy Spirit through the apostles.

Then we have many letters which interpret and apply the gospel to the church. Paul’s thirteen letters (Romans through Philemon) appear, more or less, in order from the longest letter to the shortest). Paul often wrote to churches with a particular purpose in mind. In Romans, he was writing to Jews and Gentiles who were both one in Christ. The Corinthians had many moral problems as well as problems in worship. The Galatians were forgetting the gospel and being tempted to follow Judaizers, those who insisted on circumcision and other Jewish rites. He wrote to the Philippians to thank them for their support and to encourage them. He corrected various theological errors in Thessalonica. He helped equip Timothy and Titus for ministry. And he wrote to Philemon to encourage him to set his slave, Onesimus, free.

The next letters are sometimes called the catholic or general epistles. (Catholic can mean universal), since they tend to apply to all Christians and are not written to such specific situations as Paul’s letters. These letters (Hebrews through Jude) appear, more or less, in descending order of length.

The canon of the New Testament—and the entire Bible—is capped off by Revelation, which presents a perfect summary of the many important themes of the Bible and also tells of how the story will end. (I recently heard another pastor say the whole plot of the Bible can be summarized, “Kill the dragon, get the girl.” That is, Satan is defeated, and Christ comes for his bride.)

The canon of the New Testament was completed by the first century AD. It took some time for the church to recognize all twenty-seven books (and no others), but the canon was closed when John completed Revelation.

It must be stressed, once again, that the church did not create a canon. The various apostles and other writers of the New Testament did not get together to decide what they were going to write. There was no one man (like Joseph Smith or Muhammad) or institution or organization that censored the list of approved books. In fact, if we look closely at the New Testament, we see that some of the apostles had disputes. (Paul confronted Peter, according to Gal. 2:11-14; Acts 15:36-40 tells us that Paul and John Mark had a “sharp disagreement.”) The Holy Spirit inspired certain imperfect men to write Scripture at various times, in various places, and to various locations. This multiplicity of authors, dates, and locations is what James White refers to as “multifocality.” When one considers the way the New Testament was written as well

as the consistent message of its books, one can only conclude that God was writing his Word through men carried along by the Holy Spirit.

To see the “multifocality” of the New Testament, see the table below.³¹

BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT				
Book	Author	Date	Origin	Destination
Matthew	Matthew	Mid-50s – 60s	Jerusalem? Antioch?	Jerusalem? Antioch?
Mark	Mark	Mid-50s – early 60s	Rome?	Gentiles in Roman Empire
Luke	Luke	Mid-50s – early 60s	Unknown	Unknown (Gentiles)
John	John	Mid-80s – early 90s	Likely Ephesus	Around Ephesus?
Acts	Luke	Early 60s	Rome	Gentile Christians
Romans	Paul	Mid-50s	Likely Corinth	Rome
1 Corinthians	Paul	53-54	Ephesus	Corinth
2 Corinthians	Paul	54-55	Macedonia (Philippi?)	Corinth
Galatians	Paul	48-49	Antioch or Jerusalem	South Galatia
Ephesians	Paul	c. 60	Rome	Ephesus
Philippians	Paul	c. 59	Rome	Philippi
Colossians	Paul	c. 60	Rome	Colossae
1 Thessalonians	Paul	50	Corinth	Thessalonica
2 Thessalonians	Paul	50	Corinth	Thessalonica
1 Timothy	Paul	Early to mid-60s	Macedonia	Ephesus
2 Timothy	Paul	Early to mid-60s	Rome	Ephesus
Titus	Paul	Early to mid-60s	Unknown	Crete
Philemon	Paul	c. 60	Rome	Philemon (in Colossae)
Hebrews	Unknown	Mid-60s	Unknown	Rome?
James	James	Mid- to late 40s	Jerusalem	Jewish Christian Diaspora
1 Peter	Peter	c. 62-63	Rome	Northern Asia Minor
2 Peter	Peter	65	Rome	Northern Asia Minor
1 John	John	c. 90-95	Asia Minor	Churches around Ephesus
2 John	John	c. 90-95	Asia Minor	Churches around Ephesus
3 John	John	c. 90-95	Asia Minor	Churches around Ephesus
Jude	Jude	c. 55-62	Unknown	Unknown
Revelation	John	95-96	Patmos	Asia Minor

As this table shows, the New Testament was written by nine men over approximately fifty years, in and to various locations within the Roman Empire.

Content of the New Testament³²

The issue of canon is of the utmost importance. If there were God-inspired books not in the Bible, our knowledge of God would be incomplete. If there were books in the Bible that are not inspired by God, our knowledge of God might be corrupted. Therefore, we will want to be

³¹ The information contained in this table comes from Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009). Other New Testament introductions and commentaries may provide slightly different dates or may discuss other places of origin or possible destinations. Even if we used those other dates and times, the “multifocality” of the New Testament would still be apparent.

³² This section is largely indebted to Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations*, 141-44.

sure that God authored the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and we will want to be sure that there are no other “lost” Gospels or epistles.

Generally, evidence points to the fact that the four Gospels and Paul’s letters were circulated by the end of the first century as a sort of proto-canon. Throughout the second and third centuries, there was some small debate as to which other books belong to the canon, though on the whole there was great consensus. By the end of the fourth century, Athanasius confirmed the New Testament canon when he listed the twenty-seven books of the New Testament in his thirty-ninth Paschal (or Festal) Letter in 367.

To gain confidence in the contents of the New Testament canon, we shall look at the many historical witnesses.

Clement of Rome. Clement (c. 60-100) served as bishop of Rome and may be mentioned in Philippians 4:3. He made very loose quotations from Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Titus, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and possibly Acts. (It should be noted that it was common in this era to make inexact or paraphrased quotations.)

Ignatius. Ignatius (c. 60-117) served as the bishop of Antioch. He alludes to Matthew, Luke, John, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and 1 and 2 Timothy.

Polycarp. Polycarp (c. 69-155) was a disciple of the apostle John and a bishop of Smyrna who was martyred for his faith. He mentioned sixteen of the New Testament books in his writings.

Justin Martyr. It is clear that Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) was aware of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and 1 Peter. Like the others, he may have known more of the New Testament books, but simply did not refer to them.

Marcion. Marcion (c. 85-160) was labeled a heretic for rejecting the Old Testament and any New Testament writings that strongly reflected Judaism. He drew up his own canon that included Luke and ten of Paul’s letters (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon). Tertullian wrote the following regarding Valentinus (a Gnostic theologian) and Marcion:

One man perverts the Scriptures with his hand, another their meaning by his exposition. For although Valentinus seems to use the entire volume, he has none the less laid violent hands on the truth only with a more cunning mind and skill than Marcion. Marcion expressly and openly used the knife, not the pen, since he made such an excision of the Scriptures as suited his own subject-matter.³³

Irenaeus. Another important witness to the New Testament canon is Irenaeus (c. 130-202), who was bishop of Lyon. He was educated by Polycarp and spent time in Rome. In his writings, he identifies the following books: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2

³³ Tertullian, "The Prescription Against Heretics" 38, trans. Peter Holmes In , in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume III: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 262.

Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1 and 2 John, (possibly Jude), and Revelation. He does not mention Philemon, 3 John, and (possibly) Jude. He also lists a non-canonical works, *Shepherd of Hermas*.

Irenaeus affirmed that there were only four Gospels. His argumentation is interesting, but he was surely correct, and his writings confirm that the four Gospels were circulated together in a codex (an early type of book in which sheets of papyrus were bound together).

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 that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh. From which fact, it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sitteth upon the cherubim, and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit.³⁴

The Muratorian Canon. In the eighteenth century, Cardinal Ludovico Antonio Muratori discovered an eighth-century manuscript of an early list of New Testament books. The list was originally written sometime at the end of the second century. The list contains the following books: Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 1 and 2 John, Jude, Revelation, Wisdom of Solomon, and *Apocalypse of Peter*. The fragment that Muratori discovered is incomplete. The list most likely started with Matthew and Mark. Therefore, only Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John are missing, and only two non-canonical books are added. The author of the list made it clear that *Shepherd of Hermas* is *not* canonical.

Clement of Alexandria. The first known Christian scholar, Clement (c. 155-220) wrote commentaries on all the canonical Scriptures and on some disputed books, as well. In his surviving writings, he mentions all the New Testament books but Philemon, James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. He includes non-canonical books, too: *Didache*, the *Epistle to Barnabas*, *1 Clement*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and possibly the *Acts of Peter* and the *Acts of Paul*. He also made it the four traditional Gospels from other so-called “Gospels.”

Tertullian. We have already mentioned Tertullian (c. 160-220), of Carthage. He quoted from most of the New Testament books. The only books he did not mention were Philemon, 2 Peter, and 3 John. He also quoted from Wisdom of Solomon and *Shepherd of Hermas*.

³⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, "Irenaeus Against Heresies" 3.11.8, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 428.

Hyppolytus. One of Irenaeus's students, Hyppolytus (c. 170-235), also quotes from most of the New Testament books. He quotes all but Philemon and 3 John. He apparently believed that the *Acts of Paul* were authoritative.

Origen. Another important Church Father, Origen (c. 185-253) made a list of New Testament books around 230. He listed universally accepted books: the four Gospels, Acts, Paul's thirteen epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. He then listed books that some disputed: Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, and Jude. (It should be noted that he accepted all of those books though he questioned 2 and 3 John.) He then listed non-canonical books: the *Didache*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, and possibly *1 Clement* and the *Acts of Paul*.

Eusebius. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 265-339) is known as the "Father of Church History" for his lengthy *Ecclesiastical History*. Like Origen, he made a list of the books of Scripture, placing various books in three categories: accepted, disputed but recognized, and rejected.

1 Since we are dealing with this subject it is proper to sum up the writings of the New Testament which have been already mentioned. First then must be put the holy quaternion of the Gospels; following them the Acts of the Apostles.

2 After this must be reckoned the epistles of Paul; next in order the extant former epistle of John, and likewise the epistle of Peter, must be maintained. After them is to be placed, if it really seem proper, the Apocalypse of John [Revelation], concerning which we shall give the different opinions at the proper time. These then belong among the accepted writings.

3 Among the disputed writings, which are nevertheless recognized by many, are extant the so-called epistle of James and that of Jude, also the second epistle of Peter, and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist or to another person of the same name.

4 Among the rejected writings must be reckoned also the Acts of Paul, and the so-called Shepherd, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to these the extant epistle of Barnabas, and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles; and besides, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject, but which others class with the accepted books.³⁵

Athanasius. Finally, we come to Athanasius (c. 296-373), the bishop of Alexandria, who was the first to include all twenty-seven New Testament books in his list, which he wrote to his parishioners in 367. Athanasius was simply listing those books which were universally accepted as part of the New Testament canon. He was not defining the canon himself.

Church Councils. The Council of Hippo (North Africa) of 393 confirmed that the canon of the New Testament contained the twenty-seven books. The Synod of Carthage (North Africa) of 397 also confirmed the canon as well.

³⁵ Eusebius of Caesaria, "The Church History of Eusebius" 3.25, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Volume I: Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 155-56.

Reasons for the New Testament canon

Before we look at the criteria, we should make an observation. The early church did not rush to list the canon of the New Testament. They were too busy evangelizing, growing, and avoiding persecution. But a few factors spurred on the church's confirmation of the canon:

1. The prophetic nature of the New Testament books, which spoke God's Word to the people.
2. The church's need for authoritative Scripture that could be read in local churches.
3. Heretical challenges, which became prominent in the second century.
4. Missionary outreach. In the second century, the Bible was being translated into Syriac and Latin so that the gospel could go forth. Determining the canon was important so that all the books of Scripture could be translated.
5. Persecution. The Roman emperor Diocletian declared in 303 that all sacred books of Christians be burned. It was necessary for Christians to choose which books were part of the canon so that they could be preserved.³⁶

Criteria for the New Testament canon

As can be seen from the list of witnesses above, the New Testament canon was slowly and carefully considered. Eventually, a consensus was reached, but this was not a "top-down" decision. Rather, the canon reflected what the churches viewed as authoritative. According to D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, "Indeed, it is important to observe that although there was no ecclesiastical machinery like the medieval papacy to enforce decisions, nevertheless the worldwide church almost universally came to accept the same twenty-seven books. It was not so much that the church selected the canon as that the canon selected itself."³⁷

Nevertheless, the church needed some broad criteria to help discover which books belonged to the New Testament canon. It seems that there were important criteria:

1. Apostolicity. Was the book written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle?
2. Orthodoxy. Did the book conform to the "rule of faith"? Or did it contradict the rest of the canon?
3. Antiquity. When was the book written? All the New Testament books were written in the first century AD.
4. Ecclesiastical usage. Was the book used widely in the early church?³⁸

³⁶ The list of factors is found in Köstenberger et al., *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 8.

³⁷ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 735.

³⁸ The criteria are listed in Köstenberger et al., *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 9-10.