

## **How We Got The Bible**

John F. MacArthur, Jr.

Ever since Eve encountered Satan's barrage of doubt and denial (Gen. 3:1-7), mankind has continued to question God's Word. Unfortunately, Eve had little or no help in sorting through her intellectual obstacles to full faith in God's self-disclosure (Gen. 2:16,17).

Now the Scripture certainly has more than enough content to be interrogated, considering that it's comprised of 66 books, 1,189 chapters, 31,173 verses, and 774,746 words. When you open your English translation to read or study, you might have asked in the past or are currently asking, "How can I be sure this is the pure and true Word of God?"

A question of this kind is not altogether bad, especially when one seeks to learn with a teachable mind (Acts 17:11). The Scripture invites the kinds of queries that a sincere student asks. A whole host of questions can flood the mind, such as:

- Where did the Bible come from?
- Whose thinking does it reflect?
- Did any books of the Bible get lost in time past?
- What does the Scripture claim for itself?
- Does it live up to its claims?
- Who wrote the Bible--God or man?
- Has Scripture been protected from human tampering over the centuries?
- How close to the original manuscripts are today's translations?
- How did the Bible get to our time and in our language?
- Is there more Scripture to come, beyond the current 66 books?
- Who determined, and on what basis, that the Bible would be composed of the traditional list of 66 books?
- If the Scriptures were written over a period of 1,500 years (ca. 1405 B.C. to A.D. 95), passed down since then for almost 2,000 years, and translated into several thousand languages, what prevented the Bible from being changed by the carelessness or ill motives of men?
- Does today's Bible really deserve the title "The Word of God"?

Undoubtedly, these questions have bombarded the minds of many. A study of the Scriptures alone settles all questions to the extent that there is no need to be bothered by them again. Scripture gives this assurance.

### **Scriptures' Self Claims**

Take the Bible and let it speak for itself. Does it claim to be God's Word? Yes! Over 2,000 times in the Old Testament alone, the Bible asserts that God spoke what is written within its pages. From the beginning (Gen. 1:3) to the end (Mal. 4:3) and continually throughout, this is what Scripture claims.

The phrase "the Word of God" occurs over 40 times in the New Testament. It is equated with the Old Testament (Mark 7:13). It is what Jesus preached (Luke 5:1). It was the message the apostles taught (Acts 4:31; 6:2). It was the Word the Samaritans received (Acts 8:14) as given by the apostles (Acts 8:25). It was the message the Gentiles received as preached by Peter (Acts 11:1). It was the word Paul preached on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:5,7,44,48,49; 15:35,36). It was the message preached on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16:32; 17:13; 18:11). It was the message Paul preached on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10). It was the focus of Luke in the book of Acts in that it spread rapidly and widely (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). Paul was careful to tell the Corinthians that he spoke the Word as it was given from God, that it had not been adulterated, and that it was a manifestation of truth (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2). Paul acknowledged that it was the source of his preaching (Col. 1:25; 1 Thess. 2:13).

Psalms 19 and 119, plus Proverbs 30:5-6, make powerful statements about God's Word which set it apart from any other religious instruction ever known in the history of mankind. These passages make the case for the Bible being called "sacred" (2 Tim. 3:15) and "holy" (Rom. 1:2).

The Bible claims ultimate spiritual authority in doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness because it represents the inspired Word of Almighty God (2 Tim. 3:16,17). Scripture asserts its spiritual sufficiency, so much so that it claims exclusivity for its teaching (cf. Is. 55:11; 2 Pet. 1:3,4).

God's Word declares that it is inerrant (Pss. 12:6; 119:140; Prov. 30:5a; John 10:35) and infallible (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). In other words, it is true and therefore trustworthy. All of these qualities are dependent on the fact that the Scriptures are God-given (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20,21), which guarantees its quality at the Source and at its original writing.

In Scripture, the person of God and the Word of God are everywhere interrelated, so much so that whatever is true about the character of God is true about the nature of God's Word. God is true, impeccable, and reliable; therefore, so is His Word. What a person thinks about God's Word, in reality, reflects what a person thinks about God.

Thus, the Scripture can make these demands on its readers.

So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. Deut. 8:3

I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food. Job 23:12

### **The Publishing Process**

The Bible does not expect its reader to speculate on how these divine qualities were transferred from God to His Word, but rather anticipates the questions with convincing answers. Every generation of skeptics has assailed the self-claims of the Bible, but its own explanations and answers have been more than equal to the challenge. The Bible has gone through God's publishing

process in being given to and distributed among the human race. Its several features are discussed below.

## **Revelation**

God took the initiative to disclose or reveal Himself to mankind (Heb. 1:1). The vehicles varied; sometimes it was through the created order, at other times through visions/dreams or speaking prophets. However, the most complete and understandable self-disclosures were through the propositions of Scripture (1 Cor. 2:6-16). The revealed and written Word of God is unique in that it is the only revelation of God that is complete and that so clearly declares man's sinfulness and God's provision of the Savior.

## **Inspiration**

The revelation of God was captured in the writings of Scripture by means of "inspiration." This has more to do with the process by which God revealed Himself than the fact of His self-revelation. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. . ." (2 Tim. 3:16) makes the claim. Peter explains the process, ". . . knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:20,21). By this means, the Word of God was protected from human error in its original record by the ministry of the Holy Spirit (cf. Deut. 18:18; Matt. 1:22). A section of Zech. 7:12 describes it most clearly, ". . . the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets." This ministry of the Spirit extended to both the part (the words) and to the whole in the original writings.

## **Canonicity**

We must understand that the Bible is actually one book with one Divine Author, though it was written over a period of 1,500 years through the pens of almost 40 human writers. The Bible began with the creation account of Genesis 1,2, written by Moses about 1405 b.c., and extends to the eternity future account of Revelation 21,22, written by the Apostle John about a.d. 95. During this time, God progressively revealed Himself and His purposes in the inspired Scriptures. But this raises a significant question: "How do we know what supposed sacred writings were to be included in the canon of Scripture and which ones were to be excluded?"

Over the centuries, 3 widely recognized principles were used to validate those writings which came as a result of divine revelation and inspiration. First, the writing had to have a recognized prophet or apostle as its author (or one associated with them, as in the case of Mark, Luke, Hebrews, James, and Jude). Second, the writing could not disagree with or contradict previous Scripture. Third, the writing had to have general consensus by the church as an inspired book. Thus, when various councils met in church history to consider the canon, they did not vote for the canonicity of a book but rather recognized, after the fact, what God had already written.

With regard to the Old Testament, by the time of Christ all of the Old Testament had been written and accepted in the Jewish community. The last book, Malachi, had been completed about 430 b.c. Not only does the Old Testament canon of Christ's day conform to the Old Testament which has

since been used throughout the centuries, but it does not contain the uninspired and spurious Apocrypha, that group of 14 rogue writings which were written after Malachi and attached to the Old Testament about 200-150 b.c. in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament called the Septuagint (LXX), appearing to this very day in some versions of the Bible. However, not one passage from the Apocrypha is cited by any New Testament writer, nor did Jesus affirm any of it as He recognized the Old Testament canon of His era (cf. Luke 24:27,44).

By Christ's time, the Old Testament canon had been divided up into two lists of 22 or 24 books respectively, each of which contained all the same material as the 39 books of our modern versions. In the 22 book canon, Jeremiah and Lamentations were considered as one, as were Judges and Ruth. Here is how the 24 book format was divided.

## **The Hebrew Old Testament**

### **Law**

1. Genesis 2. Exodus 3. Leviticus 4. Numbers 5. Deuteronomy

### **Prophets**

A. Former Prophets 6. Joshua 7. Judges 8. Samuel (1 & 2) 9. Kings (1 & 2)

B. Latter Prophets 10. Isaiah 11. Jeremiah 12. Ezekiel 13. The Twelve (minor prophets)

### **Writings**

A. Poetical Books 14. Psalms 15. Proverbs 16. Job

B. Five Rolls (Megilloth) 17. Song of Solomon 18. Ruth 19. Lamentations 20. Ecclesiastes 21. Esther

C. Historical Books 22. Daniel 23. Ezra-Nehemiah 24. Chronicles (1 & 2)

The same 3 key tests of canonicity that applied to the Old Testament also applied to the New Testament. In the case of Mark and Luke/Acts, the authors were considered to be, in effect, the penmen for Peter and Paul respectively. James and Jude were written by Christ's half-brothers. While Hebrews is the only New Testament book whose authorship is unknown for certain, its content is so in line with both the Old Testament and New Testament, that the early church concluded it must have been written by an apostolic associate. The 27 books of the New Testament have been universally accepted since ca. a.d. 350-400 as inspired by God.

### **Preservation**

How can one be sure that the revealed and inspired, written Word of God, which was recognized as canonical by the early church, has been handed down to this day without any loss of material? Furthermore, since one of the Devil's prime concerns is to undermine the Bible, have the Scriptures

survived this destructive onslaught? In the beginning, he denied God's Word to Eve (Gen. 3:4). Satan later attempted to distort the Scripture in his wilderness encounter with Christ (Matt. 4:6,7). Through King Jehoiakim, he even attempted to literally destroy the Word (Jer. 36:23). The battle for the Bible rages, but Scripture has and will continue to outlast its enemies.

God anticipated man's and Satan's malice towards the Scripture with divine promises to preserve His Word. The very continued existence of Scripture is guaranteed in Isaiah 40:8, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (cf. 1 Pet. 1:25). This even means that no inspired Scripture has been lost in the past and still awaits rediscovery.

The actual content of Scripture will be perpetuated, both in heaven (Ps. 119:89) and on earth (Is. 59:21). Thus the purposes of God, as published in the sacred writings, will never be thwarted, even in the least detail (cf. Matt. 5:18; 24:25; Mark 13:3; Luke 16:17).

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. Is. 55:11

## **Transmission**

Since the Bible has frequently been translated into multiple languages and distributed throughout the world, how can we be sure that error has not crept in, even if it was unintentional? As Christianity spread, it is certainly true that people desired to have the Bible in their own language which required translations from the original Hebrew and Aramaic languages of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. Not only did the work of translators provide an opportunity for error, but publication, which was done by hand copying until the printing press arrived ca. a.d. 1450, also afforded continual possibilities of error.

Through the centuries, the practitioners of textual criticism, a precise science, have discovered, preserved, catalogued, evaluated, and published an amazing array of biblical manuscripts from both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, the number of existing biblical manuscripts dramatically outdistances the existing fragments of any other ancient literature. By comparing text with text, the textual critic can confidently determine what the original prophetic/apostolic, inspired writing contained.

Although existing copies of the main, ancient Hebrew text (Masoretic) date back only to the tenth century a.d., two other important lines of textual evidence bolster the confidence of textual critics that they have reclaimed the originals. First, the tenth century a.d. Hebrew Old Testament can be compared to the Greek translation called the Septuagint or LXX (written ca. 200-150 b.c.; the oldest existing manuscripts dates to ca. a.d. 325). There is amazing consistency between the two, which speaks of the accuracy in copying the Hebrew text for centuries. Second, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947-1956 (manuscripts that are dated ca. 200-100 b.c.) proved to be monumentally important. After comparing the earlier Hebrew texts with the later ones, only a few slight variants were discovered, none of which changed the meaning of any passage. Although the Old Testament had been translated and copied for centuries, the latest version was essentially the same as the earlier ones.

The New Testament findings are even more decisive because a much larger amount of material is available for study; there are over 5,000 Greek New Testament manuscripts that range from the whole testament to scraps of papyrus which contain as little as part of one verse. A few existing fragments date back to within 25-50 years of the original writing. New Testament textual scholars have generally concluded that 1) 99.99 percent of the original writings have been reclaimed, and 2) of the remaining one hundredth of one percent, there are no variants substantially affecting any Christian doctrine.

With this wealth of biblical manuscripts in the original languages and with the disciplined activity of textual critics to establish with almost perfect accuracy the content of the autographs, any errors which have been introduced and/or perpetuated by the thousands of translations over the centuries can be identified and corrected by comparing the translation or copy with the reassembled original. By this providential means, God has made good His promise to preserve the Scriptures. We can rest assured that there are translations available today which indeed are worthy of the title, The Word of God.

The history of a full, English translation Bible essentially began with John Wycliffe (ca. a.d. 1330-1384), who made the first English translation of the whole Bible. Later, William Tyndale was associated with the first complete, printed New Testament in English, ca. a.d. 1526. Miles Coverdale followed in a.d. 1535, by delivering the first complete Bible printed in English. By a.d. 1611, the King James Version (KJV) had been completed. Since then, hundreds of translations have been made--some better, some worse. Today, the better English translations of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures include: 1) New King James Version (NKJV); 2) New International Version (NIV); and 3) New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Summing It Up God intended His Word to abide forever (preservation). Therefore His written, propositional, self disclosure (revelation) was protected from error in its original writing (inspiration) and collected in 66 books of the Old and New Testaments (canonicity).

Through the centuries, tens of thousands of copies and thousands of translations have been made (transmission) which did introduce some error. Because there is an abundance of existing ancient Old Testament and New Testament manuscripts, however, the exacting science of textual criticism has been able to reclaim the content of the original writings (revelation and inspiration) to the extreme degree of 99.99 percent, with the remaining one hundredth of one percent having no effect on its content (preservation).

The sacred book which we read, study, obey, and preach deserves to unreservedly be called The Bible or "The Book without peer," since its author is God and it bears the qualities of total truth and complete trustworthiness as also characterizes its divine source.

### **Is There More To Come?**

How do we know that God will not amend our current Bible with a 67th inspired book? Or, in other words, "Is the canon forever closed?"

Scripture texts warn that no one should delete from or add to Scripture (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6). Realizing that additional canonical books actually came after these words of warning, we can only conclude that while no deletions whatsoever were permitted, in fact, authorized, inspired writings were permitted to be added in order to complete the canon protected by those passages.

The most compelling text on the closed canon is the Scripture to which nothing has been added for 1,900 years.

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. Rev. 22:18,19

Several significant observations, when taken together, have convinced the church over the centuries that the canon of Scripture is actually closed, never to be reopened.

1. The book of Revelation is unique to the Scripture in that it describes with unparalleled detail the end-time events which precede eternity future. As Genesis began Scripture by bridging the gap from eternity past into our time/space existence with the only detailed creation account (Gen. 1, 2), so there was a parallel silence after John delivered Revelation. This also leads to the conclusion that the New Testament canon was then closed.

2. Just as there was prophetic silence after Malachi completed the Old Testament canon, so there was a parallel silence after John delivered Revelation. This leads to the conclusion that the New Testament canon was then closed also.

3. Since there have not been, nor now are, any authorized prophets or apostles in either the Old Testament and New Testament sense, there are not any potential authors of future inspired, canonical writings. God's Word, "once for all delivered to the saints," is never to be added to, but to be earnestly contended for (Jude 3).

4. Of the 4 exhortations not to tamper with Scripture, only the one in Revelation 22:18,19 contains warnings of severe Divine judgement for disobedience. Further, Revelation is the only book of the New Testament to end with this kind of admonition and was written over 20 years after any other New Testament book. Therefore, these facts strongly suggest that Revelation was the last book of the canon and that the Bible is complete; to either add or delete would bring God's severe displeasure.

5. Finally, the early church, those closest in time to the apostles, believed that Revelation concluded God's inspired writings, the Scriptures.

So we can conclude, based on solid Biblical reasoning, that the canon is and will remain closed. There will be no future 67th book of the Bible.

## **Where Do We Stand?**

In April, 1521, Martin Luther appeared before his ecclesiastical accusers at the Diet of Worms. They had given him the ultimatum to repudiate his unwavering faith in the sufficiency and perspicuity of the Scriptures. Luther is said to have responded, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason--I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God... God help me! Here I stand."

Like Martin Luther, may we rise above the doubts within and confront the threats without when God's Word is assailed. God help us to be loyal contenders of the faith. Let us stand with God and the Scripture alone.

## **The Bible**

This book contains: the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers.

Its doctrine is holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be saved, and practice it to be holy.

It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter. Here heaven is open, and the gates of hell are disclosed.

Christ is the grand subject, our good its design, and the glory of God its end. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet.

Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, health to the soul, and a river of pleasure. It is given to you here in this life, will be opened at the judgment, and is established forever.

It involves the highest responsibility, will reward the greatest labor, and condemn all who trifle with its contents.

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. 1 Thess. 2:13

*John F. MacArthur, Jr., The MacArthur Study Bible, (Dallas: Word Publishing) 1997.*