

(400 A.D.), Gothic (4th century), Georgian (5th century), Ethiopic (6th century), and Nubian (6th century). The fact that we have so many translations of the New Testament points to its authenticity, as it would have been almost impossible, had the disciples or later followers wanted to corrupt or forge its contents, for them to have amassed all of the translations from the outlying areas and changed each one so that there would have been the uniformity which we find witnessed in these translations today

- (3) 2,135 lectionaries from the **6th century**, which are in agreement with the present text;
- (4) 86,489 quotations of the N.T. in the early church father's letters of which 36,000 are **before 325AD**. In fact, there are enough quotations from the early church fathers that, even if we did not have a single manuscript copy of the Bible, scholars could still reconstruct all but 11 verses of the New Testament from material written within 150 to 200 years of the time of Christ.



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If thou wert in doubt as to what
 We have revealed unto thee, then
 ask those who have been
 reading the Book from before
 thee....
 (Surah 10 verse 94)

**CAN WE TRUST
 THE
 NEW TESTAMENT?**

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
 competent, equipped for every good work.
 2Ti 3:16-17

Background

Jesus started his public ministry in about 26 AD. This is known because in Luke 3:1 it is related to the '...fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar...' Secular history verifies that Tiberius had authority in the provinces concerned beginning in 11 AD. (N.I.V. Study Bible, 1985, p.1540). The mentioning of three annual Jewish Passover feasts (John 2, 6, 12) leads to the conclusion that he preached and taught for about three years until 29 AD. What Jesus said and did was memorized during his public ministry. This can be taken as certain for two reasons:

1. The first followers of Jesus were all Jewish. Jews have a strong tradition of memorizing their Scriptures and the teaching of their rabbi's. The Mishna (rules for right living and a commentary on the Torah) says: "A good pupil is like a plastered cistern that loses not a drop." (Aboth ii,8)

2. The seriousness of Jesus' teaching made memorization absolutely necessary:

Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? ...But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete." (Luke 6, verses 46, 49)

The gospel was mainly passed on by oral means for at least 29 years from 26 AD until 55 AD when it was first written down by Paul. This document is known as '1 Corinthians'. Its date is undisputed by all Biblical scholars.

W.F. Albright, one of the world's leading Biblical archaeologists, wrote: 'We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about 80 Ad.' ('Recent Discoveries in Bible Lands' by Albright, 1955, p.136) A.T. Robinson summarizes that the whole New Testament was written before the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. ('Redating the New Testament' by A.T. Robinson, 1976).

Scholars are in agreement that the majority of the New Testa-

very books, showing their lack of coherence to doctrine and lack of widespread acceptance. Finally, while it is difficult to evaluate the power of conviction that these books might carry, even a cursory read of these books will show a sharp disparity from the books of the NT.

Received and embraced, not selected and protected

To state quite simply what we find is that there was no official canon of NT Scripture in the earliest church history as there was no need for an official canon of Scripture. Metzger continues, "the Church did not create the canon, but came to recognise, accept, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the Church." The lack of a 'canon' does not mean that there was not a generally accepted corpus of inherently authoritative books, but that the books were so widely held as authoritative Scripture that there was no need to stipulate them (even the Old Testament, while established for quite some time, was not officially recognised as canon until the Synod of Jamnia in 90AD).

Witnesses to the accuracy of the transmission of the NT texts

- (1) 24,000 Manuscripts: in Greek, Latin and other languages, 230 MSS **before 6th century** which are in agreement concerning the present text.
- (2) 15,000 existing copies of the various versions written in Latin and Syriac, some of which were written as early as 150 A.D., such as the Syriac Peshitta (150-250 A.D.) Because Christianity was a missionary faith from its very inception (Matthew 28:19-20), the scriptures were immediately translated into the known languages of that period. For that reason other written translations appeared soon after, such as Coptic translations (early 3rd and 4th centuries), Armenian

are recording the stories of persons who did)]

2. Did the message tell the **truth about God**? (coherence: the book cannot contradict itself or accepted church doctrines)
3. Was it accepted by the **people of God**? (widespread acceptance by the church)
4. Does it carry the **power of God**? (conviction: living power to challenge and change a person's life. Jesus prepared his disciples for this in promising the Holy Spirit who would "guide you into all the truth" John 16:13)

It was debate concerning weight or priority amongst these that caused disagreements over official lists. Of the books under discussion for canonicity that are not included in the NT canon, only three were seriously considered by the church [Epistle of Barnabas (2nd C), Shepherd of Hermas (2nd C), 1 Clement (early 2nd C)], and these failed to be written by an apostle or attested by an apostle. In fact, in some cases (eg. 1 Clement, Shepherd of Hermas), the author states dependence upon other apostles for the writing's authority. And even though some of these books were kept in codices alongside canonical texts, they were explicitly set apart from the rest, as the very first canonical list (the Muratorian Canon 170AD) makes plain.

Apocryphal Books

According to these criteria, the many late Gnostic and apocryphal gospels and epistles that arose in the second and third centuries are considered 'non-canonical' [eg. the Gospel of Thomas (ca. 175AD), the Gospel of Judas (ca. 180AD), the Gospel of Philip (200-350AD), the Gospel of Mary (ca. 220AD), or the many "infancy gospels" (all within 140-235AD)]. That is, these apocryphal books are not inherently authoritative, and are far too late to have been written by apostles, many being written after the very discussion on canonicity began. Additionally, early church fathers, like Irenaeus or Cyril of Jerusalem, wrote against inclusion of these

ment books were written between 55 and 70 AD. This allows for the conclusion that the Gospel was transmitted predominantly by oral means for a period of **only** 29-44 years.

During the first three years of this time Jesus was still with his followers. In case of doubt they could have consulted him. Afterwards, many of his disciples who memorized what they saw and heard concerning Jesus could remind each other in cases of dispute. Biblical sources (Acts 2:5-11; 11:19-20; 18:1-2) and secular history make it clear that about 25 years after Jesus started his public ministry, many Christians were found all over the Eastern Mediterranean. They also spread to the West as far as Rome. Any changes to the Gospel would have been met with very fierce opposition from all these different parts of the world.

Jesus did not write down the message he brought. What Jesus said and did during his public ministry was written down during or soon after his lifetime. Papias, a hearer of John, one of Jesus' disciples wrote the following sometime between 120 and 130 AD, 'Matthew compiled the sayings (of Jesus) in the Hebrew language.' ('Church History' V.33,4.1, by Eusebius) Furthermore, Luke who wrote his account of the Gospel sometime between 59 - 63 A.D. started by saying, "*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us...*" (Luke 1:1). The followers of Jesus also memorized these things. The first four books of the New Testament contain the words and deeds of Jesus. They were written down by four different authors, Matthew, Mark, Luke (who also wrote 'Acts') and John (he also wrote '1,2,3 John' and 'Revelation'). These men wrote under God's inspiration for different communities with different needs (2 Peter 1, verses 20-21). The book of Matthew, for example, was originally directed at Jewish readers. The book of Mark on the other hand was written for Gentiles. (See N.I.V. Study Bible, 1985, pages 1439, 1490.)

God inspired the authors to write down the known words and deeds of Jesus in their particular fashion, according to the needs of the original recipients of their books. They, like the other writers

of New Testament books, Paul, Peter, James and Jude, were either eyewitnesses or had first hand knowledge of Jesus' ministry. The remaining 23 books of the New Testament again addressed different needs. God inspired the authors to comment and elaborate on the words and facts of Jesus' ministry.

Variants or mistakes in the texts

There are about 5500 Greek manuscripts still existent which contain the whole or part of the New Testament. ('Answers to tough questions' By Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, 1980, p.4). Critics will say there are thousands of variations in the New Testament manuscripts and we must understand this. Variants in the New Testament will fall into several categories :

a) Variants caused by copying mistakes. Early copies were done by hand. The copyist would move his eyes back and forth between the handwritten manuscript he was copying and the one he was writing. There could be spelling errors, repetition of a word or phrase, or the skipping of a line between similar phrases. Comparison with other manuscript copies would make the explanation of such errors clear.

b) Variations because New testament Greek was written with no spaces between the words. Look at the possible variant meanings in trying to understand the phrase "Isawabundanceonthetable." Looking at the context of the phrase and the variants themselves would make it clear what was the correct reading.

c) Variants caused by inclusion of marginal notes or exclusion of corrections. Sometimes corrections to copyist errors were put in the margins, other times explanatory notes were placed there. Infrequently, in subsequent copies the correction might be dropped or the note included in the text. Again, common sense, comparison to other manuscripts, or context makes the matter clear.

Often variants spread throughout many of the manuscripts. That is why a variant spelling of one letter of one word within one verse in 3000 manuscripts is considered to be 3000 variant readings.

repeatedly listing all 27 NT books between them (Canon of Origen ca.185-254AD, Canon of Eusebius ca. 265-340AD, Codex Claromontanus ca. 300AD, Canon of Cyril ca. 350AD, Cheltenham Canon ca 360AD, Canon of Laodicea 363AD). These lists also tell us which other books were in circulation at the time, the process by which books were considered canonical, and which apocryphal books arose from heretical sects. In the end, the Synod of Hippo Regius (393AD) brought closure to the debate affirming the 27 books of the NT as we have them today. There is no need to speculate concerning the acceptance or rejection of a canon of Scripture. The books in the NT today have always been the inherently authoritative divinely inspired Word of God. Metzger concludes his whole history of canonicity by saying that "no books or collection of books from the ancient Church may be compared with the New Testament in importance for Christian history or doctrine."

Process of Canonisation

The word 'canon' comes from the Greek word *kanon* for "reed," which was used as a unit of standard measurement. Thus *kanon* came to mean a "rule" or "standard" by which one can evaluate. The canon of Scripture is the standard for the authoritative collection of books and the collection of authoritative books, simultaneously.

While, admittedly, the discussion of canonicity did not arise until one or two centuries after the books themselves were written, the current books of the NT have always been recognised as authoritative for the church. The church alone does not determine canonicity, and no council decreed authority to certain books to the exclusion of others. On the contrary, the books themselves carry inherent authority. God gives the book authority, and not councils or churches. The early church recognised this authority by discerning certain qualities of NT canonicity:

1. Was the book written by an **apostle of God**? [apostles were 1st century eyewitnesses of Jesus, and hence reliable in what they describe (for the case of Mark and Luke who did not see Jesus, they

know it today in the twenty first century, had been already been accepted as **single** letters in the first century AD by a great majority of the early Christians. F.F. Bruce, Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester, England confirms this fact by saying: *'One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority,* direct or indirect. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa- at Hippo Reius in 393 and at Carthage in 397 - but what these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities.' (The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable? IVP, England, 1994, page 27) The formation of the definite canon took place on the basis of criteria, such '...as apostolic authorship, reception by the churches, and consistency of doctrine with what the church already possessed.' (Bakers's Dictionary of Theology,' by E.F. Harrison, Baker Book House, USA, 1994, page 95) The Scriptures were not changed at Nicea or other church councils. They were, as they always have been in Christendom, upheld and preserved.

Historians tell us that controversy and crisis often serve to refine existent beliefs, and rarely function as an opportunity to create new beliefs. As false gospels started to arise in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the discussion of canon arose as well. But the very controversy itself regarding the infiltration of false gospels shows us that the canonisation of the NT was already in process.

To substantiate this claim, let's look at the earliest discussion of canonicity. The first mention of a canon of the NT as Scripture is the Muratorian Canon in 170AD. Two hundred years later (367AD) we have Athanasius' famous 39th festal letter that lists all 27 books of the NT as we have them today. Between these times there were 6 other lists of canons, each consistent with the others,

A.T. Robertson said, that the real concern is only with a 'thousandth part of the entire text.' ("An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament" by A.T. Robertson, Broadman, Nashville, 1925, page 22) Because all manuscripts have been carefully preserved a scholarly study is possible to determine the correct readings. The following criteria are important in this science:

- a) The age of the manuscript. If a variant occurs in younger manuscripts but is not found in older ones, this indicates that it is incorrect.
- b) The frequency of variants. If a variant reading is only found in a few manuscripts but not in the majority of others it can also be identified as incorrect. Most of the variant readings are of very little significance with regard to the meaning of the text. Only a few present some problems, such as:

1 John 5, verses 7,8

This verse, as it appears in some older English translation only, adds some words that speak about the Tri-unity of God. 'But, the addition is not found in any Greek manuscripts or NT translation prior to the 16th century.' (N.I.V. Study Bible, 1985, p. 1913) It was obviously a marginal note that was added by mistake as part of the text.

Mark 16, verses 9-20

These verses summarize the ministry of Jesus. They are not found in the oldest manuscripts. The literal translation of verse 8 reads 'Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone. They were afraid for...' The last word in this verse is a translation from the Greek conjunction 'gar'. Metzger, a leading scholar in New Testament Greek says that in all Greek literature 'no instance has been found where 'gar' stands at the end of a book.'

He lists two possible solutions to this problem:

- 1) Mark was interrupted in his writing and prevented (maybe by death) from finishing.
- 2) The last leaf was lost before other copies could be made. Verses 9-20 therefore presents a marginal note that accidentally became

part of the text. ('Text of the New Testament' by Metzger, pages 226-229)

John 7, verse 53-8, verse 11

In these verses Jewish teachers bring a woman who has committed adultery before Jesus. They want to test how he judges her. 'This story may not have belonged originally to the Gospel of John. It is absent from almost all the important early manuscripts, and those that have it sometimes place it elsewhere. But the story may well be authentic.' (N.I.V. Study Bible, 1985, p. 1611)

The famous historian Philip Schaff said that none of these variant readings affect 'an article of faith or a precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teaching.' ('Companion to the Greek Testament and English Version' by Philip Schaff, Harper, New York, 1883, page 177)

The present translations of the New Testament are based on the following, oldest manuscripts:

A) P 75

It is dated around 200 AD and originally contained 'Luke' and 'John' on 144 pages. 102 pages (about 70%) still exist today.

B) P 46

It is also dated around 200 AD and originally contained 10 books of the New Testament, written by Paul. Of the 114 pages, about 75% (86 pages) exists today.

Translations of the New Testament into Latin and Syriac were made between 150-180 AD. Copies of them from the fourth and fifth century AD exist today. They confirm the 70-75% existing texts of the manuscripts P 75 and P 46. Therefore it is valid to assume that the 25-30% and the rest of the New Testament books which have not survived from around 200 AD, also agreed.

C) Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus

They are both dated around 350 AD, shortly after the beginning of monasticism, and contain all 27 New Testament books. They both confirm the manuscripts P 75 and P 46 and also the Latin and Syriac translations. Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus are used

to translate those parts of today's New Testament, which are missing from P 75 and P 46. Different early Christian communities accepted as authentic the 27 books that together form the New Testament. Because of the fast expansion of Christianity and the growing number of heretic writings it became necessary to write down officially the names of the New Testament books. There was no need for this process until around the end of the fourth century when the Syriac Church accepted some false writings to be part of the Bible. This happened even though the Peshitta, the Syriac Bible of the second century AD did not contain them. Until the end of the fourth century there was common agreement among the Christians as to which books were part of the Gospel. The Roman Catholic Church accepted some heretic writings as part of the Bible, but only in 1563, as a reaction to the Protestant Reformation. By doing so they legitimized their reference to them in disputed doctrinal matters. ('Answers to tough questions', by Josh McDowell, 1980, page 37) The oldest existing copies still in existence of almost half of the New Testament are dated about 200 AD, that is 130-174 years after they were originally written. It is important to realize that all the main Christian doctrines are contained therein! The oldest copy of the complete New Testament (Gospel) which still exists today is dated around 350 AD, that is 280-324 years after it was first written down.

How was the New Testament canonised?

In order to be better equipped against false teachings, a list (called 'canon') of the 27 books contained in the New Testament was officially approved by the Church in 397 AD at the Third Council of Carthage. ('Introduction to New Testament' by D. Carson, Apollos, 1992, page 493). This does not mean there was uncertainty and many and varied books being regarded as scripture.

The 27 books that together make up the New Testament, as we