

WHICH BOOKS BELONG IN THE BIBLE?

by

F. Furman Kearley, Ph.D.

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

When I was about nineteen, I was given an old family Bible. Upon examining it, I discovered some strange books such as I & II Maccabees, Tobit, Ecclesiasticus, and others. I had heard, of course, that the Catholic Bible contained more books than “The Bible,” but that was far off and unreal. These books in a treasured family Bible, however, were real and had to be accounted for. Thus, I began what eventually became a continuing study.

Many who are acquainted with only modern “protestant” Bibles do not realize that it is a legitimate question to ask: “Which books belong in the Bible?” However, those better acquainted with the history of the Bible know that this has been a vital and hotly debated topic. The debate concerns not only the Apocryphal books of the Catholics, but other Old and New Testament Apocryphal books as well. The question has to do not only with Apocryphal books, but also “disputed” books like Esther, Song of Solomon, 2 Peter, Jude and others.

A proper study of this problem demands a careful study of each book that lays claim to being in the Bible, thereby allowing the reader to make a decision based on the merits of each book. However, that is beyond the scope of this study. Rather, I will attempt to call attention to the major relevant points in order to stimulate further study.

It is important that every preacher and teacher be prepared to deal with this question, because in our age of skepticism it is going to be asked frequently by young people with doubts, by those of non-Christian cultures, and by others. We must “sanctify in our heart Christ as Lord and be ready always to give answer to every man that asks us a reason concerning the hope that is in us, yet with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15).

HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM

The question, “Which books belong in the Bible?,” no doubt is much older than the attested evidence. Rabbinic sources record discussions about which books “defile the hands”—that is, which are sacred (Lewis, 1964, 32[2]:130). One special debate was whether Ecclesiastes belonged among the Holy Scriptures. Early Christian writers discussed the question, especially in opposition to the gnostic, Marcion, who accepted only some of Luke’s and Paul’s writings while rejecting the rest. Riggs observed that “in the struggle with Gnosticism the canon was made” (1956, 1:564).

Various Christian writers differed on exactly which books belonged in the Bible. Eusebius gave a list of books that he divided into three categories: the Recognized Books, the Disputed Books, and the Rejected Books. The Disputed Books are James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Revelation and Hebrews (n.d., III. XXV, p. 257).

Most Christian writers—notably Jerome, Origen, Tertullian, and others—accepted the Palestinian Jewish Canon and rejected the Apocrypha (Robinson, 1956, p. 561). However, some other early lists omitted Esther, while others included the Apocrypha. The Council of Carthage, with the approval of Augustine, ratified a decree that in effect placed the canonical and Apocryphal books on the same level with the Palestinian Canon (Robinson, pp. 561-62).

Gradually, from the fourth through the sixteenth centuries, the Apocrypha received more support in the Catholic Church until finally, as a result of the canonical debate with Reformation leaders, the Council of Trent included in its official list of books, in addition to our Old and New Testament books, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, I and II Maccabees, and some additions to Esther and Daniel (Schaff, n.d., 2:81). Even though the Reformers rejected the Apocryphal books, they generally continued to print them in the various versions that were being published. Only in the seventeenth century did some English versions begin to appear without the Apocrypha. Gradually this practice increased until few English Bibles of the twentieth century contain the Apocryphal books and most “protestants” know little of the problem concerning which books belong in the Bible (Metzger, 1957, pp. 175-195).

CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING WHICH BOOKS BELONG IN THE BIBLE

Recognizing that there is a legitimate concern regarding which books belong in the Bible, what criteria may be used to test the various books under consideration? The ultimate test is, “Is the book inspired by God?” This automatically raises the question, “What is meant by inspiration?” While there are various definitions of inspiration (depending on the degree of authority one recognizes in the Bible), to Christians who hold that the Bible is the sole, absolute authority for the Christian’s life and conduct, the proper definition of inspiration must include the following:

- Since God is perfect and infallible, an inspired book is absolutely infallible and errorless in its facts and doctrines as presented in the original manuscript.
- Since God is perfectly holy and pure, an inspired book must present only holy and pure doctrines.
- Since God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, then an inspired book should reflect these characteristics in such ways as fulfilled prophecy and accurate statements with regard to geography, astronomy, science, math, psychology, and all areas of knowledge to the extent that it makes reference to these. If God is the Creator of both the world and man, He could not make an inaccurate statement about them. A book that does is not inspired.
- Since God is absolute truth, one inspired book cannot contradict another.
- Since God is absolutely just and fair, an inspired book must be impartial, without prejudice toward anyone.

These are the minimum criteria for an inspired book. Someone might argue: “You define inspiration by defining God, but you cannot know God’s characteristics apart from revelation.” While this may be true in part, if God is not at least all these above things, it would be impossible to serve Him. If God were unholy, impure, unfair, and a liar, we certainly could not trust Him even if we obeyed Him.

Another important criterion for determining which books belong in the Bible is the will to believe. Jesus said in John 7:17, “If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from myself.” Thus, faith and/or unbelief are largely a matter of attitude. In discussion of this point, it is necessary to answer the frequently asked question, “Why did God allow such an important question as which books belong in the Bible to be a matter of debate?”

Of course it is presumptuous to speak directly to a question about why God did or did not do something when God has not spoken directly to it. However, in this case since it is such a natural and frequent question, it is necessary to give some thought to it.

The answer, it seems, lies in the biblical doctrine of the free moral agency of man. Since Adam and Eve, man has had the freedom to accept or reject God's Word. Moses was God's appointed leader and was inspired by God to speak for him. Yet, Korah, Nathan, Abiram (Numbers 16), and, at times, all the children of Israel, challenged the canonicity of the word that He spoke and the laws that He gave. In the days of Ahab, Micaiah spoke the words of the Lord (2 Kings 22). What he spoke was truth inspired by God, and thus canonical. But Ahab and 400 prophets rejected its authority. Jeremiah spoke the words of the Lord and even wrote them in a book, but the princes of Judah rejected their canonicity. King Jehoiakim even took Jeremiah's canonical book inspired of God, cut it up, and with contempt threw it into the fire (Jeremiah 36). Finally, the apostle Paul spoke the inspired words of God, yet his words were rejected and his authority questioned and controverted by some at Corinth, Galatia, and other places (2 Corinthians 10-12).

Certainly, if men could so reject the direct words of God, and treat shamefully the inspired persons speaking for God, then people of a later generation likewise might be expected to reject the words of God in written form and treat shamefully the books of His spokesmen. If people in olden times rejected in person the true spokesmen of God such as Jeremiah and Paul, and could substitute in their place false prophets and false teachers, then certainly men today will reject the true books of God and accept false books as authoritative.

God's Word authenticates itself, as is indicated in such passages as Deuteronomy 13:1-18, 18:9-22, and Jeremiah 28:9,17. In the same way that God's people of old could distinguish between sorcerers, false prophets, and God's true prophets, we can distinguish between inspired books of men. However, we must want with all our heart to do God's will.

I believe that this is what is meant by Acts 13:46-52 and 16:14. The Jews at Antioch of Pisidia thrust God's Word from them, while the Gentiles had a will to believe. Lydia wanted to do God's will, and thus

her attitude of heart caused God's Word to authenticate itself to her. Batsell Barrett Baxter has an excellent discussion of "The Will to Believe" in his book, *I Believe Because* (1971, pp. 255-259). His summation is that it is senseless to have the will of skepticism. Only the will to believe offers hope.

Of course, God has not left us without objective evidence. But He has not made this objective evidence so overwhelming that a rebel or false teacher cannot possibly find support to justify his own delusions. Let us now examine some of the objective evidence concerning which books actually belong in the Bible.

EXAMINATION OF ARGUMENTS FOR INCLUSION OF THE APOCRYPHA

One argument for the inclusion of the extra books is that the great biblical manuscripts contained, in addition to the generally accepted books, the Old Testament Apocrypha and some other early Christian writings (such as the Epistle of Barnabas and Clement). Three observations are in order. First, the manuscripts are not in perfect agreement as to the extra books they include. Robinson noted concerning this point:

In the various extant MSS of the LXX, the Apocryphal books vary in number and name. For example, the great Vatican MS, . . . contains no book of Macc whatever, but does include I Esd, which St. Jerome and Catholics generally treat as apocryphal. On the other hand, the Alexandrian MS, . . . contains not only the extra-canonical book of I Esd, but 3 and 4 Macc, and in the NT the 1st and 2nd Epistles of Clement, none of which, however, is considered canonical by Rome. Likewise, the great Sinaitic MS, . . . omits Bar (which Catholics consider canonical), but includes 4 Macc, and in the NT the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas; all of which are excluded from the canon by Catholics. In other MSS, 3 Macc, 3 Esd and Pr Man are occasionally included (1956, p. 557).

Second, such manuscripts merely document the fact that the compilers desired to read and preserve these books. They do not affirm the relative value or authority of the books. Third, these manuscripts were compiled in the fourth century or later. They no doubt reflect the attitudes of some Christians of this period, but they do not reflect the apostolic attitude as to which books belong in the Bible.

A second argument is that the New Testament writers quote from the Greek Septuagint. Therefore, they must have endorsed those Apocryphal books that were included in the Greek Bible along with the other accepted books. Several observations will be helpful. First, there is no such thing as the "Greek Bible." As noted above, the many Greek manuscripts vary as to the extra books they included. The whole problem of the history and composition of the LXX is a complicated one and clouded with debate (Schaff,

n.d., 2:81). Second, there is no evidence that the Jews (even those of Alexandria) ever accepted the Apocryphal books as being on a par with the other Old Testament books. On the other hand, there is evidence that they did not (see Robinson, 1956, p. 557). (1) All extant Greek manuscripts and canonical lists containing Apocryphal books are of late Christian origin, and none originates from the Jews. (2) During the second century, the Hellenistic Jews adopted Aquila's Greek version of the Old Testament in lieu of their own, and it is known that Aquila's text excluded all Apocryphal books. (3) Furthermore, Philo, the leading Jewish philosopher, theologian, and writer who lived in Alexandria from about 20 B.C. till A.D. 50, never quoted from one of these Apocryphal books, although he quoted often from the generally accepted canonical books. Third, the New Testament writers never quoted from the Apocryphal books (Young, 1958, p. 175). They did show familiarity with them, and Jude did quote the Pseudepigraphal book of Enoch (Metzger, 1957, pp. 151-73). However, Paul also quoted heathen poets, yet this does not mean that he (or any other New Testament writer) considered any books inspired and canonical except the Old Testament books.

There simply is not adequate evidence to include the Apocrypha in the canon. One positive reason for excluding at least some of the Apocryphal books is that their content is not historically or theologically of the quality to be considered inspired. A close examination of each individual book would be necessary to prove this. Space does not allow this, but perhaps Edward J. Young's brief analysis will be helpful and stimulate further study.

There are no marks in these books (Apocryphal—FFK) which would attest a divine origin. As Green has pointed out, both Judith and Tobit contain historical, chronological and geographical errors. The books justify falsehood and deception and make salvation to depend upon works of merit. Almsgiving, for example, is said to deliver from death (Tobit 12:9; 4:10; 14:10-11).

Judith lives a life of falsehood and deception in which she is represented as assisted by God (9:10, 13). Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon inculcate a morality based upon expediency. Wisdom teaches the creation of the world out of pre-existent matter (11:17). Ecclesiasticus teaches that the giving of alms makes atonement for sin (3:30). In Baruch it is said that God hears the prayers of the dead (3:4), and in I Maccabees there are historical and geographical errors. This is not to deny many fine and commendable things in the Apocrypha, but the books nonetheless show themselves at points to be at variance with divinely revealed truth. They were consequently never adopted by the Jews as canonical (1958, pp. 167-168).

The books that contain errors obviously cannot be inspired and, therefore, do not belong in the Bible. Other arguments may be offered concerning the inclusion and rejection of the Apocrypha. However, the most important of these will be dealt with in later sections.

EVIDENCE FOR THE PRESENT OLD TESTAMENT CANON

The Old Testament bears witness within itself that at least certain parts of it were inspired and thus authoritative. Deuteronomy 17:18-20 indicates that the king was to have a copy of the law of Moses and to consider it authoritative. Deuteronomy states that an official, authoritative copy of the law of Moses was to be placed by the side of the ark of the covenant. Joshua inscribed the law of Moses on Mount Ebal and read all of it to the people (Joshua 8:30-35). Joshua later added other words to the book of the law (Joshua 24:26). Such titles as “this book of the law” (Deuteronomy 29:21; 30:10), “the law” (Exodus 24:12; Proverbs 1:8; Isaiah 42:21; Jeremiah 8:7), the “law of Jehovah” or “his law” or “thy law” (Psalms 1:2; 19:7; 37:31), “the law and the testimony” (Isaiah 8:20), “book of the covenant” (2 Kings 23:2,21), “the law of Moses” (2 Kings 23:25), and others clearly show that throughout her history Israel had a written body of laws or commandments that she recognized as a standard of faith and action.

Since the word “canon,” in its relation to the question, “Which books belong in the Bible?,” means a recognized standard of faith and action, then Israel always had a canon of divine scripture. It began with the law at Sinai (Exodus 24:1-8), and was added to as God saw fit to speak further through His prophets. In the sense of literary criticism, the canon did not “develop,” nor did Israel “decide” on or “ratify” a canon. Rather, God inspired the message, and as soon as it was uttered or written it was canonical because it then constituted a standard of faith and action. That the Pentateuch was so regarded at a very early date is made clear by reaction to the law in Josiah’s time (2 Kings 22:1-23; 30), and in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8:1-18).

However, the words of other prophets and leaders were recognized as inspired, authoritative, and as a standard of faith and action. The words of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets were so recognized by some in their own day (Isaiah 39:8; Jeremiah 21:1-14; 37:17). Certainly, Daniel and Ezra acknowledged that the words of Jeremiah were the inspired words of Jehovah (Daniel 9:2; Ezra 1:1). Zechariah affirmed

that all the former prophets spoke the words of the Lord (Zechariah 1:4; 7:7; see also 2 Chronicles 24:19; 36:15-16; Jeremiah 7:13; 25:3-7).

Furthermore, the Old Testament (especially the prophets) repeatedly claimed that the words as spoken were the words of the Lord. Those claims have been authenticated by fulfilled prophecies and by God's action in history. Therefore, on the face of the matter, most of the present Old Testament books are canonical; since the time of their utterance, they have been a standard of faith and action.

The second and most powerful testimony to the canonicity of the present Old Testament books is that of the New Testament, and even of Jesus Himself. The New Testament clearly speaks of an authoritative body of scriptures. Jesus did so by the use of such expressions as, "as the scripture hath said" (John 7:38), "ye search the scriptures" (John 5:39), "Moses wrote of me" (John 5:46-47), "the scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35), "written in your law" (John 10:34), and others. Other New Testament references to the Old Testament scriptures are Acts 17:11 ("examining the scriptures daily"), 2 Timothy 3:15 ("the sacred writings"), and Luke 16:16 ("the law and the prophets"; see also Matthew 5:17; 11:13). The term "law" is used at times to include the psalms or poetic books (John 10:34; 15:25) and also the prophets (John 12:34; Romans 3:9-19; 1 Corinthians 14:21).

Jesus provided clear testimony to all three of the traditional divisions of the Old Testament by saying "that all things must be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me" (Luke 24:44). Then, Luke recognized all these as "the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Jesus also may have accepted the Jewish order of the Old Testament canon. In Matthew 23:35, He spoke of the murder of the righteous from Abel to Zechariah. The best way to account for these names is to understand that Abel is the first one mentioned in Genesis, and Zechariah is the last one mentioned in Chronicles. In the Hebrew canon, the arrangement was the Pentateuch (Torah), the prophets (Nebhi'im), and the writings (Ketubhim), of which Chronicles was the last book. Jesus in effect said, "all the blood recorded from Genesis to Chronicles."

Finally, the New Testament quotations of, and allusions to, the Old Testament offer undisputed evidence that our present Old Testament was considered canonical by Christ and His inspired apostles. Quo-

tations and allusions come from every division, and almost every book (Robinson, 1956, p. 559). A very important observation is that neither the New Testament nor Jesus ever quoted from the Apocrypha; nor did either cite the Apocrypha as “Scripture.” Therefore, we may conclude with Edward J. Young that “When our Lord, therefore, was on earth, He placed the imprimatur of His infallible authority upon the Old Testament Scriptures in that He recognized them as divine” (1958, p. 157).

There are several other witnesses for the present Old Testament canon that should be cited briefly. Jesus, the son of Sirach, circa 180 B.C., testified to the authority of almost all of the Old Testament by his many allusions to its heroes and prophets (Robinson, 1956, p. 557). In the prologue, his grandson (circa 132 B.C.) referred to the threefold division of the Old Testament, “the law and the prophets and the other books of our father.” I & II Maccabees, by their many allusions to various parts and books of the Old Testament, showed that it was authoritative in the second century B.C. Josephus, in *Against Apion*, I, 8 (circa A.D. 90), affirmed that the Jewish canon consisted only of the books in our Old Testament, although he arranged and counted them differently (having a total of 22 books). Other significant evidence may be derived from the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Greek versions, Philo, IV Ezra, the Talmud tractate *Babba’ Bathra’* 14b, and early Christian writers. However, space does not permit the evaluation of their evidence.

EVIDENCE FOR THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

As in the case of the Old Testament, the canonicity of a New Testament book is not determined by the acceptance or rejection of that book by men. Its canonicity is determined by its inspiration of God and by God’s overruling providence to authenticate it to those who will to do His will. As noted earlier, Marcion accepted only the book of Luke and ten of Paul’s epistles. This, however, did not nullify the inspiration of all the rest simply because in his self-delusion he refused to accept God’s Word.

A few others rejected or questioned the recognition of some books like James, Jude, 1 & 2 Peter, etc. On the other hand, a few contended that 1 Clement, Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, etc., should be rejected. However, the vast majority of sincere Christians were led to accept as the Word of God the present 27 books of the New Testament.

The earliest Christians had no need to list the inspired books. They knew them because they knew the writers. However, gradually sects began to develop in the church and heretics began to lead astray the elect. Luke may have written his Gospel due to the circulation of heretical versions (Luke 1:1-4). At any rate, after the work of Marcion and other heretics, some Christian leaders felt it necessary to discuss the question of which books were authoritative, and so some provided lists. However, none of these could be considered as binding. The lists served only as recommendations. Furthermore, neither was the authority of a New Testament book settled by a church council.

Thiessen has made a careful study of these early discussions and lists, and has written an excellent summary of them in his *Introduction to the New Testament*. His conclusion is most interesting.

It is a remarkable fact that no early church council selected the books that should constitute the New Testament Canon. The books that we now have crushed out all rivals, not by any adventitious authority, but by their own weight and worth. This is in itself a strong proof of the genuineness and authenticity of the books that have survived (1954, p. 25).

After making a study of the Apocryphal New Testament books, Metzger concluded by quoting M.R. James:

The most cogent proof that these books are intrinsically on a different plane from the books of the New Testament is afforded merely by reading them side by side with the books of the New Testament and allowing each to make its own impression. Then, in the words of M.R. James, "It will very quickly be seen that there is no question of anyone's having excluded them from the New Testament: they have done that for themselves" (1957, pp. 262-263).

The subject of the Canon is much more extensive than this present study. The question, "Which books belong in the Bible?," is much more involved than what is reflected here, and the evidences supporting our present canon are considerably more abundant than those presented here. However, the question never will be solved or debate, at least in the minds of some. There were those who rejected Moses and the prophets. The Jews, as a whole, rejected Christ, and only a few who heard the apostles believed them. God's final authority will not be exercised until Judgment Day, when every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess.

However, God's divine providence has provided ample internal and external evidences to prove that He inspired the 66 books of our Bible. If we **will** to do His will, He will help us to know His teaching. I hope that this study has provoked your thinking and stimulated you to study more.

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