

The Content of Scripture – Canon, Preservation, Transmission, and Translation
The Doctrine of Scripture ~ David Strain & Ligon Duncan
First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi
Miller Hall ~ August 30, 2023

(1) What is in the Bible (and what isn't), (2) How the Bible was preserved, (2) transmitted, & (4) translated.

Quick Outline of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* on these topics:

1.2 The contents of Scripture (positively stated):

Canon ~ There is a fixed scriptural canon of sixty-six books, inspired by God, the rule of faith and life.

Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these: . . . All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.

1.3 The contents of Scripture (negatively stated):

Apocrypha ~ “The Apocrypha” is not inspired and therefore not canonical or authoritative.

The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.

1.8 The immediate inspiration, preservation and translation of Scripture

~ Holy Scripture has been providentially preserved authentically in the original languages, but should be translated into the common language of the people of God.

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.

Helpful Books to read and Study about the Bible in general

Tim Challies and Josh Byers, **A Visual Theology: Guide to the Bible** (Zondervan)

John Blanchard, **How to Enjoy Your Bible** (Evangelical Press)

William Hendriksen, **Survey of the Bible** (Evangelical Press)

Leland Ryken, Philip Ryken & James Wilhoit, **Ryken's Bible Handbook** (Tyndale)

Kevin DeYoung, **Taking God at His Word** (Crossway)

Sinclair Ferguson, **From the Mouth of God** (Banner of Truth)

Greg Gilbert, **Why Trust the Bible?** (Crossway)

Pete Williams, **Can We Trust the Gospels?** (Crossway)

Guy Waters, **For the Mouth of the Lord has Spoken** (Christian Focus Publications/Mentor)

ESV Study Bible (Crossway)

Reformation Study Bible (Reformation Trust/Ligonier)

The Westminster Confession of Faith on Canon, Preservation, Transmission & Translation

1.2 The contents of Scripture (positively stated): canon

There is a fixed scriptural canon of sixty-six books, inspired by God, the rule of faith and life.

“Under the name of holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these: . . . All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.”

Note five things here:

- (1) **Holy Scripture is said to be “the Word of God written.”** It does not contain the Word of God, it IS the Word of God. It does not witness to the Word of God, it IS the Word of God. The Confession asserts the identification of Scripture and God’s word, unlike modern Barthians and partial inspirationists.
- (2) **The books of the Holy Scripture are organized and arranged in a bi-partite form:** Old and New Testaments. This is appropriate and points to the reality of the progress of redemption, and the Old Covenant’s succession by the New. Promises Made (Old Testament). Promises Kept (New Testament).
- (3) **The canonical books are inspired by God, that is, they are God-breathed writings.** They are the products of God’s mouth. The writings themselves are inspired, objectively. They are breathed out of the mouth of God. They are canonical because they are inspired (not inspired because they are canonical). That is, it is because of their inspiration, their God-breathedness, that we recognize them as canonical; and not that we attribute to them inspiration because they are considered canonical.
- (4) **They are the rule of faith and life.** They tell us what to believe and how to live. They are the sole final authority for all believers’ faith and practice.
- (5) **Under the name of Holy Scripture are now contained “all the books” of the Old and New Testaments.** The canon (rule) of Scripture is complete and closed. There are no books awaiting addition, and none lacking.

The WLC addresses this subject this way: **“Q.3** What is the Word of God? A. The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.”

1.3 The contents of Scripture (negatively stated): Apocrypha (“Hidden writings”)

“The Apocrypha” is not inspired and therefore not canonical or authoritative.

“The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.”

The apocryphal books – Jewish books, written in Greek, composed between the time of Malachi and Matthew, mainly in the 200 or so years before Jesus’ birth.

Roman Catholics & Eastern Orthodox accept the following: Baruch & Letter of Jeremiah, additions to Daniel (Susanna, Song of the Three Children, Bel & the Dragon), additions to Esther, Judith, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, Sirach, Tobit, and Wisdom.

The *Eastern Orthodox* additionally accept: Prayer of Manasseh, 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, Odes, and Psalm 151) are not accepted by the Confession as inspired.

Note the argument of the Confession: these books are not divinely inspired and therefore not canonical and not authoritative. Notice again that canonicity is based on inspiration, not vice versa. There are four assertions in this section. (1) The apocryphal books are not divinely inspired; (2) therefore not canonical; (3) therefore not authoritative in the church; (4) therefore only to be regarded and used in the same way as other merely human writings.

1.8 The immediate inspiration, preservation and translation of Scripture

Holy Scripture has been providentially preserved authentically in the original languages, but should be translated into the common language of the people of God.

There are four main assertions in this section:

(1) The Scriptures, in their original languages, are immediately inspired by God;

“The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God,

(2) by God’s extraordinary care and providence have been preserved pure, and are therefore authentic, genuine, faithful to the originals;

and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic;

(3) so, in all theological controversies, our final appeal is to the Scriptures in their original languages;
so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them.

(4) nevertheless, because all of God’s people have a right to and a need for the Scriptures, and are commanded by God to read and study them reverently, they need to be translated into our various common languages, so that they may be strengthened and comforted by the Scriptures, and may have hope.

But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.”

How We Got the Bible

Adapted from *Ryken's Bible Handbook*

The process that produced our English Bibles involved five distinct steps:

Revelation. This expresses the idea of an unveiling of something that is hidden so that it can be known and understood. When we speak of the Bible as revelation, it is a description of God's actively disclosing to people dimensions of his nature, character, glory, attributes, ways, will, values, and plans—in short, of himself as a person—so that humans may know him. Without revelation, there could be no Scripture.

Inscripturation. Inspiration. When we speak of the word inspiration theologically, we use it in a different sense from what we mean when we say that an artist is inspired. In theology, inspiration refers to the fact that God infused the process of writing Scripture with his presence, so we can say that the words of Scripture are the very words of God. This does not diminish the genuine human element that was involved in the craft of writing the books of Scripture. The Bible is a product of human and divine activity. God guided the writing of the authors without bypassing their experiences, personalities, and literary craft.

Transmission. Several thousand years ago God gave humans a divinely inspired, self-disclosed, revelatory message. But this would be nothing more than an interesting bit of history were it not for the careful transmission of these texts through the centuries. The Bibles we have today are the product of Hebrew scribes and Christian monks who carefully copied the manuscripts and preserved them accurately.

Recognition. Canon. The word canon means “measuring stick.” Since the fourth century, Christians have used canon as a term for the authoritative list of books of the Bible. It is a measuring stick in that it reflects the standard for determining the authenticity of books to be read in church and used in worship as the Word of God. The canon was not something imposed on the books of the Bible. It was a matter of recognizing the books that had risen to the status of an authoritative canon. This process of recognition occurred over several centuries and was never marked by a single up-and-down vote. The formation of the canon was a process of determining a book's historicity and in the case of the New Testament, ascertaining a clear apostolic connection.

Translation. The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. To be of practical use, the Bible needs to be in the language of the people. The oldest and most important translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (into Greek) is what we know as the Septuagint. This translation had its origins in the third century BC in Alexandria, Egypt, and was the Bible used in the earliest churches. The impulse to translate the Bible continued with the famous Latin translations, and it is still going on today as the gospel is carried to every tribe and tongue.

Some Basic Facts about How We Got Our New Testament

By Michael J. Kruger

“The New Testament Books are the Earliest Christian Writings We Possess”

“The New Testament books are distinctive because, generally speaking, they are the earliest Christian writings we possess.”

“[NT] Apocryphal Writings are All Written in the Second Century or Later”

Such as “The Gospel of Peter,” “The Gospel of Thomas,” “The Acts of John.” “We know that many of these apocryphal writings are outright forgeries, pretending to be written by someone who was clearly not the author. That fact alone raises serious questions about the reliability of their content. Second, many of these apocryphal writings contain obvious embellishments and legendary additions. For example, in the Gospel of Peter, Jesus emerges from the tomb as a giant whose head reaches the clouds, and he is followed by the cross itself which then speaks (!). And third, many of these apocryphal writings contain a Gnostic-style theology that did not even emerge until the second century, and therefore could not represent authentic first-century Christianity (e.g., Gospel of Philip).”

“The New Testament Books Are Unique Because They Are Apostolic Books”

“The New Testament canon exists because of an early Christian belief that the apostles spoke for Christ. That belief led Christians to value apostolic books. And those apostolic books eventually formed the New Testament that we know today.”

“Some NT Writers Quote Other NT Writers as Scripture”

2 Peter 3:15-16 ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ 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.

2 Timothy 5:18 For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.” (Luke 10:7)

“If the NT writers were citing other NT writers as Scripture, then that suggests the canon was not a later ecclesiastical development, but something early and innate to the early Christian faith. And that is a basic fact that all Christians should know.”

“The Four Gospels are Well Established by the End of the Second Century”

“Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, around A.D. 180: ‘It is not possible that the gospels can be either more or fewer than the number they are.’”

“The NT Canon Was Not Decided at Nicea—Nor Any Other Church Council”

No church council “picked,” chose,” or “determined” the canonical books. The church simply recognized or affirmed them. “There are regional church councils that made declarations about the canon (Laodicea, Hippo, Carthage). But these regional councils did not just “pick” books they happened to like, but affirmed the books they believed had functioned as foundational documents for the Christian faith.”

“Early Christians Believed that Canonical Books were Self-Authenticating.”

Early Christians “believed that canonical books are self-authenticating. As Jesus said in John 10:27 “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

Origen is quite clear that the divine qualities of books play a role in their authentication: “If anyone ponders over the prophetic sayings...it is certain that in the very act of reading and diligently studying them his mind and feelings will be touched by a divine breath and he will recognize the words he is reading are not utterances of man but the language of God.”

Elsewhere Origen says similar things. He defends the canonicity of the book of Jude because “it is filled with the healthful words of heavenly grace”[2] and defends the canonical gospels because of their “truly venerable and divine contents.”[3] He even defends the canonicity of the book of Hebrews on the ground that “the ideas of the epistle are magnificent.”[4]

Tatian is very clear about the role of the internal qualities of these books: “I was led to put faith in these [Scriptures] by the unpretending cast of the language, the inartificial character of the writers, the foreknowledge displayed of future events, the excellent quality of the precepts.”[5]

Jerome defended the epistle of Philemon on the grounds that it is “a document which has in it so much of the beauty of the Gospel” which is the “mark of its inspiration.”[6] Chrysostom declares that in the gospel of John there is “nothing counterfeit” because the gospel is “uttering a voice which is sweeter and more profitable than that of any harp or any music...something great and sublime.”[7]

Right before citing Matt 4:17 and Phil 4:5, Clement of Alexandria says that you can distinguish the words of men from the words of Scripture because “No one will be so impressed by the exhortations of any of the saints, as he is by the words of the Lord Himself.”[8]