

# THE CANON AND TEXT OF SCRIPTURE

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## I. Preliminary matters

A. The term "canon" is derived from a Greek word (*kanon*), which means "measuring rod." As applied to literature, canon has come to mean those writings that conform to the rule or standard of divine inspiration and authority. It thus refers to the list of writings that are recognized as divinely inspired and authoritative, that are recognized as Scripture.

B. It is important to understand that the inspired writings were authoritative because they ultimately were authored by God. They didn't *become* authoritative by being recognized as inspired by the Jewish or Christian communities. Rather, they were *inherently* authoritative, and that authoritativeness simply was *acknowledged* or *recognized* by Israel and the church. Put differently, the writings are not authoritative because they are in the canon; they are in the canon because they are authoritative.

## II. Old Testament Canon

A. We know that by the time of Christ the Jews had a distinct body of sacred writings that they recognized as divinely inspired and authoritative.

1. Dan. 9:2 refers to "the books" ("Scriptures" NIV), and Ezra 3:4, Neh. 8:15, and 2 Chron. 30:5, 18 use the expression "according to what is written" without further explanation of *where* it is written, indicating that it means "according to what is written in the well-known and authoritative Scriptures."

2. This formula for citing Scripture and other equally absolute variations of it (e.g., "according to Scripture," "it is written," "having been written," "it says," "He says") are found in various intertestamental works, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, the N.T., Josephus and the Mishnah (Beckwith, 69-71).

3. By the last two centuries B.C., the canon had become a sufficiently unified body of material to attract to itself certain comprehensive titles and descriptions (e.g., "the Law and the Prophets and the Other Ancestral Books," "the Holy Books"), and by the first century A.D. the number of such titles had grown considerably (e.g., "Scripture," "the Holy Scriptures," "the Holy Records," "the Most Holy Oracles," "the Written Oracles," "the Inspired Oracles," "the Holy Word") (Beckwith, 105-09). Several of these appear in the N.T.

B. We know that the writings recognized as Scripture by the Jews of Jesus' day were the 39 books of the Christian Old Testament, variously grouped as 22 or 24 books.

1. From the second century B.C. through the writing of the N.T., every book of the Hebrew Bible, with the exception of Ruth, Song of Songs, and Esther, is quoted with a conventional formula for citing Scripture, most of them several times over (Beckwith, 76).

2. Josephus in *Against Apion* (A.D. 94) gives Gentile readers an account of the Jewish canon. He says the inspired books are of prophetic authorship and are only 22 in number: five books of Moses; thirteen books recorded by prophets that relate events from the death of Moses to Artaxerxes; four books containing hymns to God and precepts for human life.

a. The identity of Josephus's thirteen books can be determined with good probability to be Joshua, Judges-Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah-Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Minor Prophets.

(1) He names seven of them in another of his writings (*Antiquities*). We can figure out the rest from his statement that they cover down to Artaxerxes (464-423 B.C.) in an "exact succession" of the prophets and by knowing some other facts.

(2) One significant fact in this detective work is that Josephus was a Pharisee and the Pharisees did not dispute the canonicity of Ruth, Psalms, Job, and Chronicles. Another fact is that Josephus understood Esther to be the wife of Artaxerxes. And finally, Origen (A.D. 185-251), Epiphanius (A.D. 315-403), and Jerome (A.D. 347-420), all of whom were familiar with Jewish traditions, testify that when the Jews reckoned the books as 22 (rather than 24), they combined Ruth with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah.

b. From the description, Josephus's four books clearly includes Psalms and Proverbs. Since he already includes three of the five books whose status, or at least usability, was disputed by some Pharisees (Esther, Ezekiel, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs - Beckwith, 78), the last two of the disputed books are most likely the last two in his group of four: Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes.

3. Jerome (A.D. 347-420), a Latin-speaking Christian scholar who learned Hebrew from Jewish teachers, says in prefaces to his Vulgate translation that the Law contains Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; the Prophets contain Joshua, Judges-Ruth (in 22 count), Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah-Lamentations (in 22 count), Ezekiel, and the Twelve; the Hagiographa (Writings) contains Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Daniel, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Esther. He notes that some Jews use a 24 count by separating Ruth and Lamentations and putting them in the Hagiographa.

4. An "ancient tradition" from the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 14b) uses the 24-book count and distributes the books among the three divisions precisely as Jerome said those who count 24 books distributed them. (The Babylonian Talmud is a compilation of rabbinic writings that includes a digest of oral laws and interpretations of the Law by the Great Rabbis [the Mishnah, circa A.D. 200] and commentary on the Mishnah by later Rabbis [Gemara, circa A.D. 500].) The order differs, but Jerome's order is for the 22-book count. The Talmud puts Chronicles last in the canon.

5. In Lk. 24:44 Jesus refers to Scripture by its three traditional divisions, "the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms."

6. Prologue to Ecclesiasticus (circa 130 B.C.) implies that the books are distributed among the Law, Prophets, and Hagiographa as indicated by Jerome and the Talmud (Beckwith, 110-111, 123). It seems Josephus devised his own method for distributing the books among the three divisions. He was writing to a Gentile audience and rearranged them to make them more intelligible for them (as he admittedly rearranged summaries of the Mosaic legislation).

C. How the writings of the Old Testament were determined by the Jewish community to be inspired, to be sacred and authoritative, is not spelled out. But since Jesus accepted without reservation that those writings indeed were inspired by God, Christians can be certain that the Jewish community got it right.

1. We can make some educated guesses about how that determination was made, but I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit providentially guided the process. After all, if the Holy Spirit helped Timothy to guard the divine message that had been given to him (2 Tim. 1:14; 1 Tim. 6:20), I don't see why he would not help Israel do the same. And if Jesus' sheep hear his voice (Jn. 10:27), it would not surprise me if the true believers in Israel could recognize the voice of God in written form. As Geisler and Nix put it: "The canon was recognized by a twofold method of faith and science. Objective principles were used, but the subjective testimony of the Holy Spirit used the objective evidence, thus confirming the reality of God's Word to His people."

2. The most basic question in determining whether a writing was inspired by God would be whether the writer or writers were recognized as true prophets, as people through whom God spoke. The ancient Israelites would have been in a better position to know who wrote certain books and to know the evidence for their status as prophets, so their traditional acceptance carries much weight. In addition to there being a solid traditional claim for prophetic authorship, the criteria of inspiration probably included whether the writing was consistent with the revelation in earlier inspired writings, whether the writing was accepted as inspired by the community of faith, and whether the writing had a powerful and positive effect on the community of faith,

D. These sacred writings probably came to be a known, fixed collection through being gathered and kept at the Temple in Jerusalem.

1. The Temple was a natural site to serve as an archive for those books publicly recognized as "holy," as evidenced by the ark with its tablets being transferred to Solomon's Temple (1 Ki. 8:6-9; 2 Chron. 5:7-10) and by the finding of the Book of the Law in the Temple during Josiah's reign (2 Ki. 22:8, 23:2, 24; 2 Chron. 34:15, 30). The destruction of the northern kingdom would have made gathering the sacred literature into a single collection at the Temple even more natural.

2. 2 Maccabees 2 (late 2d or early 1st century B.C.) tells of Nehemiah (5th century B.C.) founding a library by gathering "the books about the kings and prophets and the books of David and letters of kings about sacred gifts." This would make sense after the calamity of the exile.

3. 2 Maccabees 2 also says that Judas Maccabeus gathered the writings that had been scattered by the Maccabean War. Given the hostility of Antiochus Epiphanes against the Scriptures (1 Macc. 1:56ff), it makes sense that Judas would have needed to gather copies together when the persecution ended. Judas knew that the prophetic gift had ceased long before his time (1 Macc. 9:27, 4:46, 14:41), so it is likely that in gathering the scattered Scriptures, he and his companions (the Hasidim) classified the now complete collection in the way which became traditional, i.e., dividing the miscellaneous non-Mosaic books into the Prophets and the other Books (Beckwith, 152). (Note: 1 Maccabees dates to about 100 B.C.)

a. That would explain why the Prologue to Ecclesiasticus (130 B.C.) implies that the Hagiographa (Writings) are a closed collection of old books (Beckwith, 110ff) but were formed recently enough to have not yet acquired a fixed title (Beckwith, 142).

b. This reconstruction also explains why Josephus in about 94 A.D. wrote that the inspired books of the Jews had been revered by them for *long ages*, during which time no one dared to alter them. According to Josephus, after Artaxerxes there had been a failure of the exact succession of prophets (Beckwith, 118-19).

4. We know from Josephus, the Tosephta (A.D. 100-300; teachings omitted from the Mishnah), and the Mishnah that the Holy Scriptures continued to be kept in the Temple until its destruction in A.D. 70. According to the Tosephta, other copies of the Scriptures could not be brought into the Temple (only the Temple Scriptures were exempt from the Pharisaic regulation that the Scriptures made the hands unclean, a regulation intended to protect them from careless and irreverent treatment), which confirms that the original bringing of the Scriptures into the Temple lay far enough in the past that nothing of the kind was permitted anymore.

### III. New Testament Canon

A. Again, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between the authoritativeness of the individual writings, which they possess by virtue of being inspired by God, and the recognition by the church at large of the *group* of writings as being the *only* authoritative writings. The latter is a process that occurs over time, albeit a divinely guided one (as evidenced by 2 Tim. 1:13-14 and the precedent of the O.T. canon). As stated by David Payne:

The Canon and the authority of the New Testament are thus closely related topics; but it is misleading to equate the terms "canonical" and "authoritative," because the Canon is not an authoritative list of books, but a list of authoritative books. Each book of the New Testament was authoritative from the beginning; but none of them could be called canonical until collections and lists of such books were made. The only authority the Canon wields is that of its component parts. ("The

Text and the Canon of the New Testament," in *The International Bible Commentary*, 1005.)

B. The individual N.T. writings were circulating long before a consensus on a closed list of authoritative books was reached. During that time most of the books were recognized as authoritative throughout the church, and even those that were questioned in some quarters were recognized as authoritative in large segments of the church.

1. As I pointed out last week, the authority of certain N.T. writings is expressly recognized by other N.T. writers. Peter referred to Paul's writings as "Scripture" (2 Pet. 3:15b-16), Jude quoted 2 Pet. 3:3 as authority (vv. 17-18), and Paul quoted Lk. 10:7 as "Scripture" (1 Tim. 5:18).

2. All N.T. writings except 3 John and Jude were cited or alluded to by Christian writers before the middle of the 2d century, most of them several times. (Of course, 3 John and Jude may have been cited in writings that did not survive.) Jude is cited several times in the latter part of the 2d century and the beginning of the 3d century.

3. The only N.T. books identified as "disputed" by any writer in the first four centuries are Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and Jude. The dispute usually involved a question by some as to authorship.

C. During the 3d and 4th centuries a general agreement was reached regarding the place of these books in the N.T. canon. This doesn't mean there were no groups with their own set of books, but the worldwide church almost universally came to accept the same 27 books. In the words of Barker, Lane, and Michaels:

The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character. When consideration is given to the diversity in cultural backgrounds and in orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level (quoted in Carson, et. al. *Intro. to N.T.*, 494).

D. At the human level, the consensus on canonicity was achieved by the application of three basic criteria.

1. Conformity between the writing and orthodoxy, i.e., Christian truth recognized as normative in the churches

2. Apostolic authority through direct authorship or association with the author of the writing

3. Widespread and continuous acceptance and usage of the writing by churches everywhere

#### IV. Some Notable Non-Canonical Writings

##### A. Apocrypha

1. As shown above, the Hebrew canon of Scripture was identical to the 39 books of the Protestant O.T. Some believe that the early church included in *its* O.T. canon books in addition to these 39.

2. "The Apocrypha" is the designation traditionally applied to a collection of 15 books, dating from approximately 200 B.C. to A.D. 100, that are not part of the Hebrew canon but which, with one exception (2 Esdras) and some variation, are included in ancient (4th and 5th centuries A.D.) Greek copies of Scripture (and Latin and Syriac copies dependent on Greek versions).

3. The books of the traditional Apocrypha are First Book of Esdras, Second Book of Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Additions to the Book of Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (a.k.a. Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach), Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Prayer of Manasseh, First Book of the Maccabees, and Second Book of the Maccabees.

a. Some collections combine Baruch and Letter of Jeremiah as one book. Additions to Esther may be scattered through the canonical book of Esther, and Prayer of Azariah & the Song of Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon are additions to canonical Daniel.

b. The latest edition of the Oxford Annotated Apocrypha also includes 3 and 4 Maccabees and Psalm 151, which are found in some manuscripts of the Greek Bible.

4. As I pointed out last week, Jesus' canon of Scripture was the Hebrew canon.

a. When Jesus referred to *Scripture* (e.g., Mk. 12:10) or to *the Scriptures* (e.g., Mat. 22:29-32) or to *the Law* (e.g., Jn. 10:34), and when he said "*It is written*" (e.g., Mat. 4:4-10), he was referring to that body of writings recognized by *Jews* as sacred, i.e., to the Hebrew canon.

b. In Lk. 24:44 he refers to Scripture by its traditional Hebrew divisions, "the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms." He never quotes any book of the Apocrypha and never cites one as authority.

5. The canon of Scripture that Christ passed on to his followers was the Hebrew canon.

a. The first Christians shared with their Jewish contemporaries full knowledge of the identity of the canonical books.

b. No N.T. writer quotes an apocryphal book as Scripture, and no N.T. writer introduces a reference to *any* literature outside the Hebrew canon with formulas to indicate he thought of them as inspired Scripture.

(1) There are some arguable references or allusions in the N.T. to one or more books of the Apocrypha, but that is different from citing them as Scripture. Paul quotes pagan poets and writers (1 Cor. 15:33; Acts 17:28) and Jude quotes from and refers to the O.T. pseudepigraphal works of *1 Enoch* (v. 14-15) and *Testament of Moses* (vv. 9, 16), but no one claims that means that Paul or Jude accepted those works as inspired.

(2) If a preacher quotes or refers in a sermon to Shakespeare or Socrates, he's not suggesting that their writings are inspired. It just means that the preacher believes their writings are useful in making his point.

6. Then why were some books of the Apocrypha included in some 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century Greek Bibles? Why were they bound together with a collection of O.T. and N.T. Scriptures?

a. During the first few centuries A.D., the books of the Hebrew canon were not contained in a single volume. They initially were a memorized list of scrolls. And even when codices began replacing scrolls in the second century, those early codices were only long enough to hold 1-3 O.T. books. So there was no physical safeguard against the development of uncertainty about the Hebrew canon.

b. Certainly by the time of Bar Kokhba's revolt in 135 A.D., and quite likely by the end of the first century, the division of Christianity and Judaism into separate religions was clear. As the church became increasingly detached from its Jewish roots, increasingly suspicious of Jewish oral tradition, and increasingly ignorant of Semitic languages, there was increasing uncertainty about the O.T. canon among some Christians.

c. In the latter part of the 2d century, the books of the Apocrypha, being a respected part of Jewish religious literature and familiar to Christians, came to be seen by some Christians, primarily in the Western church, as Scripture. This group lost the distinction the Jews had made between religious writings that were respected and profitable and writings that were inspired and authoritative. The presence of these writings in Greek Bibles reflects that confusion. Other Christians regarded the writings as useful reading but distinguished them from Scripture.

7. In the mid-3rd century, Origen addressed the problem and was not prepared to consider as canonical books outside the Hebrew Bible because there was no consensus in the church to include such books (Beckwith, 394-95). During the 4th century, this position was adopted by several writers in the Eastern church and by Jerome in the Western church. As

Jerome put it, the church reads some of these books "for example of life and instruction of manners" (manners = behavior), but the church does not "apply them to establish any doctrine" (Beckwith, 343).

8. Nevertheless, Augustine's (A.D. 354-450) high view of the Apocrypha (note he still made some distinction between those books and the Hebrew canon - *ISBE*, 1:600) influenced Western church councils at the very end of the 4th century to place those books on the same level as those of the Hebrew canon, and in the course of time they came to be considered as of equal authority.

9. Throughout the following centuries, some Western church leaders continued to follow the stricter canon of Jerome (*ISBE*, 1:600), but most users of the Bible made no distinction between apocryphal books and the others (Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 99); all alike were handed down as part of the Vulgate (that is, Jerome's Latin translation plus some apocryphal additions from the Old Latin version - *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 37). In the late 7th century, even the Eastern church showed a tendency to concur in the acceptance of the Apocrypha (Archer, *O.T. Survey*, 77). In the early Middle Ages, fresh attention was paid to the question of canonicity, and in the mid 12th century Hugh of St. Victor echoed the distinction of Jerome between the Hebrew canon and the Apocrypha.

10. The 16th-century Protestant Reformation, with its theme of *sola scriptura*, raised anew the issue of what really constituted the Holy Scriptures. Luther and Calvin denied canonical status to the Apocrypha, returning to the teaching of the N.T. and the Jewish background against which it must be understood. In response, the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in 1546 declared as cursed anyone who did not accept the whole of the Vulgate as canonical (the edition intended includes all of the Apocrypha except 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh).

11. In 1642 and 1672 Greek Orthodox synods confirmed as a genuine part of Scripture 1 Esdras (= Vulgate 3 Esdras); Tobit; Judith; 1, 2, and 3 Maccabees (3 Maccabees is in some manuscripts of the Greek Bible), Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and the Letter of Jeremiah (Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 82). I presume that the additions to Esther and the additions to Daniel were reckoned as part of the canonical books. Today they also accept Psalm 151 (which is in some manuscripts of the Greek Bible). The Russian Orthodox Church accepts all of these plus 2 Esdras (which is not in the LXX) (*Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 61).

12. Despite its non-canonical status, many early non-Catholic English translations of the Bible included the Apocrypha, usually as a separate collection and with some qualifying remarks.

## B. Old Testament Pseudepigrapha

1. This is a collection of some 65 documents connected with but not part of the O.T. and written by Jews and Christians between 300 B.C. and A.D. 200 (a few writings fall outside these dates). The collection came to be called Pseudepigrapha ("writings with false

superscriptions") because in many cases the person with whom they are identified was not the author.

2. The documents can be arranged under five loosely defined types: apocalyptic literature and related works; testaments; expansions of the O.T. and legends; wisdom and philosophical literature; and prayers, psalms, and odes. The writings include such titles as "Apocalypse of Abraham," "Letter of Aristeas," "1,2 & 3 Enoch," "Martyrdom & Ascension of Isaiah," "Testament of Job," "3 & 4 Maccabees," "Sibylline Oracles," and "Odes of Solomon." The standard edition of these works is the 2-volume set edited by James H. Charlesworth.

3. Unlike the Apocrypha, which were bound with ancient Greek and Latin copies of Scriptures, the Pseudepigrapha never approached canonical status (except 3 Maccabees and Psalm 151 in the Eastern Orthodox Churches). They are important because of the light they shed on the Jewish background of the N.T.

### C. N.T. Apocrypha

1. This is a large body of literature that, generally speaking, refers to Christian writings from the 2d to 9th centuries A.D. that claim to preserve memories of Jesus and the apostles and that frequently imitate N.T. genres of literature. There are Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses. The standard edition of these works is the 2-volume set originally edited by Edgar Hennecke and then by Wilhelm Schneemelcher.

2. No group regards any of these writings as canonical. Their value is the insight they provide into Christianity in the early centuries.

D. Ante-Nicene Fathers (before Council of Nicea in A.D. 325) - No group regards these writings as canonical. Their value is the insight they provide into early Christian understanding and practice.

1. Apostolic Fathers - This is a group of writings by Christians from the late 1st century to mid 2d century. It includes the writings of Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Barnabas of Alexandria, Hermas of Rome, and Papias of Hierapolis. Some collections also include the Epistle of Diognetus and the Didache.

2. Second-Century Apologists - This group includes Quadratus of Athens, Aristides of Athens, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, and Melito of Sardis.

3. Third-Century Church Fathers (from late 2d to mid 3d) - These include Irenaeus (Smyrna & Gaul), Clement (Alexandria, Antioch, & Jerusalem), Tertullian (Carthage), Origen (Alexandria & Caesarea), and Cyprian (Carthage).

### E. Dead Sea Scrolls

1. These are scrolls and fragments, dating from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 70., discovered between 1947 and 1960 at seven sites along the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, one of which was eleven caves near Wadi Qumran. They are important for study of the O.T. text and for the information they provide on the Palestinian background of the N.T.

2. Most modern scholars are convinced that the Qumran community that collected the writings was a sect of Palestinian Jews called Essenes (or some branch of them).

3. The findings include fragments of every O.T. book except Esther, major manuscripts of Isaiah and Psalms, commentaries on nine O.T. books, parts of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, sectarian works, and several collections of writings.

#### F. The Nag Hammadi Library

1. These are writings that were discovered in 1945 near the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt. There are 13 leather-bound books containing 45 separate writings that were translated from Greek into Coptic. The manuscripts date from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, but the Greek originals were probably from the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries.

2. These are writings that were valued and even considered as Scripture by an early sect of heretical Christians known as Gnostics. There is some overlap with some of the above collections. For example, The Gospel of Thomas is included in both the N.T. Apocrypha and the Nag Hammadi Library. Their value is in the insight they provide into 2d-century Gnosticism and into the religious climate of that time.

#### G. Philo and Josephus

1. Philo lived from about 20 B.C. to A.D. 50. He was the most prolific author of the non-Palestinian branch of Judaism most influenced by Greek culture.

2. Flavius Josephus (born A.D. 37) is the most important Jewish historian of the early Roman period.

#### H. Rabbinic Writings

1. Midrash - Comments on the Law and narratives and sermons on the entire O.T. dating from about 100 B.C. to A.D. 300.

2. Babylonian Talmud - Includes the Mishnah and Gemara. The Mishnah is a digest of oral laws and interpretations of the Law by the Great Rabbis. As a writing, it dates from about A.D. 200, but it reflects earlier traditions. The Gemara is a commentary on the Mishnah by later Rabbis. This Gemara dates to about A.D. 500.

3. Palestinian Talmud - Gemara dating from about A.D. 200.

4. Tosefta - Teachings omitted from the Mishnah, dating from approximately A.D. 100-300.

## V. Text: How Do We Know What Was Originally Written?

### A. Old Testament

1. History of the text (see, "Text" in *ISBE*, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, and *New Bible Dictionary*)

a. The Jews had a very reverent attitude toward their Scriptures. As Josephus said in *Against Apion*:

We have given practical proof of our reverence for our own Scriptures. For, although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable; and it is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them.

b. This attitude is rooted in the attitude of the biblical writers themselves. For instance, Dt. 4:2 states: "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you."

c. Their concern with the preservation of the original text is evident from the fact measures designed for that end were in use before the Christian era (e.g., the Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah marks doubtful words). The fact "scribes" were so well established by the N.T. period proves they were not a recent innovation. It was undoubtedly their activity that gave currency to such terms as "jot" and "tittle."

d. Despite this concern for accuracy, variant readings crept into the copies of the Hebrew books. That is a natural result of human imperfection. The variations in copies apparently became a growing cause of concern in the first century A.D.

e. For several hundred years following the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, it appears that an effort was made to standardize the Hebrew text. In other words, there was a gradual purging of variants judged to be incorrect.

f. From roughly A.D. 500-1000 the task of preserving the Hebrew text was continued by a group of scholars known as the Masoretes, which literally means "transmitters." They were obsessed with faithfully copying the sacred Scripture they had received. They developed sophisticated mechanisms for reducing errors in copying, introduced vowel signs into the text, and made marginal notes regarding the text. Two families of Masoretes, ben Asher and ben Naphtali vied with each other in transcribing and preserving the best Hebrew text, their differences being largely confined to matters of vocalization. The Hebrew text passed on by them is called the Masoretic text.

## 2. Witnesses to the text

### a. Hebrew MSS

(1) Dead Sea Scrolls, dating from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 70, include pieces of every book except Esther. The texts of Isaiah, Psalms, and Samuel are most fully represented.

(2) The Nash Papyrus is a fragment containing the Ten Commandments and Dt. 6:4 dating from the 2d century B.C.

(3) Cairo Genizah Fragments date from the 6th to 9th centuries A.D.

(4) The principal Masoretic MSS date from the 9th to 11th centuries A.D. One reason for the scarcity of early Hebrew MSS was the reverence with which the scrolls were held in Judaism. When MSS showed signs of wear and tear, they were disposed of. The faithfulness with which the Hebrew text was transmitted is indicated by comparison of the Isaiah scroll found at the Dead Sea with the M.T. of Isaiah from 1,000 years later. Millar Burrows writes (quoted in McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, 78-79):

Of the 166 *words* in Isaiah 53, there are only seven *letters* in question. Ten of these letters are simply a matter of spelling, which does not affect the sense. Four more letters are minor stylistic changes, such as conjunctions. The remaining three letters comprise the word "light," which is added in verse 11, and does not affect the meaning greatly. Furthermore, this word is supported by the LXX and IQ Is (one of the Isaiah scrolls found in the Dead Sea caves). Thus, in one chapter of 166 words, there is only one word (three letters) in question after a thousand years of transmission -- and this word does not significantly change the meaning of the passage.

(5) Samaritan Pentateuch is a copy of the first five books preserved by Samaritans (written in Samaritan letters, an ancient style of Hebrew script) after their split with the Jews hundreds of years before Christ. The oldest MSS is the Abisha Scroll, parts of which are probably as old as the 11th century A.D.

b. Versions - Note that textual criticism must first be done on the versions to determine their original text before they can be used to shed light on the Hebrew of which they are a translation.

### (1) Greek

(a) The Septuagint (LXX) is the earliest translation of the O.T. into Greek. It began in the first part of the 3d century B.C. and then grew by stages so that it was complete well before the Christian era. There were a number of revisions of LXX from the beginning of the Christian era, the results of which are spread through the surviving MSS.

(b) Aquila's version was produced in A.D. 128. Only fragments of this work survive, though some are extensive.

(c) Theodotian's revision of an earlier Greek version (origin unknown) was done in the late 2d century A.D.

(d) Symacchus's version dates from the end of the 2d to the beginning of the 3d century A.D.

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### **EXCURSUS: The LXX in the N.T.**

The N.T. writers wrote in Greek, which was the dominant language of their day. The O.T., of course, was written almost exclusively in Hebrew, the Aramaic exceptions being two words as a place name in Gen. 31:47, Jer. 10:11, Dan. 2:4b-7:28, and Ezra 4:8 – 6:18, 7:12-26. That means that when the N.T. writers reported on Jesus' or someone else's reference to the O.T. or when they referred to it themselves, they had to put the O.T. verses in Greek. Not surprisingly, the N.T. writers (and possibly those on whom they report) often referred to the LXX, which was the standard Greek version of their day.

The fact is that the LXX differs in places from the Masoretic Text, meaning the LXX rendering is not how the Masoretic Text would be rendered in Greek. So does this mean that in those instances the N.T. writers misrepresented O.T. Scripture? Much can and maybe should be said about this, but I'm just going to mention a couple of things. Those who want more can read Roger Nicole's chapter titled "New Testament Use of the Old Testament" from *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F.H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), pp. 137-151. It's online at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/nicole.html>.

First, where the LXX referred to by the N.T. writers differs from the Masoretic Text, it's possible that the LXX reflects the original Hebrew text. In other words, the change may have crept into the Masoretic text rather than the text on which the particular LXX reference is based. It's also possible that what the N.T. writer originally wrote agreed with the Masoretic Text but an error crept into early copies by a copyist assuming that the LXX he knew was being cited.

Second, everyone understood that the LXX was a translation, not the original O.T. Scriptures themselves. Even if the N.T. writers cited as Scripture this standard Greek translation of the O.T. without bothering to correct an inaccuracy in an irrelevant detail, it would not mean they were vouching for the translation's accuracy with regard to that detail. It simply would mean that the Spirit judged in his omniscience that correcting that detail at that time would distract unduly from the purpose of the writing.

If in speaking to a group reared on the KJV, a preacher says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthen me" (KJV Phi. 4:13), would anyone accuse him of misrepresentation because he did not stop to argue that the Greek text actually says "through *him* who strengthens me" rather than "through *Christ* who strengthens me"? Can you imagine what that would do to

his point? The fact he did not do that would not mean he was vouching for the translation "Christ." It simply would mean it was too peripheral to his point to warrant creating the distraction.

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(2) Aramaic - When the Jews returned from Babylon in the 5th century B.C., they had pretty nearly made the switch from Hebrew to Aramaic as their spoken language. The Hebrew Scriptures had to be translated into Aramaic (on the spot) for those who attended the synagogue. These oral paraphrases were eventually put into writing and are called Targums (meaning "translation" or "paraphrase").

(3) Syriac - There are several Syriac translations, the most important of which is the Peshitta or "common" translation. It probably dates back to the 1st century A.D.

(4) Others - By the 5th century A.D., the O.T. was translated into Latin, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, and Gothic. By the 10th century it was translated into Slavonic and Arabic.

c. Citations - Large portions of the O.T. are also attested in early rabbinic and patristic writings.

### 3. Practice of textual criticism

a. The vast majority of variant readings are scribal slips and can be accounted for by knowledge of common scribal errors, such as confusion of similar letters, transposition of letters, incorrect word division, omissions, repetitions, and confusion of similar sounding words.

b. Deliberate scribal editing, which is rare, can often be spotted by recognizing the motive behind the change, such as a desire to avoid expressions they thought were disrespectful to God or to remove what appear to be logical or historical difficulties.

c. Beyond these relatively easy situations, standard principles of textual criticism are applied to identify which variant is more likely to be original. In general, one is to prefer: the shorter reading, the more difficult reading, the older reading, the reading with the best external MSS support, the reading that best explains the rise of the other readings, and the reading that best suits the style of the author.

## B. New Testament

### 1. Witnesses to the text

#### a. MSS

(1) There are thousands of ancient handwritten Greek copies of the N.T. and its parts. There are about 99 papyri (MSS made of papyrus, generally the earliest), about 300 uncial MSS (written in Greek capital letters, generally on leather [vellum] or parchment), about 2,850 minuscule MSS (written in flowing Greek script, usually later than uncials), and about 2,400 lectionary MSS (a book of lessons for the church year) mostly from the 8th century or later (more than 270 of which are uncials).<sup>1</sup>

(2) The earliest complete New Testament MSS known today is Codex Sinaiticus, which dates from the 4th century. Codex Vaticanus, which is missing a few leaves, dates from the same time. Codex Alexandrinus, dating from the 5th century, contains most of the N.T. Two other notable fifth-century uncial manuscripts are Codex Ephraem and Codex Bezae. Codex Ephraem is missing much of the O.T. but has all or parts of every N.T. book except 2 Thessalonians and 2 John. Codex Bezae contains, with gaps, the four Gospels, Acts, and a fragment of 3 John in Latin.

(3) Less complete MSS date from the late second or early third century and possibly earlier. These include the Chester Beatty papyri (containing parts of the Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, Hebrews, and Revelation)<sup>2</sup> and the Bodmer papyri (containing parts of John, parts of Luke, and letters of Peter and Jude).<sup>3</sup> There is general agreement that the earliest MSS is the Rylands fragment of a few verses in John 18, which scholars currently tend to date closer to A.D. 100 than to A.D. 130. However, the argument has been made in the scholarly literature that P64/67 containing parts of Matthew 3 and 5 (and, by implication, P4 containing parts of Luke 1, 3, 5, and 6) date as early as A.D. 100.

b. Versions - Missionaries of the early centuries had the N.T. translated into local languages when Greek would not serve the needs of the people. This was done as early as the 2d century. The most significant versions for N.T. textual criticism are the Latin, Syriac, and Coptic.

c. Patristic quotations - The entire text of the N.T. could probably be recovered from the quotations found in the writings of the early church fathers (ISBE, 4:818).

## 2. Comparison with other ancient works:<sup>4</sup>

a. Homer's *Iliad* (written around 800 B.C.) has only 643 manuscripts, the earliest of which is about 400 years after the writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures rounded from Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, cited in McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> The portion containing Paul's letters and Hebrews (P46) is usually dated to A.D. 200, but an argument for a late-first-century date has been presented in the scholarly literature. The portion containing the Gospels and Acts is dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The portion containing Revelation (P47) is dated to the latter part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> The John portion (P66) usually is dated A.D. 175-200 but an argument for A.D. 125 has been presented in the scholarly literature. The Luke portion (P75) is dated to A.D. 200. The Peter and Jude portion (P72) is dated from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> to early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>4</sup> From McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 36-38 and Hurtado and Bruce, "Can We Trust the N.T." in *The History of Christianity* (Batavia, IL: Lion Publishing, 1990).

b. Herodotus's *History* (written around 480-425 B.C.) has only 8 manuscripts, the earliest of which is about 1,350 years after the writing.

c. Thucydides' *History* (written between 460-400 B.C.) has only 8 manuscripts, the earliest of which is about 1,300 years after the writing.

d. Works of Demosthenes (written around 300 B.C.) have only 200 manuscripts, the earliest of which is about 1,400 years after the writing.

e. Caesar's *Gallic Wars* (written between 100 and 44 B.C.) has only ten manuscripts, the earliest of which is about 1,000 years after the writing.

f. Only 35 books of the original 142 of Livy's *Roman History* (written about 59 B.C.-A.D. 17) survive, and these are known from only 20 manuscripts. The earliest is a partial manuscript that is about 400 years after the writing; the earliest of the other 19 manuscripts is about 1,000 years after the writing.

g. Only 4<sup>1/2</sup> of the original 14 books of Tacitus's *Histories* (written about A.D. 100) survive, and only 10 of the 16 books of his *Annals* (written about A.D. 100) survive. According to F.F. Bruce, there are only 2 manuscripts of these works, which date from the 9th and 11th centuries.

h. Pliny Secundus's *Natural History* (written about A.D. 61-113) has only 7 manuscripts, the earliest of which is about 750 years after the writing.

### 3. Textual criticism

a. The vast majority of variant readings are scribal slips and can be accounted for by knowledge of common scribal errors, such as confusion of similar letters, transposition of letters, omissions, repetitions, and confusion of similar sounding words.

b. Intentional changes can often be spotted by recognizing the motive behind the change (e.g., correcting perceived linguistic, historical, or doctrinal errors or removing ambiguity). There are a number of other principles that text critics use to choose between variants, similar to the practice of O.T. criticism.

c. The only passages in the N.T. of any length that are of doubtful authenticity are Jn. 8:1-11 and Mk. 16:9-20. The other issues involve a relatively few variant readings of individual words or short phrases (less than one per page are footnoted in RSV), none of which affect any substantial matter of doctrine. In the words of E. Abbot:

About nineteen-twentieths of the variations have so little support that . . . no one would think of them as rival readings, and nineteen-twentieths of the remainder are of so little importance that their adoption or rejection would cause no appreciable difference in the sense of the passages in which they occur. (ISBE, 4:818)

