



WIN Program: Witnessing in Neighborhoods
Advanced Class on How We Got the Bible

Week Two How Did We Get the Bible and Can We
Trust It? And Where did the Bible come from?

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October 23, 2013 By Matt Capps

How Did We Get the Bible and Can We Trust It?

This is a guest post from [Darrell Bock](#) (Ph.D., University of Aberdeen). Bock is Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. [You can see the whole series on A God-Centered Worldview here.](#)

The reception of the Bible is a fascinating topic. We are dealing with writings stretched over more than 1400 years. The Bible contains an array of accounts about events, some of which had to have been initially passed on orally. The 66 books of Scripture reflect the work of many different authors, writing in a variety of settings and times. The Old Testament text Protestants use matches that of Judaism. In the ancient world, the process of passing accounts down orally over time before something became written was done with care when material mattered. One of the reasons the apostles had to really know Jesus was because they kept an eye on how the Jesus story was preached ([Acts 1:21-22](#) and the oversight we see in Acts).

Recognition was another step in the process. The New Testament came to be recognized over a period of several centuries. The church did not choose the books of the New Testament. The use of books over time commended certain works over others. Athanasius gives us our earliest list of the 27 books in the AD 367, while Origen (c AD 250) may have mentioned all of them a century earlier (though there is debate whether he named the book of Revelation as manuscripts differ on this point). Either way, the core of the New Testament was functioning as canon by the end of the second century as other evidence shows. At that time, Irenaeus and the Muratorian Canon mention the core of the New Testament, noting the four gospels Acts, the Pauline Epistles, I Peter, and I John. These were the books that had apostolic roots and that churches in many distinct regions were using.

Origen, Irenaeus and the Muratorian Canon predate any church councils where some claim the canonical books were chosen. New Testament books were not chosen but recognized by their use over time in churches. The pressure to identify them had come from a variety of factors: the claim by some that other Scripture about Jesus existed, the challenge of some that some writings circulated as Scripture were not (shown by Marcion's reduced version of Luke as his gospel), and persecution which said Scripture had to be destroyed (so one had to know what to destroy!).

Getting the Bible was a painstaking process of copying. Long before the printing press of the 15th century not to mention computers, copies of Scripture had to be preserved by painstaking copying, one letter at a time. Some copies were made individually. Others were made in scriptoriums where someone read the text. In these locations, many copies were made at once as several scribes listened and wrote. I often tell people the Bible they hold in their hands is possible because many people faithfully over several centuries copied the text to replace worn out copies. Those copies were not perfect, but the fact we have many manuscripts of these texts allows us to reproduce the text with a high level of certainty. Where we are not sure, we do know what the likely options are. Good Bible translations signal the options to you by having a note in the margin that reads "or" with the variant noted. We have over 5800 Greek manuscripts. The

best ancient texts of other works have 100-200 copies. In most cases we are confident what the text should read. In no case do these differences impact the overall teaching of the faith. What they impact is which verses teach an idea and so how many relate to a specific theme.

This copying process can be tested in terms of its accuracy by the many manuscripts we have. Some of the examples of this are amazing. When the Dead Sea scrolls were found we discovered a manuscript of Isaiah 1000 years older than any other version of Isaiah we possessed. The discovered text was virtually identical to its 1000 year older descendant. Although some issues remain in particular spots, the text we have today is a solid reproduction of what was produced.

But having a good copy of the text does not equal knowing its content is trustworthy. That depends on what is in the text one has. Today one hears many claims about errors or contradictions in the Bible. Web sites even boast about the plethora of such texts. Most of what they list is not new. Serious Study Bibles, some of which are dedicated to dealing with such issues, often note these texts and discuss how one can read them. Differences in texts do not mean contradiction automatically.

The claim of the Scripture not being trustworthy either reflects a worldview that says God does not exist or act, attempts to argue that there are errors or contradictory theologies between the biblical books or a combination of these claims.

Many times such claims ignore the difference in perspective or in the usage of terms between authors, creating a problem where one does not really exist. For example, Paul discusses salvation by grace apart from works of the law. James speaks about faith producing works (not works of the law, but as a product of genuine faith. James is showing grace at work because faith works. These are not in contradiction. They discuss different time frames. Paul is looking at the start of the process in grace by faith, while James is looking back at the impact of faith down the road.

Other issues ignore a progress in revelation, where early cultural practices are described or prescribed, but only for a time or set context. In these cases, a change in practice has moved into the resolved biblical position. A case such as polygamy in the Old Testament resolving itself into monogamy by the New is an example of this category. The point to keep in mind here is that texts need to be read in their cultural context and with an eye to where they are in the movement of Scripture.

So the application is that texts need to be read, not just cited in a list side by side. They also need to be studied, sometimes quite carefully.

There is a lesson here for the church. The less we show how the Bible works, the more likely lists like this will trouble people. I have in mind church leaders here. We need to teach about some of these kinds of issues and how skeptics read the Scripture so people are not caught out by these kinds of differences when skeptics raise them (including the details of what they raise). Encourage people to read Scripture carefully. Be aware of the kinds of issues more skeptical readers raise, even down to the details. Cultivate the awareness and use of serious Study Bible tools that can help people with specifics when the challenges are raised. There is nothing new in these doubts. Answers and responses exist. People need to know where they can go and have these kinds of issues explained so that one knows the difference between a difference and a contradiction. The Bible can be trusted. Resources exist to show this. The church needs to know what they are and use them.

Where did the Bible come from?

By [Matt Slick](#)

First of all, the [Bible](#) is the result of God's act where he inspired various people to write different books of the Bible over a period of about 1500 years. The Old Testament has 39 books¹ written in Hebrew, and the New Testament has 27 books written in Greek. The New Testament tells us that Scripture is inspired ([2 Timothy 3:16](#)) and that the Holy Spirit is the one who moves people in this process of writing ([2 Pet. 1:21](#)). Second, the people of God, the Jews in the Old Testament period and the Christians in the New Testament period, recognized what is and is not the word of God. Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." This means that the Christians (the sheep) hear God's voice in the manifestation of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures. They accepted those books that we now have today in the Bible because God worked through the Church to give us the New Testament. Therefore, the Bible comes from those who are moved by the Holy Spirit both to write and to recognize God's word.

In the Old Testament, [God](#) moved various Jews to write the books. These men were recognized as prophets because they were often able to work miracles which verified the authority given to them by God. In the New Testament period, the criteria by which canonicity was determined was basically as follows. First, the documents needed to be penned by the apostles of Jesus or those who were under the apostles' direction. Second, the writings had to demonstrate authoritative style and theological orthodoxy consistent with other writings held to be inspired from God. Third, Christians recognized the writings as authoritative within the church.

Are the Biblical Documents Transmitted to us trustworthy?

Because the Bible is inspired by God, it is necessarily inerrant in the original writings. God doesn't make mistakes. This means that the direct writing of the original documents were without error. However, it is true that the copies of these ancient documents are not perfect. There are copyist errors, but this does not mean the entire Bible is untrustworthy. Both the Jews and the Christians took extreme care when copying the biblical documents. Those whose reproduced Scripture considered the work one of the most important things to do. They considered it to be the very word of God, so they were meticulous and extremely careful when copying and would not add opinions or reconstructions of text from memory. But small errors did happen, though infrequently. In fact, we have so many copies of New Testament documents that have been spread throughout the ancient Mediterranean area that we can reconstruct the originals to almost 100% accuracy. The Bible is extremely reliable.

- ¹ In 1546 the Roman Catholic Church added seven books to the Bible in response to the Protestant Reformation. They are Tobit, Judith, Maccabees 1 and 2, Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch.