

“How Did We Get Our Bible Anyway?”

In our study of God’s Word this morning we came to Mark 16:9-20, a passage that contains the preface statement in the NIV, “The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20.” That statement raises some questions for us, such as: What manuscripts are they talking about? If the passage wasn’t in some early manuscripts, how did it end up in our English Bibles? And perhaps the more basic question: *How did we get our Bible anyway?* I’d like to address that question in this lesson.

The Bible is God’s revelation. 2 Timothy 3:16 indicates, “All Scripture is God-breathed.” It came from God. Furthermore, God worked through human instruments to produce the Scriptures, as explained in 2 Peter 1:20-21, “... men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” The Bible was written over a 1,500 year period of time, beginning with Genesis penned by Moses in 1400 B.C. to the book of Revelation penned by the apostle John in 100 A.D.

[See timeline chart]

When the Spirit of God inspired the Scriptures He used the Hebrew language for the Old Testament (with a small portion in Aramaic) and Greek for the New Testament. Why? Because these were the languages spoken by the authors and the first recipients of the Scriptures.

As time passed, two things happened. One, the original manuscripts were copied in order to preserve the Scriptures and to make it possible for others to read them. Secondly, as time passed and as the gospel spread throughout the world, it became necessary for the Bible to be translated into other languages. We do not today have the original manuscripts. We hold in our laps this evening an *English translation* of the Bible. So how did we get our Bible anyway?

The Preservation of Scripture: What belongs in the Bible and what does not belong?[\[1\]](#)

1. The term *canon* literally means “measuring rod or rule”. In theology, it refers to the closed collection of books that make up the authoritative Scriptures. The Canon consists of the 66 books we know today as the Bible—39 OT books, and 27 NT books. The Canon is recognized by the Church as God’s Word, the authentic and authoritative rule of life for believers.
2. It’s important to point out that the Church does not have the authority to make something to be Scripture. Rather, the Church only recognizes what God has caused to be His written Word. What would be wrong with the Church having authority to make something to be Scripture? The Church would be an authority over Scripture—and this can’t be.

Consider a dollar bill. I don’t have the authority, or the power to make a piece of paper into a dollar bill. In fact, if all of us put our heads together and agreed to make this piece of paper a dollar bill, we still would not be any further ahead. Actually, the deception would be all the greater. I only can recognize what is already a dollar bill. Similarly, only God can make words to be his very words and worthy of inclusion in Scripture.

3. In the formation of the Old Testament Canon, God spoke to prophets and instructed them to write down His

Words (Exodus 24:3-4). The Israelites recognized the collected writings as authoritative (Joshua 1:8; 2 Kings 23:3). The collection of books recognized as God's Word was gathered together from the very beginning of their writing. God instructed the Israelites how to recognize His true prophets (Deuteronomy 13:1-5, 18:20-22). If they failed these tests, they were to be ignored or killed! All 39 books of the Old Testament were collected and recognized as God-inspired by Ezra and the Jewish scribes in the fifth century BC. In the New Testament, there is no record of any dispute between Jesus and the Jews over the extent of the canon. In fact, Jesus puts His stamp of approval on the accepted Old Testament books (Luke 24:44-49). Notice also that Jesus identified the Scripture as one completed book from Abel, the first martyr (Genesis) to Zacharias, the last one killed in 2 Chronicles 24. It is interesting to note that Jesus did NOT include any apocryphal books. They were in existence during His time and included accounts of other martyrs later than Zacharias. This shows that Jesus did not include them in Scripture (Matthew 23:35).

4. In the formation of the New Testament Canon, the 27 books of the New Testament were recognized as God's authoritative Word by several factors:
 - a. **Apostolic endorsement** (the author had to be an apostle or have an endorsement by an apostle [Peter endorsed Mark's Gospel, and Paul was used to authenticate Luke's books]). (John 14:26 and John 16:13-14 show how the Holy Spirit will reveal Truth to the Apostles and remind them of what Jesus had said to them, and the Apostles would in turn will write it down for all believers).
 - b. **Consistency with the rest of Scripture.** Martin Luther wrestled with the book of James because it seemed to contradict the doctrine of Justification that he was fighting the Roman Catholic church over.
 - c. **The perception of a writing as "God-breathed" on the part of an overwhelming majority of believers.** The intrinsic qualities of the book attest to its divine origin as Christians read them. Jesus said in John 10:27 "My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me". As with the case of Hebrews, the majestic glory of Christ is so evident to believers that there can be no question as to its place in the Canon. An over-whelming perception of a writing as God-breathed on the part of an overwhelmingly majority of believers--which seems to be the case with the book of Hebrews—whose authorship is not perfectly clear—though many credit Paul.

The first official recognition of the 27 books of the New Testament was 397 AD at the Council of Carthage. Of course individual books were already accepted as Scripture before this point (2 Peter 3:16; I Timothy 5:17).

What about the Apocrypha?

5. The Apocrypha (lit. "things that are hidden", or "deuterocanonical" as the Roman Catholics refer to them) is not part of the Canon. They were never part of the Hebrew Scriptures, though the Septuagint included them (Greek translation of the OT—for the Greek-speaking Jews). They were included in Jerome's Latin Vulgate (completed in AD 404), but he said they were not "books of the canon", only "books of the church". Only in 1546, at the Council of Trent, did the Roman Catholic Church officially declare the Apocrypha to be part of its canon. Among other things, this was done to help strengthen its defense against the Reformer, Martin Luther. There are at least 4 reasons why the Apocrypha was never recognized as part of the Canon:
 - a. They have no internal witnesses that speak of their own claim of divine inspiration. They don't claim to be God's Words.

- b. The Apocrypha originated from Jewish people. And yet, these same Jewish people did not consider them as God's words. Even Josephus, the Jewish historian, said "no more words of God were added to Scripture after about 435 BC.
- c. There were not considered as Scripture by Jesus or the New Testament authors. Jude 14 quotes a prophecy by Enoch which is also recorded in the Book of Enoch 1:9. Hebrews 11:35 *may* be referring to the record of events found in 2 Maccabees 6:18 to 7:42. None of these references refer to the Apocrypha books as Scripture. None are introduced or cited with a phrase like "God says", or "Scripture says", or "it is written", which are phrases that imply the divine authority of the words cited. These were cited more for the purposes of illustration than proof. Paul has quoted even pagan poets as saying truth but does not equate any of their works as inspired by God. It's also helpful to see that I Enoch, nor the pagan poets that Paul mentions are even part of the Apocrypha. No book of the Apocrypha is even mentioned in the NT.
- d. They contain teachings that contradict the rest of the Bible (i.e. works salvation—2 Maccabees 12:45-46; Prayer for the dead—Tobit 12:9; they justify falsehood and deception, and support a morality based upon expediency; they teach creation of the world out of pre-existent matter; giving of alms makes atonement for sin, and more).

Should we expect any more writings to be added to the Canon? Hebrews 1:1-2 seems to answer this question very clearly...read...The writer makes a contrast between the former speaking of old by the prophets, and the recent speaking in the last days by God's Son. This is a strong indication that the final revelation given by God has come through His Son. Throughout chapters 1 and 2 of Hebrews, God reveals to us that the revelation that came through Jesus is far superior to that of any previous prophet.

Where do we learn of this revelation that came through Jesus? The New Testament Scripture. The Holy Spirit came to the Apostles and reminded them of what Jesus had taught and also led them into all Truth so they could write it down as the Holy Spirit carried them (John 14:26 and John 16:13-14). One test of whether or not a book was included in the Canon was Apostolic endorsement—what are the biblical qualifications of an apostle? They were with Jesus during His earthly ministry the whole time, from John's baptism to the time when Jesus ascended into Heaven, and they had to be eye witnesses of His resurrection. None of those qualifications could ever be met past the first century. And so, it's clear that the New Testament writings are the final, authoritative, and sufficient revelation of the redemptive works of Christ.

- 6. **The Canon is now closed.** Therefore, any attempt to add to what God has already given is a grave mistake. Read Revelation 22:18-19...the primary reference is to the book of Revelation. But it is no accident that that this statement comes at the end of the last chapter of Revelation, and Revelation is the last book of the New Testament. Even the message of Revelation makes it clear that it must be placed last in the Canon, for its focus is on the future hope and God's new Creation. Just like the book of Genesis has to be first in the Canon because it teaches us of creation. (Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32; Proverbs 30:6—these passages give a warning not to add, but more is written after them. What do we make of this? Simply put, they warn that no unauthorized writer should ever claim to be writing God's Words).
- 7. God has preserved His Word for us today. We can be assured of this because God is faithful. And because we know that this is God's Word. He has more at stake than any of us. Based upon His character, and based upon the fact that so much is riding upon us having His completed Word in our hands, we can rest assured that we

have all that He wants us to have, and none more. Remember that God is sovereign and in complete control of the universe, the church, and our lives. He is able to protect and preserve His Word.

Archaeological Support

It is also helpful to see that the more archeologists and textual scholars have studied, the more they verify that God has preserved His inerrant, infallible, inspired Word for us today. The Bible in our hands today is the most accurate representation of any original manuscript from the ancient or present world! Only the Almighty only wise God could and would do this for His creatures.

Archeological finds not only verify the events recorded in the OT as an accurate historical record, but they show the remarkable accuracy with which God preserved and transmitted these texts to us, demonstrating the reliability of God's Word today. This is the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These old manuscripts of the OT (believed to be from 100 BC to 70 AD) were found to be dated almost 1,000 years older than any other Hebrew Old Testament manuscript previously in existence. Even after all those years between a copy made in 100 BC and a copy made in 900 AD, 95 % of the text was word for word identical! The other 5 % of the text was chiefly variations in spelling and obvious slips of the pen. The more texts we find the more they verify that today we have an accurately transmitted copy of the original inspired text given the prophets by God.

The NT has even greater numbers of Greek manuscripts (over 5,000) with some dating to within 70 years of their writing. After much study and research scholars have produced a few current Greek texts that seek to use all that information to produce a reliable text as close as possible to the original writing. It is from these texts that we have our contemporary language versions of the Bible translated. There are some differences between the manuscripts and Greek texts you would find available today.

Some claim there are 10,000 "errors" in the NT today. This is very misleading and deceptive. It is true that there are that many "variants" which critics of the Bible have falsely called "errors". A variant is counted any time anything in a manuscript differs from any other manuscript (or copy). This difference is counted again in every copy where it appears. So if a single word is spelled differently (even names transliterated from Hebrew to Greek using a different vowel) in 3,000 copies, that is counted as 3,000 variants but only involves the question of a single word like "the" or maybe one letter.

Actually there are less than 40 places in the Greek NT manuscripts where these variants occur and most those are a matter of spelling or word order. Even as archeology studies these manuscripts we are getting a better understanding of these variants. This is settling more of those questions of differences and verifying the accuracy of the NT we have in our hands today. We can be certain that we have 100% of the NT and today less than ½ a percent is in question as to which text has the original reading. And none of those variants change the biblical teaching of the passages in question either.

So what about Mark 16:9-20?

As mentioned earlier the NIV states, "The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20." The statement is included to let the reader understand that the oldest Greek manuscripts omit this section. In other words, there's a real possibility that Mark did not write this ending to his Gospel. Apparently, someone else did.

There is external evidence to suggest this. For instance, the fourth century church fathers Eusebius and Jerome noted that almost all Greek manuscripts available to them lacked verses 9-20. In fact, there's even a shorter ending that some manuscripts have.

There is also *internal* evidence. Verse 9 introduces Mary Magdalene as if she was a new person in the book,

even though Mark already mentioned her three times (15:40, 47; 16:1).^[2]

Why do various English translations differ from each other at certain points?

In part it's because of the growing availability of older manuscripts. Perhaps the following chart will help explain... [show chart of translation process]

^[1] I am indebted to Pastor Darrel Schrock for his efforts in developing much of the following explanation for use in a Bibliology class used to train church leaders in Eastern Europe .

^[2] Observations made by John MacArthur, *MacArthur's Quick Reference Guide to the Bible*, p. 187.