

# Canonicity Considerations

By Martin Pickup

## Apostolic Authority and the Christian Canon

In previous material we advanced the argument that the historical evidence for Jesus' miracles supports his claim to be the Son of God. If this proposition is true, then everything Jesus taught during his earthly ministry must also be true. Simply put, if Jesus is the Son of God, we can rest assured that he knew what he was talking about!

The ramifications here are profound. If Jesus truly is the Son of God, then he has power and authority over the lives of human beings, and it is incumbent upon all of us to submit to his divine authority. This means that we should accept as authoritative the teaching of the men whom Jesus affirmed as his official spokesmen. It is from the eyewitnesses whom Jesus appointed as his ambassadors, and from their associates, that we learn what Jesus taught during his earthly ministry and what he wants us to do.

Jesus declared that his apostles would be guided by the Holy Spirit as they delivered his message to the world. According to Luke's record of the apostolic testimony, Jesus commissioned his apostles with these words: "You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of my Father upon you ... [you will be] clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:48-49). The apostle John records the following statement of Jesus: "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when he, the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:12-13). The significance of

such affirmations must not be missed. Jesus calls upon us to accept as authoritative the teaching of his appointed spokesmen, for their teaching would be inspired by the Holy Spirit. They were to testify to the world about what Jesus said personally during his earthly ministry, as well as about additional things that God wanted revealed to mankind.

The apostles and the earliest disciples are, of course, no longer with us. But that fact does not mean that we are left without a standard to follow. The teachings of the spokesmen of Christ remain accessible to us through the authoritative writings that they left behind. It is these writings that constitute the standard by which Christians should guide their lives.

### **The Kanōn**

The technical designation for such an authoritative collection of writings is the word *canon*. This term is derived from the Greek word *kanōn*, a word that originally meant “rule” or “standard.” Since the fourth century this term has been used to designate the corpus of documents that Christians regard as divinely inspired. As the term implies, these documents serve as a standard or rule for Christians to follow.

So what specific writings should constitute the Christian canon? The answer is simple: Any and all extant documents that were authored by the apostles and prophets of Christ. Conveniently, all of these writings are readily available to us in “the New Testament” portion of the Bible. But it’s not the fact that they are found in a book we call the Bible that makes them authoritative. It is the fact that they were written by men upon whom Jesus put his stamp of approval—men whom he said would be guided by the Holy Spirit as they revealed his message to the world.

Several of Jesus’ twelve apostles composed treatises and letters that have been preserved through the centuries. The apostle Matthew wrote an account of Jesus’ life and

teaching—a “Gospel” that was written for an audience of Jewish Christians. The apostle Peter wrote two letters to Christians living throughout the provinces of ancient Asia Minor. The apostle John wrote one Gospel and three letters to Christians in Asia, and also the visionary book of Revelation. In addition to the writings of these men, we have several letters written by Paul, the one-time opponent of Christianity who was converted after Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Jesus commissioned Paul to be a special apostle to the Gentile world, and the original apostles confirmed the validity of Paul’s apostolic calling (see Gal. 2:7-9; 2 Pet. 3:15-16).

In addition to the Gospel that bears his name, Luke, the traveling companion of the apostle Paul, wrote the Book of Acts, an account of the rise of the kingdom of Christ in the early decades of the first century. Though Luke was not an apostle, we may presume that Paul considered him to be a prophet, for Paul wrote that both “apostles and prophets” were guided by the Holy Spirit in order to reveal the mystery of the gospel (Eph. 3:4-5). The same can be said of John Mark, another traveling companion of Paul and also an assistant of the apostle Peter; Mark wrote a Gospel account of the life of Christ for the benefit of Roman Christians. In addition to all of the above documents, we also have a couple of letters from James and Jude—two of Jesus’ fleshly brothers who were leaders among Jewish Christians.

These extant writings of the apostles and prophets total 27 in number. These 27 documents are the same books that uniformly have been grouped together since the late fourth century and accepted by believers as the Christian canon. Since the invention of the printing press they have been printed as the New Testament portion of the Bible. But let me repeat that it is incorrect to think of these writings as authoritative because they are “in the

Bible.” They are authoritative because they were written by men whom Jesus affirmed as his inspired spokesmen. The writings of the first-century apostles and prophets make known to every generation “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

### **Were There Other Apostolic Writings?**

There is some evidence to suggest that this group of inspired men may have written a few other documents than just these 27 books. Paul, for instance, appears to speak in 1 Corinthians 5:9 of something he had written to the Corinthians prior to the current letter. Yet, for whatever reason, this earlier letter was not broadly circulated among the early Christian communities and preserved. Aside from the 27 books of the New Testament, no other writings of the apostles and prophets of Christ were preserved through the centuries.

The fact that a few apostolic writings may not have been preserved tends to bother some Christians. They worry that if the apostles and prophets of Christ wrote other documents than those found in our New Testaments, then our ability have a full knowledge of the truth of Christ is somehow compromised. But that is not the case at all. There obviously were a great number of unpreserved *oral* messages that apostles and prophets spoke by inspiration during the first century, yet no one is concerned by the fact that we do not have knowledge of those speeches today. By the same token, we need not be concerned if there were some *written* messages by the apostles that we do not have today. In the writings that have been preserved we are told emphatically that God will provide all generations with “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3). The integrity of God should give us complete confidence that the apostolic writings extant today are sufficient in number to

reveal his complete will to us. The full gospel of Christ that was declared in the first century has been preserved in these 27 extant documents.

## **Erroneous Conceptions of Canonicity**

I argued above that Christians should regard the 27 books of the New Testament as their canon (i.e., religious standard) not because these writings are “in the Bible,” but because the historical evidence indicates that Jesus put his stamp of approval upon the authors of these books. I believe that this is the only proper approach to canonicity. But people often do not address the issue in this way. Let me now discuss what I consider to be two erroneous approaches to canonicity.

### **The Witness of the Holy Spirit**

Some believers affirm that one can know that the books of the Bible are the word of God because the Holy Spirit testifies of their authority to an individual’s heart. In the words of one evangelical writer,

One of the blessings of regeneration is that the Spirit of God opens the eyes of man’s understanding to clearly perceive these strong marks of the divine origin of Scripture ... This inward testimony of the Holy Spirit enables a man to recognize the Scripture as truly from God.

This approach to canonicity is the natural offshoot of Calvinistic doctrine. When Protestant Reformers first began to oppose the Roman Catholic claim that the Church gave the books of the Bible their authority, Protestants argued that the inner witness of the Holy Spirit directly affirmed the Bible’s inspiration to every believer.

The glaring problem with this view is the fact that none of the books of the New Testament ever says that the Spirit will supernaturally speak to an individual and authenticate the inspiration of Scripture. Moreover, this kind of thinking entangles one in religious subjectivism. What if someone claimed that the Spirit had testified to him that *non-apostolic writings* not found in the Bible were also the word of God? Would that make it so? This, in fact, is the very reason that a Mormon offers for how he “knows” that the writings of Joseph Smith are inspired. A subjective approach to canonicity will not work.

### **Recognition by the Early Church**

The most common approach to canonicity today is the view that the post-apostolic Church determined for later generations what books should comprise the Christian canon. This view says that as Christians from the first to the fourth centuries sought to ascertain which writings came from authoritative authors and which did not, they were engaging in the process of “canonizing” Scripture. By the end of the fourth century virtually all congregations accepted all 27 New Testament books, and several Church councils, such as those convened at Hippo and Carthage, gave formal recognition to these books. Thus, according to this view of canonicity, inspired writings became canonical only after they were recognized as such by the Church. Roman Catholicism vividly exemplifies this approach. Catholicism conceives of the Church as an authoritative institution that has officially declared the canonicity of the books of the Bible.

Though most Protestants object to the idea that the proclamation of the Church is what makes a book canonical, they nevertheless tend to resort to virtually the same approach as they offer their explanation of canonicity. They say that the early Church’s acceptance and use of these 27 writings constituted a binding tradition for subsequent generations to follow. So here again, the concept is that canonicity depends upon the action of the post-apostolic Church. Such

thinking permeates the Christian world today. Even people who are vehemently opposed to the notion that Church tradition can ever authorize anything tend to equivocate when it comes to the matter of canonicity. They simply overlook their own inconsistency.

What's wrong with thinking that the post-apostolic Church established the canon? First and foremost, such thinking is predicated upon a wrong conception of the nature of the Church. The Church is viewed as an institution that possesses the right to determine religious doctrine—or, in this case, to determine the standard from which that doctrine is derived. But the original Church of Jesus—the Church spoken of in these very documents—was not of such a nature. Jesus said that he himself possessed all authority and his Church were all those individuals who accepted his authority and submitted to him (Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 1:3-14; 2:17-22). The Church of Jesus was not some religious party with authorizing power. It could never establish anything as true, much less establish what its own standard should be (Matt. 23:8-10).

In the first century there were no Church councils that determined doctrine by majority vote. Nor could Church tradition—no matter how widespread the practice—ever establish anything as true (Gal. 1:6-9; 2:3-14). In the centuries that followed, fallible Christians began to make alterations in the original apostolic teaching, not the least of which were alterations pertaining to the nature of the Lord's Church. People's view of the Church evolved into that of a religious institution which possessed the authority to determine truth. This was a grave error. It is self-contradictory for Christians to accept the Biblical canon on the grounds that it was handed down by an institutional, tradition-authorizing Church, when those very writings teach against that kind of Church.

The statements of post-apostolic Christians provide us with valuable data regarding the apostolic writings, such as evidence about authorship and other matters. But the New Testament

books are not canonical because Church Fathers or Church tradition decided that they were. We can be assured that the 27 documents contained in our New Testaments are inspired, authoritative writings, but the reason for that assurance is the historical evidence that indicates that they are the writings of men whom Jesus promised would be guided by the Holy Spirit.

## **Are Some New Testament Books Forgeries?**

The 27 books in our New Testaments were written by men whom Jesus said would be guided by the Holy Spirit. Because of that fact, we know that these writings constitute our canon—our authoritative, religious standard. But modern Biblical critics deny the authenticity of the authorship claims of some of the New Testament books. These scholars assert that several epistles were written not by the persons identified in the text, but by unknown persons of later decades who wrote under the guise of early Christian leaders. If true, this would undermine the canonicity of those particular New Testament books.

The technical term to describe a writing that makes a false assertion about authorship is *pseudonymous*, a word that means “false name.” In Jewish circles from about 200 BC - AD 300 pseudonymous writings were not uncommon. Several compositions from this time period were falsely attributed to Enoch, to the twelve sons of Jacob, or to other persons of Old Testament fame. In Christian circles from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries similar writings appeared purporting to come from the hand of an apostle or other early disciple of Jesus. These writings include the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Protoevangelium of James*, and many others.

In view of the practice of pseudonymity by some post-apostolic Christians, modern scholars assert that several of the books of the New Testament are pseudonymous works themselves. Now some Christians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> centuries themselves had questions about the

genuineness of a few New Testament books, such as 2 Peter and Jude. But modern scholars go further and boldly assert that not only were these two epistles forgeries, but also Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and James. Scholars claim that these books were written by writers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century who falsely attributed them to first-century Christian leaders. In essence, this view means that these New Testament books are forgeries.

The fact that pseudonymous literature was produced in early Christian circles means that we cannot simply accept the authorial attributions of any ancient work blindly and uncritically. Therefore the issue of the authenticity of the New Testament writings needs to be addressed. Certain New Testament books have their own particular issues, but let me offer here a general response to the charge that some New Testament epistles were pseudonymous.

### **The Purpose of Pseudonymous Literature**

One of the main motivations behind the ancient practice of pseudonymity was the desire to gain acceptance for new religious doctrines that departed from normative Christian teaching. For example, the post-apostolic authors of the so-called *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Peter* were Gnostics, and they hoped to win credence for their false doctrines by writing under the guise of two of Jesus' apostles. But when examining the content of 2 Peter, Jude, 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians or Colossians, one is hard-pressed to find any teachings that are not also mentioned in other New Testament books whose authenticity is unquestioned. Some scholars do claim that novel doctrines are to be found in 1 Timothy and Titus. The discussion of elders and deacons in these writings is said to manifest a complexity of church organization that fits 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christianity better than 1<sup>st</sup> century Christianity. Hence, modern scholars deny the Pauline authorship of the epistles to Timothy and Titus. But a fair reading of 1 Timothy and Titus reveals a very simple congregational structure, one in which a group of elders (also called

bishops) guide their own congregation without the presence of a head bishop like that of 2<sup>nd</sup> century innovation. All of this fits in well with the picture of congregational organization that we see in the undisputed New Testament books (cf. Phil. 1:1; Acts 14:23; 20:17).

Many scholars respond by saying that the purpose of pseudonymity was not so much to foster novel doctrines, but simply to honor the first-century Christian leader whose name was attached to the pseudonymous document. Thus, we are told that writing a document as if it came from the hand of Paul or Peter or Jude was an innocent literary device, one that would have been obvious to the original readers and was never intended to deceive anyone. Will this theory work?

The New Testament letters whose genuineness modern scholars reject are filled with personal references speaking of specific people and events. Such detailed references to persons and events cannot be labeled as an innocent literary device. It is incredible to think that the authors of these alleged “forgeries” never intended for anyone to think they were authentic. The post-apostolic Church certainly concluded that all of these writings were genuine. If modern scholars are right and the “pseudonymous authors” of these books never intended to deceive anyone, how ironic it is that large-scale deception is precisely what occurred!

Even if we were willing to grant a benign motive to a pseudonymous author, the fact is that persons of the post-apostolic era who wrote pseudonymous documents did not typically compose them as letters—the most personal form of communication; they normally limited their pseudonymity to apocalypses and gospels. Despite the evidence indicating that ancient pseudonymity did not involve letter-writing, modern scholars want us to believe that much of the New Testament corpus consists of that very thing: pseudonymous letters! This odd view assumes that pseudonymity would have been seen as an acceptable practice within the early Church, a matter to which we now turn.

### **Was Pseudonymity Widely Accepted?**

Since pseudonymous material was not always intended to deceive, but was sometimes produced as a way of honoring a renowned teacher, some modern scholars argue that it would have been an acceptable practice within the early Church. Early Christians, we are told, saw pseudonymity as a benign, even laudable practice, so the idea that some of the New Testament epistles were forgeries should not disturb us.

I believe that this view is totally false. The nature of Biblical authority and canonicity depends upon the authenticity of the authorship claims of New Testament writings. While it is true that the authorship of a few New Testament books is not stated within the text, writings that are falsely attributed to an apostle or prophet certainly could not be accepted as the word of God (see 2 Thess. 2:2; 3:17, Col. 4:18, Gal. 6:11). 2 Thessalonians 2:2 warns Christians about being misled by “a message or a letter as if from us.” This passage and several others show that pseudonymity would not have been considered a legitimate Christian practice (cf. 2 Thess. 3:17, Col. 4:18, Gal. 6:11). Yes, some Christians of the post-apostolic era employed it, but it is a misconception to think that even then it was widely viewed as acceptable.

People who argue that pseudonymous literature was commonly accepted among Christians are misreading the data. Let me cite the words of professor Bart Ehrman, one of the foremost authorities today on early Christian literature. (Ehrman is a theological liberal, by the way, and is not motivated by a desire to defend the inspiration of any Biblical book.)

Some modern scholars have argued that the practice [of pseudonymity] was so widespread that nobody passed judgment on it; others have claimed that forgeries were so easily detected that everyone could see through them and simply accepted them as literary fictions. The ancient sources themselves suggest that both views are wrong. Forgers were commonly successful because people did not always see through them. When they did see through them, they were usually not amused. Indeed, despite its common occurrence, forgery was almost universally condemned by ancient authors

(except among members of some of the philosophical schools). [*The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, p. 375].

One of the things that has prompted the mistaken idea that pseudonymity was widely accepted among early Christians is the following statement of Tertullian, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian writer: “That which Mark produced is stated to be Peter’s, whose interpreter Mark was. Luke’s narrative also they usually attribute to Paul. It is permissible for the works which disciples published to be regarded as belonging to their masters” (*Against Marcion* 4.5). But Tertullian is not talking about pseudonymity here. He is defending the reliability and authoritativeness of the histories recorded by Mark and Luke—men who, though not apostles themselves, were associates of apostles and delivered their apostolic teaching. The Gospels of Mark and Luke were not pseudonymous works, and Tertullian is not saying that they were.

Interestingly, Tertullian clearly indicates his attitude about pseudonymity when, in another work, he condemns those persons who “claim writings which are wrongly inscribed with Paul’s name” (*On Baptism* 17). He specifically mentions *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a work that was purported to have been written in the name of Paul, but was actually composed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by an elder of a congregation in Asia. After suspicions about the work arose, this man finally confessed that he had written it himself, saying that he only wanted to honor the apostle. Despite the man’s assertions of a benign motive, once his forgery was discovered he was forced to resign his eldership. Another 2<sup>nd</sup> century author, Serapion, said the following about the so-called *Gospel of Peter* and other pseudonymous works: “We, brethren, receive Peter and the other apostles as Christ himself. But those writings which falsely go under their name, as we are well acquainted with them, we reject, and know also, that we have not received such handed down to us” (*Ecclesiastical History* 6.12). Patristic accounts like these show that pseudonymous literature was not typically met with favor by the early Church.

Even within those Christian circles where pseudonymity was employed, the normal format was not that of letters, but rather gospels or apocalypses. Yet some people today assert that pseudonymous letter-writing was commonplace. They appeal to 4<sup>th</sup> century works like *The Epistles of Paul and Seneca*, but such writings are much too late to use as evidence for early Christian practice. The fact is that in the early post-apostolic period pseudonymous works in letter-format were few in number, and when they did surface they were rejected by Christians as soon as their non-genuineness was discovered. For example, Paul's so-called *Third Epistle to the Corinthians* was respected for a time in Syrian congregations on the grounds that it was thought to be a genuine Pauline epistle. But eventually it was discovered to be a 2<sup>nd</sup> century document forged by the same individual who composed *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. In the mid-second century Marcion, a Christian living in Rome, included among his Pauline corpus an *Epistle to the Laodiceans* and an *Epistle to the Alexandrians*. But the church at Rome disfellowshipped Marcion as a heretic and excluded these two writings from their canon because they recognized them as forgeries!

All of this verifies the point above, that pseudonymity was a practice that did not enjoy general approval in the early Church. As post-apostolic Christians sought to determine what writings should be regarded as canonical, they rejected pseudonymous literature and ultimately accepted the 27 New Testament books because they believed that none of them could be classified as pseudonymous. Modern scholars who boldly assert that the New Testament contains forged epistles have adopted a position that conflicts with what we know of the ordinary methods of pseudonymity as well as the early Church's attitude about it.

## **The Old Testament Canon**

Some Jews I have talked with are surprised that my Bible contains the books Genesis – Malachi. Christians call these 39 books “the Old Testament,” but they are Jewish Scriptures, documents that were first written to the people of ancient Israel. So why would Christians need these books? Perhaps it does seem strange on the surface. But the reason why Christians revere the Jewish Scriptures is simple: our King told us to. Speaking personally during his earthly ministry, and then later through his apostles, Jesus Christ affirmed that these writings were inspired of God and that they foretold him and his kingdom. He taught his followers to learn from these writings, not to denounce or ignore them.

### **What Books Should Comprise the Old Testament Canon?**

“The Scriptures,” “the sacred writings,” “the Law and the Prophets”—these are all designations that the New Testament writers use for the books of the Old Testament. Whatever terminology one uses, it is clear that Jesus affirmed the inspiration of the writings that the Jews accepted as the word of God. But what books comprised the Jewish Scriptures? Can we be sure that the books that Jesus affirmed are the same 39 books we have in our Old Testaments today?

To answer this question, let me first say a word about the presence of a fixed canon of Scripture in the time of Jesus. The phrase “the Scriptures” (*hai graphai*) literally means “the writings.” But when ancient Jews used this terminology, they did not refer to just any writings; they referred to *the* writings—a recognized collection of documents that all Jews revered. As the New Testament repeatedly illustrates, a passage from this corpus of documents could be cited using the simple introductory phrase, “It is written ...,” and everybody knew what writings were intended. As early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, Jews talked about “the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors” (*Sirach* 1; cf. Josephus’ *Against Apion* I.8; *2 Esdras* 14; Philo’s

*Contemplative Life* 25). One of the key documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q399) stressed obedience to “the Book of Moses, and the Prophets, and David.” This language is very similar to that which Jesus used in Luke 24:44 when he spoke of “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.”

The standard position of modern liberal scholars used to be that the Jewish canon was not closed at the time of Jesus. They said this because in AD 90 a group of rabbis met at the city of Jamnia and discussed, among other issues, questions regarding the canonicity of Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Ezekiel. Liberal scholars concluded that these books, and perhaps some others, were not viewed as canonical until after the rabbis of Jamnia decided in their favor. But this assertion is now known to be false. The so-called council of Jamnia was not an authoritative body that convened to decide what the Jewish canon should be. It was a group of rabbis who discussed questions about books whose canonicity had been recognized for centuries. Most liberal scholars now acknowledge this fact and have backed away from their prior claims regarding Jamnia.

There is no question that the concept of a fixed Jewish canon did exist in the time of Jesus, and it was this canon that Jesus affirmed as the inspired word of God. But that still does not answer the question of precisely which writings comprised the Jewish canon. How do we know that the Jewish Scriptures of that day were the same 39 books that we have in our Old Testaments today?

### **Sometimes 39 = 24, and 24 = 22**

Nowhere does Jesus or any New Testament writer list the books of the Jewish canon for us, but we can be certain which books they were. The Talmud lists by name the documents that Jews had always revered as Scripture, and they are the same 39 books that we have in our Bibles.

It is interesting, though, that the Talmud counted them as 24 in number. In fact many ancient people counted them as 24, including Tertullian, Jerome, and the author of *2 Esdras*. How did they arrive at this enumeration?

First of all, the two books that we call 1 & 2 Samuel were originally one book, and the same thing is true of 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles. When these three books were translated from Hebrew into Greek, each one had to be divided into two books because a single scroll could not contain the entire work. (In their Hebrew form, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles were each able to fit on a single scroll because written Hebrew does not use vowel letters. But Greek—like English—does use vowel letters, so each of these books took up two scrolls when they were translated into Greek.) This is why the documents that we count as six separate books (1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and 1 & 2 Chronicles) were counted as three books in ancient times.

The situation was just the reverse when it came to the Minor Prophets. Though these twelve works were all separate documents, each of them was too small to be copied onto its own individual scroll. So all of them were grouped together onto a single scroll and counted collectively as one book. The same was true with Ezra and Nehemiah. The content of these two books formed a unit, so they were copied onto a single scroll and numbered as one book. This gave a total of 24 books, and because there were 24 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, it made for an easy way of reckoning the entire canon of Scripture.

The Greek alphabet, however, has just 22 letters, and so some people in ancient times liked to count the Jewish Scriptures as 22 books (e.g., Josephus, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome). They arrived at this number by appending the little book of Ruth to the scroll of Judges, and appending Lamentations to the scroll of Jeremiah. But no matter how these documents were

enumerated, the content was exactly the same as what we have today in our Old Testaments. It may seem like a mathematical conundrum, but in this case 39 does equal 24, and 24 equals 22!

### **Neglected Scriptures**

Before concluding this discussion, let me address the tendency that I observe today among some Christians and congregations to relegate *the study* of the Old Testament to a low level of priority.

In some congregations, the Old Testament seems to receive emphasis only in children's Bible classes. Adult classes may spend time surveying Old Testament history, but they often scarcely touch the prophetic books like Isaiah or Jeremiah. Many Christians have a hard time locating the books of Hosea or Zephaniah in their Bibles, much less know anything about them. Many Christians feel no obligation to gain a knowledge of the 39 books of the Old Testament. "We're under the new covenant," they reason. "The New Testament's teaching is what's important for us today, so it's not necessary for me to study all of the books of the Old Testament." I hear preachers quote Romans 15:4 a lot—"the things written aforetime were written for our learning." But I think Christians tend to apply these words only to the stories of the Old Testament. People read the historical books if they read anything from the Old Testament at all, but they see little need to study the Law, the Prophets, or the Psalms. The upshot of this kind of thinking is this: Christians say the Bible has 66 books in it, but for all practical purposes it might just as well contain 27. Our Jewish friends aren't the only ones who fail to understand why our Bibles contain Genesis – Malachi.

2 Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." Contrary to what is often assumed, when Paul refers to "all

Scripture,” he is speaking of the Old Testament books and not the New Testament books. The previous verse makes this clear, for the apostle was reminding Timothy of “the sacred writings” that “from childhood you have known” (v. 15).” It is of course true that what Paul says here about the nature of God’s revelation is a principle that applies equally to the books of the New Testament. But in this passage, Paul is talking specifically about the inspiration of the Old Testament and its profitability for the life of a Christian.

The same is true of Romans 15:4, the passage I mentioned above. Paul says, “Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope.” This concept would certainly apply to the writings of the New Testament, but that is not what Paul is talking about. The apostle is referring to the fact that the Old Testament provides Christians with encouragement. Nor is he limiting this source of encouragement to the stories in the historical books of the Old Testament. Paul’s thought begins in the previous verse (v. 3) where he quotes Psalm 69!

If we look carefully at the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, we see that, in large part, he explicated principles that were first revealed in the Law of Moses and later elucidated by Israel’s prophets (see e.g., Matt. 5:17-48; 12:7). The Old Testament is the foundation of God’s revelation to man and it is important that a disciple of Christ know these writings. The fact that quotations from all portions of the Old Testament appear on page after page of the New Testament should tell us something. First-century converts were expected to gain a good knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures. God’s revelation to ancient Israel was understood to be of timeless benefit and it needed to find a home in the mind and heart of every Christian.

So if the pages of your Bible from Genesis to Malachi still stick together like they did when your Bible was brand new, let me suggest that you un-stick them. Believers in Jesus need to put Old Testament Scriptures to good use in their Bible study and in their life.

### **What about the Apocryphal Books?**

Many people are aware of the fact that a Catholic Bible contains some extra books that are not found in most other Bibles. The Old Testament portion of a Catholic Bible includes additional books that are called the Apocrypha. Are these additional books inspired of God? Should they be granted a place in a Christian's canon?

The term *Apocrypha* literally means "hidden books." Centuries ago the term was used to refer to writings that were deemed to be esoteric and appropriate reading only for mature believers rather than for the masses. Later, the term came to designate certain writings that some early Christians regarded as part of the Old Testament Scriptures. These works were *Tobit*, *The Letter of Jeremiah*, *Judith*, *1 & 2 Esdras*, *Additions to Esther*, *Sirach*, *Baruch*, *Additions to Daniel*, *The Prayer of Manasseh*, *1 & 2 Maccabees*, and *The Wisdom of Solomon*. All of these apocryphal works were composed between 200 – 30 BC, hundreds of years after the time when the 39 books of the Old Testament were completed.

Some Christians in the early centuries did believe that some of the Apocrypha were inspired. In 1546 the Roman Catholic Church officially gave to most of the Apocryphal books a *deutero-canonical* status (which effectively signified a secondary level of canonicity), and included them thereafter in all Catholic Bibles. *1 & 2 Esdras* and the *Prayer of Manasseh* were the exceptions; the Council of Trent denied these three works any degree of canonicity. Protestants have historically disavowed the inspiration and canonicity of the entire Apocrypha, though up until about 1825 Protestant Bibles still commonly included the Apocrypha in a special

section. Today, in the New Revised Standard Version and in some other English translations, one will find the Apocrypha included just after the 39 Old Testament books.

Should the Apocryphal books be considered part of the Old Testament canon and therefore regarded as part of God's inspired word? No, because Jesus did not regard them as such. Jesus affirmed the inspiration of the Jewish Scriptures, and the Jewish canon never included the Apocrypha. The writings of Josephus and Philo, as well as the entirety of the Rabbinic Literature all indicate that the ancient Jewish canon comprised the same writings that we know today as the 39 books of the Old Testament. Even *2 Esdras* itself affirms this fact. It distinguishes the truly inspired writings of the Jewish canon from later, uninspired literature (*2 Esdras* 14:44-46).

It is true that a few of the Apocrypha are included in the earliest extant copies of the Septuagint, but that fact doesn't indicate that the people producing these copies necessarily thought of the Apocrypha as part of Scripture too. It only proves that they deemed them of value. Furthermore, these Septuagint manuscripts come from the fourth century AD and were transmitted by Christians. That does not prove that Jews during the time of Jesus had included them in their Septuagint, much less that they regarded them as canonical.

Some people have argued, however, that the Jews of Alexandria had a larger canon than the Jews of Palestine and that the canon of Alexandria contained the Apocrypha. There is no solid evidence to back up this assertion, and a host of evidence arguing against it. No early manuscript of the Septuagint contains all of the Apocrypha; only *Tobit*, *Judith*, *Sirach*, and *The Wisdom of Solomon* are found in all of the earliest manuscripts. Philo, an Alexandrian Jew himself, wrote numerous commentaries on the Jewish Scriptures throughout his life, yet he never once cited any of the Apocryphal books as Scripture. Nor is there indication in any ancient

sources that would suggest a controversy existed between Alexandrian and Palestinian Jews over the content of the Jewish canon. Even if, for the sake of argument, we granted the possible existence of a broader canon in Alexandria than elsewhere, the Apocrypha were certainly not part of the Palestinian Scriptures that Jesus used and affirmed.

Yet even for the sake of argument there is no reason to grant the existence of a canon controversy among ancient Jews. The Jewish historian Josephus, about AD 90, had this to say about the makeup of the Jewish Scriptures:

Nothing can be better attested than the writings authorized among us. In fact, they could not be subject to any discord, for only that which the prophets wrote ages ago is approved among us, as they were taught by the very inspiration of God.

Josephus then speaks in detail about the documents that comprised the Jewish Scriptures, referencing all of the Old Testament books familiar to us today. He then goes on to say the following:

It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former of our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time. And how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already past, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them. (*Against Apion* I. 8)

It is evident from the above words that Josephus was well aware of the Apocryphal writings, but he knew that they were not part of the Jewish canon. Clearly, the Jews of Jesus' day did not include any of the Apocrypha among their Holy Scriptures. It is certainly significant that while Jesus and the New Testament writers quote extensively from most of the Old Testament books, they never once quote any of the Apocryphal books.

The Apocrypha are not without value however. Some of them (most notably *1 & 2 Maccabees*) provide us with important historical information about events in the lives of Jews of the last few centuries before the time of Christ. Other books of the Apocrypha record motivational stories of Jewish faith in God (e.g., *Tobit* and *Judith*). *Sirach* and *The Wisdom of Solomon* advocate some very good practical lessons about wise daily living. When one reads the Apocrypha, it becomes quite understandable why they enjoyed a measure of popularity among Jewish and early Christian audiences. But we must realize that the Apocrypha are human compositions and nothing more. There is no grounds for thinking that any of them were part of the Jewish Scriptures that Jesus affirmed as the inspired word of God.