

THE BOOK - HOW WE GOT IT AND HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF IT - Part two

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HOW DO WE KNOW WHICH BOOKS ARE AUTHORITATIVE SCRIPTURE?

The reason we're working our way through this study about how we got our Bible and why we believe it's true is a very basic one. You are staking your whole life on this book. If there is no absolute truth we're wasting our time here. **Also**, if there **is** absolute truth but we don't **possess** it in our Bibles, then we're still wasting our time here. If **we** don't have the truth we should be dedicating our search elsewhere.

So how do we know we hold on to truth when we carry our Bibles? There are other religious books and traditions. We're going to spend several weeks on this quest. Today we're going to look at what is commonly known as the **canon** of Scripture. How do we know we have the right books included in our Bibles? The word "**canon**" means "**rule**" or "**norm**." So when we talk about the canon of Scripture we are talking about the books that **measure** and **regulate** everything else. We are talking about the books we will deem as "**Scripture**."

We have sixty-six books included in our Bibles - 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. How did we arrive at that number? And why don't we allow others? After all, our Jewish friends allow for 24 books in their Scriptures. They include all of our Old Testament (as we'll see in a minute) but exclude all 27 from our New Testament. And our Roman Catholic friends include about 13 **more** books than we would include, called the **Apocrypha**. We don't include any of those books in our Bibles. Most are from the inter-testamental period - now more commonly called the **second temple** period.

So why do we include the books we include and exclude the books we exclude? Those are the questions we'll launch into today, though we certainly won't get through all of them.

This isn't just incidental, intellectual stuff. We call the Bible God's Word. We mean it isn't like other books. When we read it and hear it we are to hear **God** speaking in a way He **doesn't** speak in or through any other book. Every Christian should be able to back up the claim that **this** Bible - and not any other collection of religious writings - **alone** is God's Word. You need to know how we **get there** - how we come to this staggering conclusion. So keep the big picture in mind as we launch into some of the details of this study.

1) **THE BIBLE JESUS USED AND ENDORSED INCLUDED THE BOOKS WE HAVE IN OUR OLD TESTAMENT - AND NO MORE**

This isn't irrelevant to your Christian life. This point I want to make here is just a starting point, but it's a very important starting point, as I think you'll see if you work hard at following my argument. The point I'm making here is that the Jewish Bible of Jesus' day - the Bible Jesus studied and preached from and quoted - contained exactly **24 books**.

Jesus' Bible contained three sections - the **Law (Torah)**, the **Prophets (Nebiim)**, and the **writings (Chetuvim)**. Just as a remembering aid, if you take the first letters from each of those - the "**T**" from Torah, the "**N**" from Nebiim, and the "**Ch**" from Chetuvim - and put the letter "**a**" in between each of them you get the word "**Tanach**," which is the Hebrew word for their Scriptures.

Of course, Jews don't call their Scriptures the "**Old Testament**" because, as far as they're concerned, there is no such thing as the "**New Testament**." Their books are the Scriptures - period. They don't recognize Jesus as the Messiah nor the New Testament record of Jesus and his life and work as Scripture at all.

Here are the books of their Scriptures. There are twenty-four of them and they include - this is **important** - all thirty-nine books of our Old Testament. Here's how it works. The Jewish scriptures include the **Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)**, and then the **Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel - 1st and 2nd in one book, Kings - 1st and 2nd in one book, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets - Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi - all 12 in one book)**, and then, finally, the **Writings (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra/Nehemiah - one book, and Chronicles - 1st and 2nd in one book)**, equaling 24 books in total.

Now there's something you need to take note of. I know it doesn't seem important right now, but trust me, you will see something **very** important coming out of it in just a minute or two. For now, just make your mind mentally alert to

the fact that while the books are the same in the Jewish Scriptures and our Old Testament, there is one very important difference. The **order** of the books is entirely different. Our Old Testament ends with the book of **Malachi**. The Jewish Scriptures end with the book of **Chronicles** (first and second together). Again, I'm just mentioning that fact now. I'll show you why it matters greatly in a few minutes.

2) THE BIBLE JESUS USED AND ENDORSED DIDN'T CONTAIN ANY OF THE APOCRYPHAL BOOKS

Our Roman Catholic friends include about thirteen books - written after the close of our Old Testament - in the era between the Old and New Testaments - today usually referred to as the time of Second Temple Judaism.

Why don't we consider these books a part of inspired Scripture? Clearly, they aren't included in the Jewish Scripture. We've already seen the 24 books included there, in different order from our 39. The Apocryphal books include **1st and 2nd Esdras, Tobit, Judith, The Addition to the Book of Esther, The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, The Letter of Jeremiah, The Prayer of Azariah, Suzanna, Bel and the Dragon, The Prayer of Manasseh, and 1st and 2nd Maccabees**.

And now we come to something interesting. The reason our Old Testament is ordered in a different sequence from the Jewish Scriptures is our Old Testament follows the order, not of the Hebrew text, but the order of the Greek translation of the Hebrew text - the **Septuagint**. And the Greek Septuagint originally **included** the Apocryphal books.

Think about this. That means it must have been a very conscious decision to **remove** those books and return to only those included in the Hebrew text. And I'm arguing here that this was a good decision. I'm arguing that they did the **right** thing when they edited the Old Testament down to the original 24 books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

But who's to say who is right? Is there any Biblical basis for my claim that the Apocryphal books shouldn't be included? Or is it all just a matter of religious tradition and taste? How can we know with any degree of Scriptural certainty?

And now we go back to something I asked you to remember about the order of the books in the Hebrew text - the text of the original 24 books, ending with Chronicles. Because when this is remembered it sheds some light on some very important words from Jesus Himself on the structure of the Old Testament text:

Luke 11:49-51 - "Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' [50] so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, [51] from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation."

Now put your finger right under those important words in **verse 50** - "**...the blood of all the prophets...**" Jesus tells us He is very deliberately including **all** the prophets in His remarks. Then He does something else very important. He **defines** who He means by **all** the prophets. He **book-ends** the group He's including in "**all the prophets.**"

Jesus starts with the death of **Abel**. He's the very first one to die. It's recorded in Genesis chapter four. Genesis is, of course, the very first book of the Hebrew Scriptures. And then Jesus lists a man called **Zechariah**, who "**perished between the altar and the sanctuary**" (51).

But there's a problem. Zechariah **isn't** the last prophet to be martyred chronologically in the Old Testament. Chronologically the last prophet to be killed in the Old Testament is a man called **Uriah, the son of Shemaiah**.

His story is told in **Jeremiah 26:20-23** - "**There was another man who prophesied in the name of the Lord, Uriah the son of Shemaiah from Kiriath-jearim. He prophesied against this city and against this land in words like those of Jeremiah. [21] And when King Jehoiakim, with all his warriors and all the officials, heard his words, the king sought to put him to death. But when Uriah heard of it, he was afraid and fled and escaped to Egypt. [22] Then King Jehoiakim sent to Egypt certain men, Elnathan the son of Achbor and others with him, [23] and they took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who struck him down with the sword and dumped his dead body into the burial place of the common people."**

We know **King Jehoiakim** reigned in the late 500's B.C. This is long after the death of Zechariah. So why does Jesus choose the death of Zechariah to close the season of "**all the prophets?**" He puts **Abel** at the beginning and **Zechariah** at the end. And the **reason** for this is very important.

The story of Zechariah's death is found in **2 Chronicles 24:20-21** - "Then the Spirit of God clothed Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, and he stood above the people, and said to them, "Thus says God, 'Why do you break the commandments of the Lord, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, he has forsaken you.' " [21] But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the Lord."

Now remember, Jesus' Bible didn't end with *Malachi*. The Bible Jesus used ended with **2 Chronicles**. And here we have a ringing, resounding endorsement and a *limitation* of the sacred text to the book-ends of Genesis at the beginning and 2 Chronicles at the close.

I'm arguing Jesus didn't recognize, in any way shape or form, the Apocryphal writings. He clearly places these limiters on who "*all the prophets*" could include. And it lines up with the books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jesus very clearly says if you include all the prophets you will begin with Genesis and end with 2 Chronicles. And that excludes all books that we today don't have in our Old Testament.

Now, it is true that there are other writings *referred* to and *quoted* in the New Testament. Sometimes these writings include pagan poets (**Acts 17:28**) and sometimes they include inter-testamental writings (**Jude 14 and 15**) and sometimes just commonly known sayings and expressions (**Titus 1:12**). But these writings and sayings are never quoted *as* or called *Scripture*.

This is very different from the way the Scriptures are referred to when the authority of doctrinal belief and instruction in the truth is being discussed. Jesus claimed consistently that the Bible He studied was the original Hebrew text with the same three divisions as the 24 Old Testament books:

Luke 24:44 - "Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Notice the three divisions. Almost all scholars agree the third division of the "*writings*" is here called the "*Psalms*" simply because it's by far the largest and most dominating part of the writings.

And notice the highly significant words of Paul to Timothy on the value of being trained in "*the Scriptures*" - **2 Timothy 3:14-17** - "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it [15] and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. [16] All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

So Paul knew there was an accepted body of texts - collected and put together - that by this time would be recognized by Timothy collectively as "*the sacred writings*" (15) or "*the Scriptures*" (16). Those are the only terms Paul had to use. He didn't list the books because Timothy *knew* the collection of texts to which Paul referred. And that collection was the Jewish Scriptures that Timothy's Jewish grandmother (Lois) and his Jewish mother (Eunice) had trained him in. These are the twenty-four books Paul acknowledged - just as Jesus acknowledged - as "*the Scriptures*."

We've just introduced this subject today. We're just scratching the surface of this vital topic. I'm hoping that by the time we're done every person in this church will be able to explain to anyone who asks why we call this book we carry to church "*God's Word*." There are solid reasons for building our lives on it. We've only reached the level of establishing the cannon of our Old Testament. But already you can see God at work. Jesus - God the Son - gives His precious assessment of these recorded words. The Apostles quote and acknowledge them as "*the Scriptures*."

These truths *matter*. They beg the question, *what do you hear when you read your Bible? What do you hear when someone teaches and unfolds an Old Testament text?*

1 Thessalonians 2:13 - "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."

Paul's point *isn't* just that the Bible really *is* God's Word and so it works powerfully in believers. His point is God's Word must be *heard* as God's Word *if it is to work in believers*. In other words, that word, "*believers*," means

people who actually **believe the Bible really is God's Word and they hear and respond as though they really believe it is God's Word.** That's what makes the Word **work** in those who hear it in a church like this on Sunday!

If you're young you might be inclined merely to hear the voice of your parent's religious beliefs. You might think this is just your family's **tradition**. Or you might think you're just hearing some moral advice - something to give you a bit more purpose or a better self-image.

But **do you hear God speaking**? Has that cutting, unbendable edge of the mighty Sword of the Spirit somehow grown dull in your perception? God never gives **advice**. God only **reveals** and **commands**. There's nothing optional in God's Word. It is life itself. And hearing it when you aren't immediately inclined to is the most important habit you can develop.

Let me close with this great Old Testament text. It's as basic as you can get - **Deuteronomy 30:19-20** - **"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, [20] loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."**

This has never changed. This is **always** what's at stake whenever God's Word enters any human situation. It's always a matter of life and death - blessing and curse. And just in case we forget, God even **tells** us which is the best choice - **"Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live!" (19).**

This is almost humorous. If God were a game show host He'd be saying "There's door number one and door number two. And, O yea, the car is behind door number two. So choose door number two!"

Every time you are confronted with God's Word and you respond as though it were something **less** you inject **death** into whatever point God's Word addressed. You **curse** your own future. And every time, in whatever weakness and desperation you hear God's Word **as** God's Word, with humility, repentance, and obedience, you start to breed **life and blessing** beyond whatever fruitfulness you can see in your present circumstances. No wonder God makes it so clear and basic. **Choose life!** Hear the Word of the Lord!