

## HOW WERE THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE CHOSEN?

*\*Books referenced in this message are "How to Study the Bible" and "Why Believe the Bible" by John MacArthur*

Recently, when I preached a message called, "Isn't the Bible Just Myths & Legends?" multiple people asked a particular question afterwards, which is: *How were the 66 books of the Bible chosen?* So tonight, let's jump right in because we've got a lot of ground to cover. First of all, it's important to understand that...

### 1. The biblical writers were absolutely certain that they were writing the words of God.

The Bible was written by 40 different people over a period of about 1,400 years. The writers lived in separate times and places and many of them had no real chance to collaborate on their story, but they all wrote a unified message about the same Person (Jesus)!

And many of the writers were simple men without much formal education. There were a few exceptions who were well-educated – Moses and Solomon in the Old Testament and Paul, Luke, and James in the New Testament. But the rest were simple farmers, herdsman, soldiers, fishermen, and so on.

But there is one amazing characteristic among all of them – educated or not – they wrote with an absolute certainty that they were writing the very words of God. They never said, "Now, this may sound ridiculous, but this *really is* the Word of God." Instead, they just *unashamedly* claimed and understood that they were writing God's Words.

For example:

- When **Moses** tells God at the burning bush that he can't possibly go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. Then in **Exodus 4:12** God says, "Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." So, Moses would be speaking the very Words of God!
- Also, the prophet **Isaiah** opens his book in **Isaiah 1:2** by saying, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord has spoken." Isaiah was speaking and recording the very words of God as God gave them to him.

- **Jeremiah** begins his prophecy in **Jeremiah 1:4** by claiming, "Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying..."
- In **Ezekiel 3:11** God tells the prophet Ezekiel, "Go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God...'"
- And **Amos** was a shepherd and a keeper of fig trees. And in **Amos 7:15** he says, "The Lord took me from following the flock and [He] said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"

You see, these men understood that they were not just sharing their thoughts or opinions – they were absolutely certain that they were speaking and writing the very words of God!

And this is why Jesus and the NT writers quoted the OT so often. They were absolutely confident that the OT writings were the Words of God. For example, the NT writers directly quoted the OT Scriptures at least 320 times. And they refer to the OT around 1,000 times in all...

***Romans 15:4 "For whatever was written in former days [in the OT] was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."***

***Hebrews 1:1 "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets."***

The words of the OT prophets were considered Scripture because God would speak directly through them.



**But what about the New Testament writers? Were they just as confident that they were writing the very words of God?**

Yes! Let me give you two examples...

***1 Timothy 5:18 "For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."***

The first quote that Paul gives is from Deuteronomy 25:4. But the second one is an exact quote from Luke 10:7 and is found nowhere in the OT. In other words, Paul viewed Luke's writings as "*Scripture*" just as he viewed the verse from Deuteronomy.

***2 Peter 3:15b–16 "...Our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,<sup>16</sup> as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures."***

Peter was acknowledging that Paul's writings were viewed as "Scripture" just like they viewed the OT Scriptures. This is why Paul would say things like this...

**Galatians 1:11–12** *"For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. <sup>12</sup> For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."*

**1 Thessalonians 2:13b** *"...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."*

So, from the beginning of the Bible and throughout the NT, the writers are fully convinced that they are speaking the true words of God, which leads us to our second point...

## **2. The biblical writers were inspired to write the words of God.**

They were writing under what is called "the *inspiration* of the Holy Spirit." What does it mean that they were writing under the "inspiration" of the Holy Spirit? Let's start by explaining what inspiration is *not*...

**"Inspiration" is *not* simply a high level of human achievement.** Some say the Bible is no more inspired than Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In other words, they say the Bible is an amazing human achievement – a book that should be held in high esteem, but it's not the words of God. So they would say that *God* didn't write the Bible, smart men wrote it.

But this view doesn't hold up under scrutiny. For one thing, smart men wouldn't write a book that condemned ALL of them to hell (Romans 3:10-18). Forty different "geniuses" would *never* come to that same conclusion about the entire human race, including themselves. Also, smart men would never write a book that provided salvation from the outside. Smart men want to provide their own salvation; they do NOT want to trust God alone for salvation and submit to His rules and standards.

**Inspiration is *not* God working only through the thoughts and concepts of the writers.** There are some who teach "thought" or "concept" inspiration. In other words, they say that God never gave the biblical writers the exact words they would write. Instead, God gave them general ideas (general concepts) and they wrote these ideas down in their own words.

For example, they would say that God planted the "concept" of love in Paul's mind and one day Paul sat down and wrote 1 Corinthians 13 on his own. This view claims that men were free to say whatever they wanted and that is why critics claim that there are

“mistakes” and “contradictions” in the Bible. BUT the idea of “concept inspiration” is not true. And those so-called contradictions and mistakes can be explained if critics take an honest, unbiased look at the evidence.

(See book entitled *“The Big Book of Bible Difficulties”* by Norm Geisler & Thomas Howe)

**Inspiration is *not* God merely inspiring the reader of Scripture.** Some say that the only part of the Bible that is inspired is the part that gives you “goose bumps” at that moment. And when you get those goose bumps, *that* particular passage is inspired... *to you*. But they say the entire Bible is not the inspired word of God – it simply “contains” the word of God.

**Inspiration is *not* robotic, mechanical dictation.** We know this because in every book of the Bible you find the writer's personality coming through. They all have a different way of expressing themselves. From author to author there are distinct personalities and life experiences that show through. You can even feel their emotions as they speak and record God's Word.

**So, what DOES it mean that men wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?** It means that God Himself spoke through these men, while allowing their personality, life experiences, and emotions to show through. And these men understood that they were writing down *God's* words, NOT their own!

### **3. The 66 books of the Bible were chosen with extreme caution.**

The completed Bible is known as the “canon” of Scripture. The word *canon* is a play on words. It comes from a Greek word which means “a measuring rule” or “standard.” In other words, the Bible is our “standard” by which we “measure” everything in life. It gives us everything we need to know about ourselves, our world, God, and the afterlife.



**But *how* were the 66 books of the Bible chosen, and *who* chose them?**

Let's start with the OT. Two basic tests were used to determine whether a book was allowed into the OT canon:

- **Test #1: Was the book written by a prophet or someone with the proven gift of prophecy?**

There was no question among the Israelites which of the OT writings were inspired by God. In the first place, the writings/books were not accepted unless they were written by a “tried and true” prophet. In fact, God gave them a sure-fire way to tell if a person was a legitimate prophet...

**Deuteronomy 18:20-22** “But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.<sup>21</sup> And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’—<sup>22</sup> when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.”

- **Test #2: Was the book accepted, preserved and read by God’s people, the Israelites?**

They collectively held each other accountable to the standard that God had set. And God promised that He would ALWAYS have a remnant of people who would remain faithful to Him and guard the integrity of His Word. So, the Israelites were VERY careful to test the books that were chosen for the OT. They had to be written by a tried-and-true prophet, and God guided the Israelites as they meticulously rejected any writings that didn’t meet that God-given standard.



**But what about the NT books? How were they chosen?**

The early Christian church used similar tests for the New Testament books.

- **Test #1: Was the book written by a proven apostle or someone closely associated with an apostle?**

An apostle was someone who had been with Jesus throughout His entire ministry, and witnessed His death, burial and resurrection (Acts 1:21-26). So, the only NT books that were accepted were books written by an apostle or someone who was a very close companion of an apostle.

For example, Mark was not an apostle, but he was a close associate of Peter. So, Peter was verifying *everything* that Mark wrote to ensure accuracy. Also, Luke was not an apostle but he worked closely with Paul (who was an apostle through his special experience on the road to Damascus and his further revelations from Christ).

- **Test #2: Did the content of the book line up with the rest of Scripture?**

You see, Scripture must be interpreted by comparing it to other Old and New Testament Scriptures. This keeps you from taking a verse or passage out of context and believing a lie. And this was *vital*ly important for the early church because, in those early years, people would try to slip in a false book, but none ever made it. Why? Because the doctrinal differences were too easy to spot, and ALL the churches were carefully comparing them to the rest of Scripture...

**Acts 17:10–11** “The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. <sup>11</sup> Now these Jews [the Bereans] were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

You see, even the apostles’ writings were meticulously compared to other Old and New Testament Scriptures to ensure accuracy. Paul wrote most of the NT books, but even his writings were carefully compared to other Scriptures to ensure that nothing false made it in! Believers in the early church were *extremely* cautious about the content, which made it easy to spot the fakes and reject the writings/books that didn’t belong.

- **Test #3: Was the book accepted, preserved and read by all the churches?**

Did the people of God accept it, read it during worship, and make it’s teachings a part of their daily lives? In other words, NT believers (churches) collectively held each other accountable to the standard that God had set. And remember, God promised that He would ALWAYS have a remnant of people who would remain faithful to Him and guard the integrity of His Word.

#### **4. God personally guided the selection of the 66 books in the Bible.**

Ultimately, no one man or group of men made a certain book a part of the canon. God Himself *inspired* and *determined* the canon; man simply *affirmed* it through long and steady usage. The completed canon of Scripture finally emerged through the combined conviction of church leaders and church members working in harmony and guided by the Holy Spirit.

For example, no church council ever decreed an “official” NT canon, but several councils did recognize and affirm the consensus of the people, which is the Bible we know today. By the end of the fourth century, the canon was complete and closed.



**Why was the canon closed by the fourth century and no more books allowed?**

Because they didn’t meet the original tests...

- First of all, they were too late to be written by an apostle or their close companion (they were all dead by that point).
- Also, the content didn’t line up with the rest of Scripture (later books contained contradictions, false teachings, errors of facts, etc).

This is why the so-called “lost books of the Bible” were never accepted to begin with.

### **Q&A with audience**

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**Next Week’s Question:** We know the original copies of the Bible were without error. But we don’t have any of those original copies, so how do we know our copies of Scripture were not changed or corrupted through the centuries? Come back next week and find out!