

Newsletter, April 2013

Christianity stands or falls on the integrity of a single book, the Holy Bible, in which everything that we as Christians believe is contained. In this newsletter we shall briefly discuss the origin and preservation of Holy Scripture using edited excerpts taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*, Book I, Chapter 1.1, *Origin of the Bible*.

The word “Bible” comes from the Greek word *biblion*, which means “a little book.” However, the Holy Bible is actually made up of many “little books.” There are 39 Old Testament books, and 27 New Testament books for a total of 66 in all. The first five books of the Old Testament beginning with Genesis and continuing through Deuteronomy (collectively referred to as the Pentateuch) were written by Moses around 1400 B.C., and the last writing is that of the Revelation written down by the Apostle John in or about A.D. 90. Yet, by tradition, the book of Job is considered to be the oldest book in the Bible most likely written somewhere around 1800 BC during the time of Abraham.

Old Testament writings in Hebrew and Aramaic languages were all in existence at the time of Christ, kept in trust by the Jewish nation. Upon the death of the apostles, their own writings were combined with those of their close associates to form the body of the New Testament text. Originally, the word “Scriptures” (sacred writings) was applied specifically to Hebrew and Aramaic Manuscripts such that in most instances where this word is found in the New Testament, Old Testament text is being referred to. A collection of the writings of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) containing the words of Jesus were available later in the first century A.D. and were assembled and used by the early church along side Old Testament Scriptures. The Apostle Peter referred to the epistles of the Apostle Paul as Scripture on a par with Old Testament Scriptures (2Pe.3:15,16), and today the entire New Testament is referred to as Holy Scripture.

The means by which God transported his Word into the physical world is commonly referred to as divine inspiration meaning “God breathed” (2Ti.3:16). It is important to note that divine inspiration differs greatly from mere human artistic inspiration that enables mankind to write great novels or create beautiful paintings. God spiritually enlivened the minds of various chosen men to write his own Words after his own thoughts onto a readable physical medium. Although the writers of Scripture were human beings no different from us, whose individual personalities are quite evident in their writings, their words convey a divine message just as if God, Himself, had written down every single word with pen and ink. Therefore, when we read Holy Scripture, we are actually reading the thoughts and mind of God.

The original writings by the hand of the authors or their immediate assistants are referred to as autographs since they carry the author’s personal mark. Books of both the Old and New Testament were first written down on small scrolls made of papyrus, parchment, or vellum that was made from the skin of animals with brushes, quills, or reeds. Writing was a tedious chore in ancient days requiring considerable ability, and for that reason some authors made use of skilled assistants to write for them as they dictated the contents. For instance, Peter wrote his first epistle through an assistant named Silvanus (1Pe.5:12). The Apostle Paul most often wrote down his own epistles (Ga.6:11), but at times even he utilized writing assistants apparently because of his poor eyesight. He then carefully wrote down the salutations with his own hand to authenticate the writing (Co.4:18; 2Th.3:17).

Because of the fragile materials on which the first books of both the Old and New Testament were written, none of the physical autographs exist today. None could withstand the ravages of time and the elements such that others needed to be periodically produced to replace them. Early on, handwritten copies of autographs were being inscribed for posterity and to aid in wider circulation of the text. That was a laborious job and in the early days required meticulous hand copying. Those copies are referred to as manuscripts. Other scribes repeatedly copied them over many centuries creating a trail of manuscripts back through time. Individual manuscripts were often copied in mass by a group of scribes all sitting in one room who listened to a single oral reader of the current manuscript. Those human scribes were meticulous in their efforts because of the sacred reverence they attached to the text. They wrote down exactly what they heard as it was dictated. Each word was then read back aloud to verify its accuracy one

by one. Even the smallest error made by a scribe while transcribing rendered the entire document in error, whereupon it was immediately destroyed.

Today, there are at least four thousand known manuscripts of the Bible that were written from earlier manuscripts between the years A.D. 200 and 1400. Many are small fragments of the Bible while some are nearly complete copies of various books. There are slight variations between some manuscripts consisting of errors in spelling, incorrect word usage or sentence structure, and omissions or repetitions of various sentences or words. Occasionally, the reader may have made a comment during the dictation that was mistakenly written down in a copy, although that appears to have been quite rare (cf. *Problematical Text in Mark*, Book II, page 344). The older age of a particular manuscript does not necessarily mean that it is more accurate. Later manuscripts in fact may be more accurate if they were copied from a better “original” and/or copied by more skillful scribes. Only by comparing many manuscripts and determining a preponderance of evidence for one rendition over others by its multiplicity can we make a final determination of the autographic text.

We have older manuscripts of Old Testament books than New Testament books because of their more extreme antiquity. Those are written in Hebrew along with some Aramaic text. Various of these manuscripts have been carefully preserved, and as a consequence of finding the *Dead Sea Scrolls* in 1947, we have Old Testament texts written in Hebrew dating back to 200 BC. Of course, even those are but copies since the last book of the Old Testament (Malachi) was written about 450 BC. It is believed that Ezra, author of the book of Ezra, assembled many of the scrolls of the Hebrew Scriptures into one volume in about 530 B.C. To those were added later writings of the prophets until the scroll of Malachi was added in about 450-400 B.C.

We may ask how we know there are no other books that have been erroneously excluded or that we do not have books included in the Bible that should not have been accepted. That brings us to the important subject of canonicity (i.e. measurement of authenticity). The writings of the *Apocrypha* (cf. Book I, page 41) represent a collection of books, fragments of books, and appendages to Old Testament books that appeared in the four hundred years between the Old and New Testament writings. Those texts were at first referred to as “hidden or secret” because they were considered to be so precious that they were reserved for the use of an “inner circle” of believers only. However, there is no reason to accept the books of the *Apocrypha* as canonical inasmuch as they did not measure up to close scrutiny (see below). They were not considered to be canonical until a corrupt Roman church accepted them many years later in opposition to the Reformation Movement that fully rejected them.

In general, there were three basic considerations necessary for a book’s inclusion into the canon of Scripture. The first centers on its divine authorship. Any Old Testament book from which Jesus quoted must obviously be considered authoritative by virtue of his divine position in the Godhead. In addition, any Old Testament book that was quoted by his apostles and other New Testament authors as being God’s Word must be considered authoritative as well. The early Christian Church declared the 39 Old Testament books to be authoritative in the year A.D. 90, thus affirming that which was considered common knowledge among God’s people: the assembled Hebrew and Aramaic writings had measurable attributes identifying them as the divine Word of God.

As to the authority of New Testament writings, the four Gospels contain a written record of Jesus’ spoken word. Jesus himself wrote no Scripture, but he had chosen twelve apostles to carry his Word of Truth to the entire world as the Holy Spirit inspired them to write. For that reason, any book that was written by one of the apostles must be considered authoritative. Nevertheless, we find that not all of the books of the New Testament were directly written by apostles, but were written by close associates of the apostles or other disciples. Their writings were considered canonical because their text was derived from the apostles’ direct teaching.

A second consideration was that of the spiritual integrity of the writings. All Scripture has a coherent unity of thought that comes directly from the mind of God. Books containing purely secular material were rejected. Since God is a Spirit, God wishes to impart to us those things of spiritual

significance in his Word. He is interested in teaching us about Himself and our relationship with Him. The contents of writings under consideration also must be consistent with other core canonical writings. Any writing that blatantly contradicts another writing or writings known to be canonical beyond question could not be inspired since that would be paramount to the Holy Spirit contradicting Himself. The Hebrew epistles of Hebrews, James, and Jude took a while to be accepted because of initial questions concerning authorship and in the case of James its as yet unresolved apparent conflict with the teachings of the Apostle Paul regarding salvation by grace through faith alone (cf. Book I, Chapter 7.2, *Faith in Action*).

A third consideration was whether the congregations in the early Church universally accepted the writing as coming from God. God said, “So shall my word be that goeth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Is.55:11). God has a specific purpose in giving us his Word. “All scripture...is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2Ti.3:16,17). Therefore, if a particular writing had no impact upon believer’s lives (was not profitable) in matters of doctrine, reproof, correction, or instruction in what is godly, it was not considered inspired Scripture and, therefore rejected.

Mankind finally approved all the books of the New Testament, having before received the approval of the early Church for nearly four centuries, in the year A.D. 398 by the Council of Carthage (cf. Book III, page 155). Inasmuch as the Scriptures carry their own stamp of authority on them because of God’s primary authorship, we can be very certain that the Bible consists only of infallible books and that none were inadvertently omitted.

The great question for us today then becomes, “what translation of the Bible should I use in my private study”? The much-revered *King James Authorized Bible* was translated from a derived Greek Old Testament text referred to as the *Textus Receptus* or *Received Text*, which was compiled from many manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts assembled together and carefully compared in their original language into a single text. It was this text that Martin Luther used to translate the New Testament into German (cf. Book III, page 231) as well as the text used by other reformers of his day. More modern translations of the New Testament make use of a still later derived Greek text: Eberhard Nestle’s *Novum Testamentum Graece* first published in 1898, and/or another compiled by Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort commonly referred to as the *Westcott and Hort Greek Text* first published in 1881. It must be clearly understood that no version can ever be perfect due to human frailty that is involved in translation through many manuscripts from the original autographs into the vernacular. It is therefore necessary to deeply explore each translation to mine the Truth from the words of the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts that underlie them. For that reason, mere paraphrases should be avoided as a serious study Bible. Moreover, many translations are deliberate efforts to alter certain Scripture texts to satisfy the views of various neo-pagan groups (cf. *The Neo-pagan Movement*, Book III, page 430), various church doctrines, and even the erroneous teaching of various cults (cf. Book III, page 374 *The Growth of Religious Cults*, and page 446, *Corruption of the Bible*). For that reason, it is imperative to diligently seek out as accurate a translation as possible for one’s primary study Bible (cf. Book I, pages 35-40).

We are not talking about ordinary literature written of men when we refer to the Bible. Even though written by God-fearing men throughout time, God Himself had a firm hand in both the content and its preservation. Even after more than 273 translations in more than 1100 dialects, even after faulty and poor translations and outright attempts by men to bend the Scriptures to their own inventions, the Word of God prevails. The Bible has weathered unbelievable criticism and attempts at outright destruction. That the Bible still exists at all is a miracle; that it exists in the form and accuracy that it does today attests to divine control. Only the Word of God could have such significance in the personal lives of men and women that this one book provides. Today, more than ever before, we need to turn to the Word of God through the Holy Scriptures that we may not follow false teachers — who, by telling us what we want to hear, deceive us through false church traditions and the teaching of vain philosophy thus leading us increasingly away from the Truth. © Arthur J. Smith, April 2013