

What is the Bible?

By Roger Aubrey

The Bible is unique. Of the millions of books ever written and yet to be written, the Bible stands alone, because its author is none other than God himself.

The Bible is really a collection of sixty-six books (the word 'Bible' comes from the Greek word for books). They were written over a period of approximately one thousand five hundred years, beginning with the writings of Moses around 1400 BC, culminating with the letters of the apostle John around 90 AD. Here we have the great wonder of the Bible: men wrote the words but the author was God. Let us begin by investigating that further; it will help us appreciate what the Bible really is: the Word of God.

The Bible is inspired: God-Breathed

The Bible tells us something very important about its origin and nature:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2Timothy 3:16-17)

While more modern translations have the term 'God-breathed', older translations have the word 'inspired'. The Greek word used here literally means 'breathed out by God'. The Bible is more than a book which inspires us. This passage tells us that the Bible originated within God himself; it came from within his being. God 'breathed out' the Bible; he 'breathed' through the human authors by his Spirit. Therefore, when we say that the Bible is inspired we describe:

The activity of the Holy Spirit of God in which he superintended the human authors of Scripture so that their writings were a transcript of God's word to man. (Bruce Milne; Know the Truth, IVP)

The Bible is not a collection of human writings containing people's ideas of God. It is not a book written *about* God; it is a book written *by* God. God did not discover an already existing book that best described him and decided to give it his divine approval by giving

it that extra inspiring quality. God is a God who speaks; he reveals himself by speaking. He created the universe out of nothing by speaking it into existence (Genesis 1; Hebrews 11:3). When God breathed out the Bible he breathed out words which were just as powerful as those which brought the Creation into being. Those words are the actual words we have on the pages of our Bibles. The Bible is the Word of God written down. Therefore,

inspiration is to be defined as a supernatural, providential influence of God's Holy Spirit upon the human authors which caused them to write what He wished to be written for the communication of revealed truth to others...a divine activity which...effectively secured the written transmission of saving truth. (J.I.Packer, Fundamentalism and the Word of God, p.77)

It was the Holy Spirit himself who worked through the human authors. The New Testament explains how he did it:

You must understand that no prophecy of scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2Peter 1:20:21)

That phrase *prophecy of scripture* refers to the writings of the Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah for example. This passage tells us that these men wrote as they were 'carried along' by the Holy Spirit. That same term is used in Acts when Paul was caught in a terrible storm at sea:

*The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were **driven along**. (Acts 27:15)*

This powerful imagery of the ship being driven along by the wind reveals to us just how forceful the activity of the Holy Spirit was in the production of the Bible through its human authors. How did the Holy Spirit do it?

God sovereignly supervised and ordered the background, heredity and circumstances of the individual writers. As a result, when they recorded events, meditations or sermons in writing, the words used were consciously the free composition of the authors and at the same time the very word of God. (Bruce Milne, Know the Truth: p.37)

God chose those he had appointed to write down his Word. He arranged when and where they would live. He fashioned them to be the people he wanted so they would write what he wanted. Their personality, outlook, cultural conditioning, position in society, and writing style were sovereignly controlled by the Spirit. Some of the authors understood this:

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." (Jeremiah 1:4-5)

God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles. (Galatians 1:15)

Jeremiah and Paul knew that God had chosen them for a specific purpose. In the process of breathing out his word through the authors, the Holy Spirit did not bypass their personalities or cultures; they were not merely human typewriters, writing while in a trance-like state what God was dictating to them (even though some of them received what they wrote while in heightened awareness of the supernatural). Luke, for example, undertook a thorough investigation and decided to write his account of Jesus (Luke 1:3). Neither did God accommodate himself to the human frailties and limitations of the authors. He controlled their lives in such a way that what was produced was a divine-human product:

Thus the Holy Spirit allowed the writers free play of their personalities, vocabulary and training, while at the same time guiding them to make an infallible record of truth infallibly revealed. (Kenneth Wuest: Word Studies in the Greek New Testament (Volume III): Eerdmans, 1973)

Some might think that seems unfair to the human authors, that they were controlled by God in such a manner. Well, they do not seem to have had a problem with it. There is no evidence in the Bible that the authors were reluctant to produce what they did. The classic presentation of how God breathed his word through the human authors is made by Benjamin Warfield:

There is the preparation of the men to write these books to be considered, a preparation physical, intellectual, spiritual, which must have attended them throughout their whole lives, and, indeed, must have had its beginning in their remote ancestors,

and the effect of which was to bring the right men to the right places at the right times, with the right endowments, impulses, acquirements, to write just the books which were designed for them...Representations are sometimes made as if, when God wished to produce sacred books which would incorporate his will - a series of letters like those of Paul, for example - he was reduced to the necessity of going down to earth and painfully scrutinising the men he found there, seeking anxiously for the one, who, on the whole, promised best for his purpose; and then violently forcing the material he wished expressed through Paul, against his natural bent...nothing of the sort took place. If God wished to give his people a series of letters like Paul's, he prepared a Paul to write them, and the Paul he brought to the task was a Paul who spontaneously would write just such letters. (B.B.Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1948, pp155-156)

All equally inspired

Every book of the Bible is equally inspired; and every word is equally inspired. We might have favourite books of the Bible; and some of the books might appear to be more inspired. Paul's letter to the Romans might appear more inspired than his letter to Philemon. But Philemon is just as inspired as Romans. It might not be as significant; Romans contains major material about our new life in Christ. Nevertheless, Romans was breathed out by God in the same way as Philemon, and with the same degree of inspiration. They are both equally the Word of God. Furthermore, Philemon has its own unique place within the Bible. Without it the Word of God would be incomplete.

This principle also applies to the actual words in the Bible. Words are important, and God breathed out the actual words he wanted on the pages of his Word, not just ideas to which the writers added their own words. The whole of the Bible from beginning to end, including each individual word, has come from God himself. So we can say with complete confidence that the Bible is the actual Word of God written down.

Infallible & without error

Since the Bible is God's breathed word written down, it is also infallible and without error. When we say that the Bible is infallible we mean that it does not deceive or mislead us. It is trustworthy. Of

course, this assumes that we treat each part of the Bible in the light of the whole Bible; and the whole Bible in the light of each of its parts. That means we have to learn how to handle the Bible properly. It is important that we view whatever part we are reading in its proper context within the rest of the Bible. It is dangerous to take passages of the Bible out of context. An extreme example of this is Acts 25:19, where Festus speaks about 'a dead man named Jesus'. While this verse says that Jesus is dead, the rest of the Bible states unequivocally that Jesus is very much alive!

Allied to infallibility is inerrancy: the Bible contains no errors or contradictions. Specifically, this means firstly that the Bible is true concerning doctrine – what we believe. For example, what the Bible says about Jesus Christ is true. He is the God who made the world; he became a real man; he really died, rose again and ascended to heaven. He is the only way to God the Father. Secondly, inerrancy means that historical events which the Bible says are true, are true. The Red Sea parted; the walls of Jericho fell down; Balaam's donkey really spoke; Jesus walked on water. The stories of the Bible are not myths; they are historical facts. Thirdly, and this is a major factor today, inerrancy means that what the Bible says is right and wrong is actually right and wrong. It is inerrant concerning morality. Its ethical standards are eternal. What the Bible teaches about marriage and sexuality were not just for Bible times. Paul's views of morality were not the prejudices of a man of his times. He wrote what the eternal God has to say about an eternal truth. Homosexuality was a sin then and it is still a sin now. Marriage between a man and a woman was the God ordained pattern in Bible times; it still is today. The Bible is not a cultural book; it is an eternal book because it was written by the eternal God. If we interpret the Bible through the eyes of culture we make it less than it is. We must interpret culture through the Word of God.

The Canon of Scripture

Having established that the Bible is the unique, inspired Word of God written down, let us now see how the early church came to acknowledge what was inspired and how the books that comprise our Bible were accepted as such.

The Bible is divided into two parts: the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven of the New Testament. The term used to describe these sixty six books is the canon; this word comes from a Greek word meaning a measuring rod or standard. When

applied to Scripture, canon means the officially accepted list of books. It is the term used by Christians since the fourth century to denote the books belonging to the Old Testament and New Testament. It is important to remember that the books were canonical *before* they were collected into the canon by reason of their own nature. The Church recognised that they were inspired from their inception; they were inspired by God when they were written, not when the church recognised them as such.

The Old Testament Canon

The details of the final completion of the Old Testament canon are not known with certainty. Israel existed as a religious community without a holy book for hundreds of years between the time of Abraham and Moses (Abraham lived around 1900 BC; Moses around 1400 BC). In fact, none of the patriarchs before Moses is recorded as having composed inspired writings, even though the art of writing was well developed. The Old Testament was more than a thousand years in writing, from Moses through to the post-Babylonian exile era. Malachi was the last Old Testament book to be written, around 440 BC. Before we examine the formation of the Old Testament canon it is helpful to note the content and structure of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Hebrew Canon

The Hebrew Bible is exactly the same as our Old Testament. It differs only in the number and order of books, and comprises three sections:

THE LAW:

- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This is also known as the Pentateuch.

THE PROPHETS:

- Former - Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.
- Latter - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and The Twelve [our Minor Prophets].

THE WRITINGS:

- Poetical books - Psalms, Proverbs and Job.
- Five rolls - Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther and Ecclesiastes.
- Historical books - Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles.

This makes a total of twenty-four books in comparison with our thirty-nine; but they are exactly the same books, with precisely the same content.

The Formation of the Old Testament Canon ***The Torah/Pentateuch***

Far back in Israel's history certain writings were recognised as having divine authority, thus serving as a written rule of faith and practice for the people. Examples can be seen in Exodus 24:7, 2Kings 22-23; 2Chronicles 34; Nehemiah 8:9-17; 10:28-29; 13:1-3. In all these instances the writings are either a part or the whole of the Pentateuch - in the first example above probably just Exodus 20 to 23. Subsequently, as each part of the Pentateuch was completed, it was received by Israel as the word of God. Therefore, a short document like Exodus chapters 20 to 23 was regarded as canonical when Moses wrote it and before it had grown to anything like the complete book we now have.

We know that Deuteronomy was regarded as canonical when Moses wrote it. It was laid beside the Ark of the Covenant during the life of Moses (Deuteronomy 31:24-26), before the account of his death could have been added. Deuteronomy was edited after his death with the details of his death, but was not open to continual addition. So, the first five books of the Bible were immediately acknowledged as the authoritative Word of God and never questioned thereafter.

The Prophets and the Writings

The process here is not so clear or well defined, since it took place over a thousand year period. Evidence within the Old Testament itself indicates that some canonical books were selected out of a larger literature, or were editions of them. The Old Testament refers to over fifteen other books that are not contained in it. Examples can be found in Numbers 21:14; Joshua 10:13; 1Kings 11:41; 1Chronicles 29:29. The books in these sections are by a variety of authors, some independent of one another, others closely related in time and theme. Daniel, for example, was familiar with the book of Jeremiah (Daniel 9:1-2). Many of the authors were prominent, nationally known figures in the society of their time. This is certainly true of men like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Books like Kings and Chronicles were written by official court historians of the day. Many of the Psalms were written by David, the most famous king of Israel. Proverbs and

Ecclesiastes are largely the work of Solomon. The pedigree and authority of these books was known and acknowledged immediately.

A popular date for the final organising these books into their separate sections was probably around 165 BC under the guidance of Judas Maccabaeus. Further evidence is found in *Ecclesiasticus*, one of the books of the Apocrypha, written about 130 BC; it refers to the "Law, the Prophets and the other books of our Fathers." This implies a fixed and complete group of books. Josephus, a Jewish historian writing in 95 AD, gives confirmation of the Hebrew canonical list. Jewish scholars have consistently regarded the Old Testament canon closed since the time of Malachi (440 BC).

Jesus' Witness to the Old Testament Canon

Jesus witnessed to the existence of a fixed Old Testament canon in his lifetime:

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." (Luke 24:44)

Jesus referred to a threefold division of Scripture; he mentioned the Psalms because it is the first and the longest of the Writings section.

Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all. (Luke 11:50-51)

Abel was the first martyr (Genesis 4:8); Zechariah was the last according to the Hebrew canon (2Chronicles 24:21). Chronicles is the last book in the Hebrew canon; Jesus was referring to the whole of the Old Testament.

The New Testament Canon

The early church already had its scripture; the Old Testament was its Bible, received as the Word of God. There is no sense in those early years following the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit of the need to add to it. This is due to two factors:

1. There was a great body of spoken tradition concerning Jesus' ministry and teaching in existence;
2. The apostles, the immediate disciples and countless eye witnesses of the events were still alive.

Features of this period

Like the Old Testament, the formation of the New Testament was a process, not a one off event. Special honour was given to the letters of the apostles; Paul often signed his letters to confirm their authority (1Corinthians 16:21, Colossians 4:18, 2Thessalonians 3:17). He commanded that his letters to one church had to be read and obeyed in other churches (Colossians 4:16). 2Peter 3:16 is an example:

He [Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

Peter states here that Paul's letters were regarded as Scripture, putting them on the same level as the Old Testament as the Word of God. There is no way a man like Peter, steeped in his Jewish tradition of honouring the Hebrew Scriptures as the Word of God, would use the word *Scripture* to describe these letters unless he were convinced of their God-breathed status.

Local Canons to General Canon

The New Testament was composed between 50 to 90 AD. (Some think that all the material was written before 70 AD). Galatians or James is usually regarded as the earliest; and John's letters and Revelation the last. Paul himself refers to a previous letter he wrote to Corinth (1Corinthians 5:9) and to a letter to the church in Laodicea (Colossians 4:16), neither of which the early church preserved in its canon and which do not survive today. While the churches would have regarded everything written by Paul and the other apostles as authoritative, not all of their writings were thought equally necessary to preserve.

Why a Canon?

Why did the church need to judge between what was the Word of God and what was not? The twenty seven books that eventually

were accepted as canonical were not the only books circulating in the church. There were many others too, ranging from dangerous forgeries claiming to come from the apostles, to those that were helpful but lacking the authority of the apostolic letters and the Gospels. This was compounded by the actions of heretics in the church, who began to formulate their own canons; and the sporadic but intense persecutions the church suffered under the Romans. These persecutions demanded the destruction of the church's sacred books. Therefore, the church had to know which books could not be sacrificed. There was a growing awareness that a general, universal canon of all the material circulating in the church would have to be made, just like that of the Old Testament.

Throughout the church there existed local canons that often represented no wider usage than the churches of particular regions. Remember, ease of travel and communication was not what it is today. There was not yet a universal canon for all the church. Two of the earliest and best manuscripts of the New Testament documents contain books that were not eventually accepted by the church as a whole. Peter's reference to Paul's letters in 2Peter 3:16 indicates that some apostolic letters were clearly meant to be circulated among the churches from the day they were received. John's Revelation was also meant to be sent to the seven churches mentioned in it.

It seems that a process of collecting and preserving documents eventually began. Every church that received and possessed literature would have asked questions concerning authenticity. That was how the process took place. Local canons, which often contained some books not known to or used by other major churches, were eventually replaced by those canons that represented the general usage of the wider universal church. Church history tells us that by the middle of the fourth century, the church had agreed on a universal canon. Documents exist which give us the list of accepted New Testament books exactly as we have them today. The canon was complete and closed.

How Was Canonicity Determined?

There were three main criteria for a book to be included in the New Testament canon.

1. The authority of the writer in the Church.

Who wrote the book or letter? Was it written by an apostle? This matter of apostolic authorship, signature or authorisation was vital.

Mark and Luke were accepted because of their close association with the apostles. The apostles were known to the church either through personal relationship or reputation. Many of the forgeries circulating in those days pretended to come from the apostles. A book without apostolic signature or known apostolic authorship was questioned. Hebrews was one such book. Therefore, other questions were also asked.

2. *External evidence*

Where did the book come from? What was its origin? How did it arrive at a church? A book's provenance and usage was important; it had to be recognised by a leading, loyal church or a majority of churches. A few books were originally doubted by a minority through lack of knowledge as to the book's origin. This minority was always a very small one. There is no example of any book which was doubted by any large number of churches having been later accepted, or vice versa. By this process many false works were rejected. Our example of Hebrews again: because of its origin and provenance it was accepted.

3. *Internal evidence*

Was the book sound doctrine, faithful to what the church had been taught by the apostles? Paul himself warned the churches:

If we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:8-9)

The document had to be faithful to the apostles' teaching. Many of the spurious Gospels and letters of the time were anti-Christian propaganda which sought to dilute the truth of Christ. The Gospel of Peter, for example, was one such document. It claimed to have been written by the apostle Peter; but it was rejected because it said that Jesus only appeared to be human; that he was not really a man. On the other hand, our example of Hebrews passed this test with flying colours.

The Greatest Story Ever Told

The story contained in the Bible is the greatest story ever told. The story of the Bible itself is also a fascinating one. The history of the

Bible and how it came into the form we recognise today is a long and epic one. That history is filled with the stories of some incredible men and women who sacrificed their own lives that we might enjoy holding the very Word of God in our hands. We have only been able to scratch the surface of this story; nevertheless I trust that you will appreciate more and more in the days to come the wonderful book you have in your possession: it is the life changing, dynamic truth. It is the Word of God.

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About the author

Roger Aubrey was born and raised in Cardiff, the Capital city of Wales. Roger lives in the city with his wife Dianne, and has served on the leadership team of All Nations Church since 1986, with responsibility for teaching and preaching. He loves cricket and rugby; and teaches at churches, Bible Colleges and conferences throughout the world. Roger has a Master's Degree and a PhD in Christian Theology from Cardiff University. He likes to read biographies of those who shape history.

Roger is the author of three books: *The Circle of Life*; *Discovering God*; and *Stars and Sand*. His fourth book - *The Elijah People* - will be published in the autumn of 2011.