

There has been one reoccurring claim by Christians regarding the bible; I have heard it from nearly every Christian who corresponds with me. It is the statement that the bible-- being a perfect book, written by forty writers all inspired by God-- has **remained unchanged for thousands of years**. This claim, when made by a layman, **shows his ignorance of the subject**, and when made a **religious authority, is dishonest and misleading**.

The fact that the books of the bible, both the Old and New Testament, have undergone change throughout the centuries is undeniable. The Dead Sea Scrolls prove this. The Scrolls, dating to about the first century C.E., demonstrate that there were several versions of scripture in distribution-- some that are claimed by scholars to be even more extensive, and of better quality, than those found in our modern bibles.

But what I shall bring to light is the history of "The Bible", as a finished, completed work. Has the bible always been as it is now?

In the first place, which bible are we talking about? Throughout history, there have been literally thousands of translations. I am in possession of nearly twenty myself.

Most Christians seem to think that the bible (as it is now, with its sixty-six or so books, divided into chapters and verses) has existed for thousands of years. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the bible that most Christians are familiar with is a *fairly recent* contrivance. The religious term "canon" refers to the divinity of a specific set of writings. Just which books are canonical and which are not has been the subject of debate among Judeo-Christian leaders for the last two thousand years. The Protestant Church did not agree on which books should be contained in the bible until as late as 1647, at the Assembly of Westminster.

New Testament Books which are now accepted by Christians, but which were for a time rejected, are Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Revelation.

Books now excluded from the canon, but which are found in some of the older manuscripts of the New Testament, are Shepherd of Hermas, Epistle of Barnabas, 1 Clement, 2 Clement, Paul's Epistle to Laodiceans, Apostolic Constitutions.

Books accepted as canonical by some Jews, and for most part by the Greek and Roman Catholic churches, but *rejected* by the Protestants, are Baruch, Tobit, Judith, Book of Wisdom, Song of the Three Children, History of Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Prayer of Manasseh, Ecclesiasticus, 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, 5 Maccabees.

The **only** books of the bible which are accepted as divine by all Jews and all varieties of Christians are the first five books of the Old Testament: the Pentateuch.

There are lost books of the bible, which should have been included into the canon. These books are cited by writers of the Bible, and they are: Book of the Wars of the Lord, Book of Jasher, Book of the Covenant, Book of Nathan, Book of Gad, Book of Samuel, Prophecy of Ahijah, Visions of Iddo, Acts of Uzziah, Acts of Solomon, Three Thousand Proverbs of Solomon, A Thousand and Five Songs of Solomon, Chronicles of the Kings of Judah, Chronicles of the Kings of Israel, Book of Jehu, Book of Enoch.

What we know as the "canonized" bible was not assembled in anything like its present form until the 3rd century by a council of bishops (although it was still debated for centuries after). They chose which books should be included in the bible, which books were inspired by God, *by vote*, just as we might vote on a law. (Can you imagine that some books missed out on being The Word of God by *one vote*?) Were they any more qualified to judge which books were divine than anyone living today? Is their judgment and knowledge any better than ours?

Whatever happened to the Gospels according to Thomas, Jade, James, Peter, and the Gospel of the Hebrews, of the Egyptians, of Perfection, of Judas, of Thaddeus, of the Infancy, of the Preaching of Peter, of the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Pastor of Hermas, the Revelation of Peter, the Revelation of Paul, the Epistle of Clement, the Epistle of Ignatius, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Nicodemus and of Marcion? They were all not considered inspired (or inspired *enough*). They did not get voted in. There were also the Acts of Pilate, of Andrew, of Mary, of Paul and Thecla, and many others. If the bishops at the Council of Laodicea in 365 had voted differently, millions of Christians would have believed differently. The vote of the one is the belief of all the others.

There is one important question for you to consider: why are we bound by their opinion?

What we have come to know as the bible was not in a solid form until the Gutenberg printing press was invented in the 15th century. Before that, the bible was copied by hand, onto scrolls and parchments, which could be easily altered to fit the needs of those in power. It was malleable, easily altered-- no one could hinder the early Church from adding or subtracting verses at their will. No one will ever know just how much of the biblical text was altered, deleted, and rewritten while it was in handwritten form.

For your education on this subject I have included Chapter Three of "The Bible" by John E. Remsburg. (The copyright on this book is expired, and the book in its entirety can be purchased on CD-ROM from www.bank-of-wisdom.com).

Chapter Three: FORMATION OF THE CANON

Second in interest and importance only to the origin of the individual books composing the Bible are the facts relating to the manner in which these books were collected into one great volume and declared canonical or authoritative? The formation of the canon required centuries of time to complete.

The Jewish Canon

The Jewish canon, it is claimed, was chiefly the work of Ezra, completed by Nehemiah. "All antiquity," says Dr. Adam Clarke, "is nearly unanimous in giving Ezra the honor of collecting the different writings of Moses and the prophets and reducing them into the form in which they are now found in the Bible."

This opinion, shared alike by Jews and Christians, is simply a tradition. There is no conclusive evidence that Ezra founded the canon of the Old Testament. Nehemiah could not have completed it, because a part of the books were written after his time. There is no proof that all the books of the Old Testament existed in a collected form before the beginning of the Christian era. There is no proof that even the Law and the Prophets existed in such a form before the Maccabean period. The Rev. Frederick Myers, an able authority on the Bible, makes this candid admission: "By whom the books of the Old Testament were collected into one volume, and by what authority made canonical, we do not know." (Catholic Thoughts on the Bible, p. 56).

Another prevalent belief is that all of the Jewish scriptures were lost during the captivity, and that Ezra was divinely inspired to rewrite them. Irenaeus says: "God . . . inspired Esdras, the priest of the tribe of Levi, to compose anew all the discourses of the ancient prophets, and to restore to the people the laws given them by Moses" ("Ecclesiastical History," Book V., chap. viii).

This is a myth. The books of the Old Testament which were written before the captivity were not lost. Many books, it is true, were written after the captivity, but these books were not reproductions of lost writings. They were original compositions, or compilations of documents which had not been lost.

If Ezra was inspired, as claimed, to rewrite the Hebrew Scriptures, he did not complete his task, for the books that were really lost have never been restored, and the Old Testament is but a part of the Hebrew Scriptures that once existed. St. Chrysostom says: "The Jews having been at some time careless, and at others profane, they suffered some of the sacred books to be lost through their carelessness, and have burnt and destroyed others." The list of books given in the preceding chapter, under the head of "Lost Books cited by writers of the Bible," would nearly all be deemed canonical were they extant. Referring to these books, the Rev. Dr. Campbell, in his "Introduction to Matthew," says: "The Book of the Wars of the Lord, the Book of Jasher, the Book of Nathan the Prophet, the Book of Gad the Seer, and several others, are referred to in the Old Testament, manifestly as of equal authority with the book which refers to them, and as fuller in point of information. Yet these are to all appearances irrecoverably lost." **God's revelation in its entirety, then, no longer exists.**

The ten Hebrew tribes which formed the kingdom of Israel, and whose remnants were afterwards called Samaritans, accepted only the first six books of the Old Testament. The other Jews generally accepted the Pentateuch and the Prophets, and, in a less degree, the Hagiographa as canonical. Some of them also attached more or less importance to the Apocryphal books.

The Christian Canon

Respecting the formation of the New Testament canon, the Rev. Dr. Roswell D. Hitchcock says: "The new book of records was, like the old, set down by eye-witnesses of and actors in its scenes, closely after their occurrence; its successive portions were cautiously scrutinized and clearly distinguished as entitled to reception; when the record, properly so-called, was completed, the new canon was closed" ("Analysis of the Bible," p. 1149).

"This process was rapid and decisive; it had in all probability become substantially complete before the death of John, the last of the apostles." (Ibid, p. 1158).

That these statements, popularly supposed to be true, are wholly untrue will be demonstrated by the facts presented in this and succeeding chapters. The Christian canon was not completed before the death of the last apostle. The New Testament did not exist in the time of the apostles. It did not exist in the time of the Apostolic Fathers. It was not in existence in the middle of the second century.

There was no New Testament in the time of Papias. Dr. Samuel Davidson, the highest Christian authority on the canon, says: "Papias (150 A.D.) knew nothing, so far as we can learn, of a New Testament canon." ("Canon of the Bible," p. 123).

Justin Martyr knew nothing of a New Testament canon. I quote again from Dr. Davidson: "Justin Martyr's canon (150 A-D.), so far as divine authority and inspiration are concerned, was the Old Testament." (Ibid, p. 129).

For nearly two centuries after the beginning of the Christian era, the Torah, Psalms and Prophets--- the Old Testament alone constituted the Christian canon. No other books were called scripture; no other books were considered inspired; no other books were deemed canonical.

Founding of the Canon

To Irenaeus, more than to any other man, belongs the credit of founding the Roman Catholic church; and to him also belongs the credit of founding the New Testament canon, which is a Roman Catholic work. No collection of books corresponding to our New Testament existed before the time of Irenaeus. He was the first to make such a collection, and he was the first to claim inspiration and divine authority for its books.

Dr. Davidson says: "The conception of canonicity and inspiration attaching to New Testament books did not exist till the time of Irenaeus" ("Canon," p. 163).

At the close of the second century the Christian world was divided into a hundred different sects. Irenaeus and others conceived the plan of uniting these sects, or the more orthodox of them, into one great Catholic church, with Rome at the head; for Rome was at this time the largest and most influential of all the Christian churches. "It is a matter of necessity," says Irenaeus, "that every church should agree with this church on account of its preeminent authority." (Heresies, Book 3).

In connection with this work Irenaeus made a collection of books for use in the church. His collection comprised the following: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, Galatians Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, First Thessalonians, Second Thessalonians, First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon, First John, and Revelation-- twenty books in all.

In the work of establishing the Roman Catholic church and the New Testament canon Irenaeus was succeeded, early in the third century, by Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. They adopted the list of books made by him. The books adopted by these Fathers were selected from a large number of

Christian writings then extant-- forty or more gospels, nearly as many Acts of Apostles, a score of Revelations, and a hundred epistles. Each church had one or more books which were used in that church. No divine authority, however, was ascribed to any of them.

Why did the Fathers choose these particular books? Above all, why did they choose four gospels instead of one? We never see four biographies of Washington, of Cromwell, or of Napoleon, bound in one volume; yet here we have four different biographies of Jesus in one book. Irenaeus says it is because "there are four quarters of the earth in which we live, and four universal winds." Instead of this artificial reason he could have given a natural, a rational, and a truthful reason. While primitive Christians, as we have seen, were divided into many sects, the principal sects may be grouped into three divisions:

- 1) The Petrine churches, comprising the church of Rome and other churches which recognized Peter as the chief of the apostles and the visible head of the church on earth;
- 2) The Pauline sects, which accepted Paul as the true exponent of Christianity;
- 3) The Johannine or Eastern churches, which regarded John as their founder. A collection of books to be acceptable to all of these churches must contain the favorite books of each.

The First Gospel, written about the time this church union movement was inaugurated, was adopted by the Petrine churches. The Second Gospel was also highly valued by the church of Rome. The Third Gospel, a revised and enlarged edition of the Pauline Gospel of Marcion, had become the standard authority of Pauline Christians. The Fourth Gospel, which had superseded other and older gospels, was generally read in the Johannine churches. The Acts of the Apostles, written for the purpose of healing the dissensions that had arisen between the followers of Peter and Paul, was acceptable to both Petrites and Paulines. The Epistles of Paul were of course received by the Pauline churches, while the First Epistle of John was generally received by the Eastern churches. The collection would not be complete without a Revelation, and the Revelation of John was selected.

The work instituted by Irenaeus was successful. The three divisions of Christendom were united, and the Catholic church was established. But this cementing, although it held for centuries, did not last, as was hoped, for all time. The seams gave way, the division's separated and to-day stand out as distinctly as they did in the second century; the Roman Catholic church representing the Petrine, the Greek church the Johannine, and the Protestant churches to a great extent the Pauline Christians of that early age. But while the church separated, each retained all of the sixty-six canonical books, save Revelation, which for a time was rejected by the Greek church.

The New Testament originally contained but twenty books. To First Peter, Second John, and the Shepherd of Hermas Irenaeus attached some importance, but did not place them in his canon. Hebrews, James, Second Peter, Third John, and Jude he ignored. Tertullian placed in an appendix Hebrews, First Peter, Second John, Jude, and the Shepherd of Hermas. Clement of Alexandria classed as having inferior authority, Hebrews, Second John, Jude, First and Second Epistles of Clement (of Rome), Epistle of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, and Revelation of Peter.

Regarding the competency of the founders of the New Testament canon, Davidson says: "Of the three fathers who contributed most to its early growth, Irenaeus was credulous and blundering, Tertullian passionate and one-sided, and Clement of Alexandria, imbued with the treasures of Greek wisdom, was mainly occupied with ecclesiastical ethics." (Canon, p. 165). "The three Fathers of whom we are speaking had neither the ability nor the inclination to examine the genesis of documents surrounded with an apostolic halo. No analysis of their authenticity was seriously contemplated." (Ibid, p. 156).

Completion of the Canon

The Christian canon, including the New Testament canon, assumed something like its present form under the labors of Augustine and Jerome toward the close of the fourth century. St. Augustine's canon contained all of the books now contained in the Old and New Testaments, excepting Lamentations, which was excluded. It contained, in addition to these, the apocryphal pieces belonging to Daniel, and the books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, and First and Second Maccabees.

St. Jerome's canon contained Lamentations, which Augustine's canon excluded, and omitted Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, and First and Second Maccabees, which Augustine's included. Roman Catholics accept the canon of Augustine, including Lamentations; Protestants, generally, accept the canon of Jerome.

While Jerome included in his canon all the books of the New Testament, he admitted that Philemon, Hebrews, Second Peter, Second and Third John, Jude, and Revelation were of doubtful authority.

Referring to the work of Augustine and Jerome, Davidson, says: "Both were unfitted for the critical examination of such a topic." ("Canon", p. 200).

Christian Councils

Many believe that the Council of Nicea, held in 325 A.D., determined what books should constitute the Bible. This council did not determine the canon. So far as is known, the first church council which acted upon this question was the Synod of Laodicea which met in 365. This council rejected the Apocryphal books contained in Augustine's list, but admitted Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah. It excluded Revelation.

Various councils, following this, adopted canonical lists. One council would admit certain books and the next council would reject them. The third council of Carthage in 397 adopted the list of Augustine which admitted the Apocryphal books and Revelation and rejected Lamentations.

The actions of none of these councils were unanimous or decisive. The list of books adopted was adopted simply by a majority vote. A large minority of every council refused to accept the list of the majority. Some advocated the admission of books that were rejected; others opposed the admission of books that were accepted. As late as the seventh century (629), at the sixth Council of Constantinople, many different canonical lists were presented for ratification.

The damaging facts that I have adduced concerning the formation of the Christian canon are admitted in a large degree by one of the most orthodox of authorities, McClintock and Strong's "Cyclopedia of Biblical and Ecclesiastical Literature."

Dr. McClintock says: "The New Testament canon presents a remarkable analogy to the canon of the Old Testament. The beginnings of both are obscure... The history of the canon may be divided into three periods. The first, extending to 170, includes the era of circulation and gradual collection of the apostolic writings. The second is closed in 303, separating the sacred from other ecclesiastical writings. The third may be defined by the third Council of Carthage, 397 A.C., in which a catalogue of the books of the Scriptures was formally ratified by conciliar authority. The first is characteristically a period of tradition, the second of speculation, and the third of authority, and we may trace the features of the successive ages in the course of the history of the canon. But however all this may have been, the complete canon of the New Testament, as we now have it, was ratified by the third Council of Carthage, 397 A.C., from which time it was generally accepted by the Latin church, some of the books remaining in doubt and disputed."

Concerning the work of these councils, William Penn writes as follows: "I say how do they know that these men discerned true from spurious? Now, sure it is, that some of the Scriptures taken in by one council were rejected by another for apocryphal, and that which was left out by the former for apocryphal was taken in by the latter for canonical." (Penn's Works, Vol. I, p. 302).

In regard to the character of these councils, Dean Milman writes: "It might have been supposed that nowhere would Christianity appear in such commanding majesty as in a council... History shows the melancholy reverse. Nowhere is Christianity less attractive, and if we look to the ordinary tone and character of the proceedings, less authoritative, than in the councils of the church. It is in general a fierce collision of two rival factions, neither of which will yield, each of which is solemnly pledged against conviction." (History of Latin Christianity, Vol. I., p. 226).

The Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, and Protestant canons, no two of which are alike, were fixed by modern councils. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) determined the Roman Catholic canon. While a majority was in favor of the canon of Augustine they were not agreed in regard to the character and classification of the books. There were four parties. The first advocated two divisions of the books, one to comprise the acknowledged books, the other the disputed books. The second party proposed three divisions-- the acknowledged books, the disputed books of the New Testament, and the Apocryphal books of the Old Testament. The third party desired the list of books to be named without determining their authority. The fourth party demanded that all the books, acknowledged, disputed, and apocryphal, be declared canonical. This party triumphed.

At a council of the Greek church held in Jerusalem in 1672, this church, which had always refused to accept Revelation, finally placed it in the canon. The Greek canon contains several apocryphal books not contained in the Roman Catholic canon.

Both divisions of the Protestant church, German and English, declared against the authority of the Apocryphal books. The Westminster Assembly (1647) formally adopted the list of books contained in our Authorized Version of the Bible.

Ancient Christian Scholars

Most Christians believe that all of the books of the Bible, and only the books of the Bible, have been accepted as canonical by all Christians. And yet, how far from this is the truth! In every age of the church there have been Christians, eminent for their piety and learning, who either rejected some of these books, or who accepted as canonical books not contained in the Bible.

Not one of the five men who contributed most to form the canon, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, Jerome, and Augustine, accepted all of these books.

Late in the second century Melito, Bishop of Sardis, a contemporary of Irenaeus, was deputed to make a list of the books belonging to the Old Testament. His list omitted Esther and Lamentations. The Muratori canon, which is supposed to belong to the third century, omitted Hebrews, James, First, and Second Peter, and Third John. The Apostolic canon omitted Revelation, and included First and Second Clement and the Apostolic Constitutions.

Of Origen, the great Christian Father of the third century, "Chambers' Encyclopedia" says: "Origen doubted the authority of the Epistle to the Hebrews, of the Epistle of James, of Jude, of the Second of Peter, and the Second and Third of John; while, at the same time, he was disposed to recognize as canonical certain apocryphal scriptures, such as those of Hermas and Barnabas." In addition to the apocryphal books named, Origen also accepted as authoritative the Gospel of the Hebrews, Gospel of the Egyptians, Acts of Paul, and Preaching of Peter.

The Rev. Jeremiah Jones, a leading authority on the canon, says: "Justin Martyr, Clemens Alexandrinus, Tertullian, and the rest of the primitive writers were wont to approve and cite books which now all men know to be apocryphal." (Canon, p. 4).

Theodoret says that as late as the fifth century many churches used the Gospel of Tatian instead of the canonical Gospels. Gregory the Great, at the beginning of the seventh, and Alfric, at the close of the tenth century, accepted as canonical Paul's Epistle to the Laodiceans.

Early in the fourth century the celebrated church historian, Eusebius, gave a list of the acknowledged and disputed books of the New Testament. The disputed books-- books which some accepted and others rejected-- were Hebrews, James, Second and Third John, Jude, Revelation, Shepherd of Hermas, Epistle of Barnabas, Acts of Paul, and Revelation of Peter.

Athanasius rejected Esther, and Epiphanius accepted the Epistle of Jeremiah. Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, and Gregory, Bishop of Constantinople, both rejected Revelation. Chrysostom, one of the greatest of church divines, and who gave to the sacred book of Christians its name, omitted ten books from his canon-- First and Second Chronicles, Esther, Job, and Lamentations, five books in the Old Testament; and Second Peter, Second and Third John, Jude, and Revelation, five books in the New Testament.

Protestant Scholars

Many Protestant scholars have questioned or denied the correctness of the Protestant canon. John Calvin, founder of Presbyterianism, doubted Second and Third John and Revelation. Erasmus doubted Hebrews, Second and Third John, and Revelation. Davidson thinks that Esther should be excluded from the canon; Eichorn rejected Daniel and Jonah in the Old Testament, and Second Timothy and Titus in the New.

Dr. Whiston excluded the Song of Solomon, and accepted as canonical more than twenty books not found in the Bible. He says: "Can anyone be so weak as to imagine Mark, and Luke, and James, and Jude, who were none of them more than companions of the Apostles, to be our sacred and unerring guides, while Barnabas, Thaddeus, Clement, Timothy, Hermas, Ignatius, and Polycarp, who were equally companions of the same Apostles, to be of no authority at all?" (Exact Time, p. 28).

The Rev. James Martineau, of England, says: "If we could recover the Gospel of the Hebrews, and that of the Egyptians, it would be difficult to give a reason why they should not form a part of the New Testament; and an epistle by Clement, the fellow laborer of Paul, which has as good a claim to stand there as the Epistle to the Hebrews, or the Gospel of Luke." (Rationale of Religious Enquiry).

Archbishop Wake pronounces the writings of the Apostolic Fathers "inspired," and says that they contain "an authoritative declaration of the Gospel of Christ" (Apostolic Fathers).

The Church of Latter Day Saints, numbering one half million adherents, and including some able Bible scholars, believe that the modern Book of Mormon is a part of God's Word, equal in authority and importance to the Pentateuch or the Four Gospels.

Martin Luther

The greatest name in the records of the Protestant church is Martin Luther. He is generally recognized as its founder; he is considered one of the highest authorities on the Bible; he devoted a large portion of his life to its study; he made a translation of it for his people, a work which is accepted as one of the classics of German literature. With Luther the Bible superseded the church as a divine authority. And yet this greatest of Protestants rejected no less than six of the sixty-six books composing the Protestant Bible.

Luther rejected the book of Esther. He says: "I am such an enemy to the book of Esther that I wish it did not exist." In his "Bondage of the Will," he severely criticizes the book.

He rejected the book of Jonah. He says: "The history of Jonah is so monstrous as to be absolutely incredible." (Colloquia, Chap. LX., Sec. 10).

He rejected Hebrews: "The Epistle to the Hebrews is not by St. Paul; nor, indeed, by any apostle." (Standing Preface to Luther's New Testament).

He rejected the Epistle of James: "St. James' Epistle is truly an epistle of straw." (Preface to Edition of 1524).

He rejected Jude. "The Epistle of Jude," he says, "alleged stories and sayings which have no place in Scripture." (Standing Preface).

He rejected Revelation. He says: "I can discover no trace that it is established by the Holy Spirit." (Preface to Edition of 1622).

Source: <http://freethought.mbdojo.com/canon.html>

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Author of "The Bible" by John E. Remsburg