

THESE ARE WRITTEN  
THE CANON OF THE BIBLE ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE ITSELF

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## CONTENTS

|                                                                               |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| ABSTRACT .....                                                                | IV |
| INTRODUCTION .....                                                            | 1  |
| The Purpose of Scripture                                                      | 1  |
| The Questions of God’s People                                                 | 2  |
| LITERATURE REVIEW .....                                                       | 4  |
| A Brief Overview of Canonical Studies                                         | 4  |
| The Canon according to Luther                                                 | 7  |
| The Canon according to Orthodox Lutheran Dogmaticians                         | 12 |
| <i>Autopistia</i> : Definition and Use by John Calvin                         | 16 |
| <i>Autopistia</i> : The Self-Authentication of Scripture in Lutheran Theology | 19 |
| THE OLD TESTAMENT SPEAKS FOR ITSELF .....                                     | 25 |
| The First Words of God                                                        | 25 |
| The Written Word                                                              | 29 |
| The Preservation and Copying of the Written Word                              | 33 |
| Use It or Lose It                                                             | 37 |
| Written Works Outside the Canonical Scriptures                                | 41 |
| A Man After God’s Own Heart                                                   | 42 |
| The Teacher                                                                   | 45 |
| Lost and Found                                                                | 47 |
| The Prophets                                                                  | 51 |
| Putting It All Together—Ezra                                                  | 58 |
| THE NEW TESTAMENT CONFIRMS THE OLD TESTAMENT .....                            | 65 |

|                                           |    |
|-------------------------------------------|----|
| A Continuous Message                      | 65 |
| The Testimony of Jesus                    | 66 |
| The Fulfilled Prophecies                  | 69 |
| THE NEW TESTAMENT SPEAKS FOR ITSELF ..... | 72 |
| The Gospels                               | 72 |
| Matthew                                   | 72 |
| Mark                                      | 73 |
| Luke                                      | 75 |
| John                                      | 76 |
| A New Scripture?                          | 79 |
| Paul                                      | 85 |
| The Elder                                 | 91 |
| PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS .....               | 95 |
| As an Individual Christian                | 95 |
| As a Pastor of Souls                      | 96 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY .....                        | 98 |

## ABSTRACT

Lutherans hold firmly to the principle of *sola scriptura*—“the Word alone.” Everything we believe and teach is based on the Word of God. Where do we find that Word of God? In the inspired books of the Bible. Yet, with such an emphasis on the Word of God in our congregations, our church members often struggle with a simple question: “How do we know we have the right books?” Or, phrased a different way, “How do we know we have the right Word of God?” As this author studied this topic, he noted that many writers focus on the external evidence for the canon of Scripture, such as the apostolic authority of its authors and the corporate reception of the canon in the New Testament Church. This essay, however, will approach the topic of canon from a different perspective: What can be learned about the formation of the biblical canon from the Bible itself? God’s Word is self-authenticating, and this study of the Scriptures reveals that the written Word of God provides many convincing proofs of its authority and canonicity. Faith in God’s Word comes through hearing and reading the Word itself. May this essay lead all to a firmer trust in Jesus our Savior and his precious Word.

## INTRODUCTION

### **The Purpose of Scripture**

The Word of God was written with a purpose. Although the Bible was written by about forty different authors over 1,500 years, the purpose of every part of God's Word can be summarized by the words of John: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31 NIV).

God's goal is for people to have life—life in him here on earth and life with him forever in heaven. That goal of life is God's gift to those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. As Jesus himself testified, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), and "for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). It is through faith in Jesus the Messiah that God gives life as his gift to human beings.

That's where the Word comes in. For us to have faith in Jesus, what do we need? Well, "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah." We need the Word! The Scriptures clearly testify that faith in Jesus comes through hearing the Word of God, for "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Rom 10:17). The Word of God was written with a clear purpose: That we and all the world may believe in Jesus the Messiah and receive life in his name. That's God's certain promise!

Let's hear another promise. God gives so many promises! He says, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever" (Isa 40:8). God also promises that his Word will endure forever. People come and go, just like the grass and the flowers. Our kingdoms rise and fall. Yet, the Word of our God endures forever. As long as the world endures, our gracious God promises that there will be people who have his Word, who preserve his Word, who preach and share his Word, and who through that Word believe in Jesus the Messiah.

These two promises from God guide a Christian's approach to the Bible: 1) God had this Word written down for me so that I can have life through believing in Jesus my Savior. 2) God will ensure that his Word is preserved forever. This is why we don't treat the Bible like a textbook. It's not just a rule book or a great tale of adventure. It is the life-giving Word of God that he intends to plant in our hearts and preserve in his world forever.

### **The Questions of God's People**

The vital importance of God's Word to our hearts and lives as Christians naturally results in questions about the Bible. I have had questions. You have too. As an individual Christian, I've wondered, "If my salvation is based on the Word of God, how can I know what is the Word of God?" Sometimes that question morphs into a different one, "How can I know that the way I see the Bible is really the way the Bible wants itself to be seen?" As a Christian, this need has developed for my own personal faith: "What does the Bible say about itself?"

As a pastor, that need has been magnified. With unexpected regularity, my church members are constantly confronted with questions about the legitimacy of the Bible. In Bible class, the questions of participants often return to these same themes: "Do we really know we

have the right books of the Bible? Are Paul's words equal to Jesus' words? Can we really say this is all the Word of God?" Christians are wrestling with these questions about the Bible.

Unfortunately, those same Christians are bombarded with messages that are completely divorced from the truth of the Bible. As the devil works to undermine the Church's confidence in God's Word, he convinces Christians to focus on any and everything other than the Scriptures. It's a regular occurrence to have church members ask about the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Mary. "Why don't we use those?" It's not uncommon to have someone stop me after church and say, "Have you read the letters that Pontius Pilate wrote about Jesus?"<sup>1</sup> or "I've started reading the Apocrypha. Why don't we have those books in our Bible?" I've noticed that people—even life-long Christians—aren't used to using the Bible to defend itself. The old adage is still true: "It's amazing what people are willing to believe as long as it's not the Bible!"

Ultimately, isn't this what the devil has been doing from the beginning? He slithered up to Eve and said, "Did God really say?" (Gen 3:1). That same question is repeated in a thousand different ways, but it still slithers into Christian hearts today. The authority of God's Word is always at stake, from the Garden of Eden to the streets of the United States.

These questions from my own heart and from my people's mouths are the impetus for the study in this essay. These are vital questions for our faith: Does the Bible itself teach us to expect there to be a written Word of God that's true and authoritative for all people of all time? What can we learn about the writing of the Bible from the Bible itself?

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1. I had to admit that I had never heard of these. You can find the apocryphal letters of Pilate in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 8, 459–66.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **A Brief Overview of Canonical Studies**

Although the focus of this essay is on what the Bible says about its own formation, I wanted to begin my research by becoming acquainted with canonical studies as a whole. Many books and essays have been written about the canon. Christians can gain much from reading such sources. To become familiar with canonical studies, I chose to read one book on the formation of the New Testament canon and another on the formation of the Old Testament canon.

For the New Testament, I found the book *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* by Michael J. Kruger to be a well-written resource.<sup>2</sup> As he summarizes the history of canonical studies, Kruger advocates for what he calls the “Self-Authenticating” approach to canonicity. He describes three components of that approach: 1) Providential exposure: “We trust in the providence of God to expose the church to the books it is to receive as canonical. How can the church recognize books it does not have?” 2) Attributes of canonicity: “The Scriptures indicate that there are three attributes that all canonical books have: (1) divine qualities, (2) corporate reception, (3) apostolic origins.” 3) Internal testimony of the Holy Spirit: “The internal testimony is not private revelation that tells us which books belong in the canon, but it is the Spirit opening our eyes to the truth of these attributes and producing belief

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2. Michael J Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

that these books are from God.”<sup>3</sup> I agree with each of those components and would note that this self-authenticating nature (*autopistia*) of Scripture is what this essay will ultimately focus on.

Kruger also dives into the history of the canon’s formation in the first centuries of the Christian Church. He addresses which books were almost universally recognized as authoritative (*homologoumena*), while also discussing each of the books whose authority was at times questioned in the early church (*antilegomena*), including Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation. In addition, he describes a number of early Christian writings which were ultimately excluded from the New Testament canon, such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache. Ultimately, Kruger concludes that the 27-book canon of the Protestant church is correct and should be viewed as authoritative by all Christians today.

If someone is inclined to dive into further study of the formation of the New Testament canon, there are a plethora of resources available, including both Lutheran and non-Lutheran sources.<sup>4</sup> Instead of focusing on the Bible’s testimony about itself, as this essay intends to do, the majority of these resources trace the development of the New Testament canon through the first four centuries of the Christian era, culminating with the official acceptance of the 27-book New Testament canon at the Third Council of Carthage in 397 AD.

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3. Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 290.

4. Here is a list of canonical resources I have in my pastoral library: Siegbert W. Becker, *The Scriptures: Inspired of God* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1971); R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration* (Oxford University Press, 1964); Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988). Many articles on both the New Testament canon and the inspiration of Scripture are also available in Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary’s online essay file.

For the Old Testament, I greatly benefitted from reading *The Oracles of God: The Old Testament Canon* by LCMS professor Andrew E. Steinmann.<sup>5</sup> Steinmann defines the term “canon” in this way: “In this study, the term canon will mean a collection of authoritative and divinely inspired books accepted as such by an *overwhelming* majority in a religious community” (emphasis his). That definition implies several corollaries, including, “The acceptance of books as authoritative means that they exercise an authority not only for the present generation, but also (in some sense) for all generations.” And, “the acceptance of some books as authoritative and inspired immediately implies that other works are excluded because they are viewed by the community as either not authoritative or not inspired.”<sup>6</sup>

Steinmann explains and then debunks one prevalent theory about the formation of the Old Testament canon:

This theory held that the OT canon formed in three stages corresponding to the three divisions of the canon found in Jewish Bibles. The Torah was the original section of the canon, and it was recognized by 400 BC. The Prophets were accepted by 200 BC. The Writings rounded out the canon and were officially recognized no later than AD 90 by a rabbinic council held at Jamnia. This council was responsible not only for adopting the Writings but also for closing the canon.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to that theory, Steinmann lays out powerful evidence for why the Old Testament canon was established before the time of Jesus, including references in 1 and 2 Maccabees that allude to the canon being closed before the days of Judas Maccabeus,<sup>8</sup> quotations from Josephus that deny canonicity to the Apocrypha and describe the canon as being set long before his time,<sup>9</sup>

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5. Andrew E. Steinmann, *The Oracles of God: The Old Testament Canon* (St. Louis: Concordia Academic, 1999).

6. Steinmann, *The Oracles of God*, 18–19.

7. Steinmann, *The Oracles of God*, 19.

8. Steinmann, *The Oracles of God*, 61.

9. Steinmann, *The Oracles of God*, 114.

and citations from the Talmud and Midrash that indicate an understanding that divinely-inspired prophecy ceased after the prophet Malachi.<sup>10</sup>

In his conclusion, Steinmann encourages his readers not to look for how the Old Testament canon was formed. That's the wrong question! God formed the canon long before any group of people confirmed it. Instead, Steinmann encourages his readers to look for evidence of the canon's formation throughout history. In his words, "subsequent developments are not evidence of the formation of the canon, but of its history subsequent to its formation."<sup>11</sup>

This brief dive into canonical studies led me to desire a different approach for my further research and the bulk of this essay. It seems to me that much of canonical study inadvertently seeks to find the authority of the canon from outside of the canon, i.e. from what the early church said about the canon, or what ancient Jewish rabbis said about the canon, or how the various books of the Old Testament and New Testament were received by believers in God. Instead of continuing to plow through more scholarly works on the canon, I decided to narrow my research into what Lutheran dogmaticians have said about the self-authenticating nature of the canon. I then dedicated the bulk of my research to reading and studying what the Bible says about itself.

### **The Canon according to Luther**

As a Lutheran pastor, it was striking to read how critical Kruger is of Luther's approach to the canon. According to Kruger's understanding, Luther based the canonicity of New Testament

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10. Steinmann, *The Oracles of God*, 145.

11. Steinmann, *The Oracles of God*, 186.

books solely on his principle of whether or not the book preaches Christ. Kruger calls this the “canon-within-the-canon model” and points out its perceived deficiencies:

In reality, the “what preaches Christ” principle does not come from Scripture at all, but rather it comes from his Scripture—the books he already deems to be authentic in the first place (on some other grounds). But the question is, what are these other grounds? On what standard does he receive the books that give him the “what preaches Christ” principle? That is the key question that is never answered. It is not entirely cogent to choose certain books to be canonical (on some unnamed criterion), use those books to establish the new criterion of “what preaches Christ,” and then turn around and use that criterion to decide which books are canonical.<sup>12</sup>

Of particular concern for Kruger are Luther’s comments about the book of James. In his *Preface to the New Testament*, Luther writes:

In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.<sup>13</sup>

In his essay, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*,<sup>14</sup> J. A. O. Preus explains the context of Luther’s concerns about James and other books among the *antilegomena*. According to Preus, the Third Council of Carthage in 397 A.D. settled the centuries-old debate about the New Testament canon for well over a millennium. As the Renaissance began to bloom, however, debates about the canonicity of certain New Testament books began to reappear. For example, Erasmus expressed doubts about the canonicity of Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation. Cardinal Cajetan—the bitter opponent of Luther—expressed similar

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12. Kruger, *Canon*, 73. Further comment and criticism of Luther, especially regarding his thoughts on James, are found on Kruger, *Canon*, 116.

13. Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, in *Luther’s Works*, Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., American Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 35:362.

14. J. A. O. Preus, “The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians,” *The Springfielder* 25, no. 1 (1961): 8–33.

doubts. Preus comments, “We can summarize the thinking of the early Reformation period on Canon as being a return to the more flexible position of the early church before Carthage III.”<sup>15</sup>

In his essay, *The Hermeneutics of the Reformers*, Klaas Runia argues in the same vein that far from foreshadowing higher criticism, Luther was returning to early Christian thought:

The church fathers already distinguished between recognized writings (*homologoumena*) and disputed writings (*antilegomena*). From his new understanding of the gospel Luther opened up again the question of the canon, and it is interesting to note that several of the books questioned by him (such as James, Jude, 2 Peter) did indeed belong to the *antilegomena* of the church fathers!<sup>16</sup>

Luther was wrestling with the same questions that other theologians of his day were wrestling with, and his approach to the canon took him back to the days of the early Christian Church.<sup>17</sup>

In his book, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Paul Althaus offers further depth into Luther’s beliefs about Scripture and the canon. To start, “Luther sees the Bible as a great unity. It has only one content. That is Christ. ‘There is no doubt that all the Scripture points to Christ alone.’”<sup>18</sup> Since Luther believed that Christ is at the center of Scripture, he was adamant that Scripture needs to be understood in light of Christ:

Christ is the Lord and not his servant; he is the Lord of the Sabbath, of the law, and of all things. And the Scripture must be understood in favor of Christ and not against him. For this reason every part of Scripture must either refer to him or not be considered true

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15. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmatics*, 10.

16. Klaas Runia, “The Hermeneutics of the Reformers,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 19, no. 2 (December 1984): 139.

17. Preus adds that Luther’s comments in 1522 didn’t attract much attention until the Council of Trent thrust the canon debate back into the public view: “When Luther in 1522 published his German New Testament with its much-quoted strictures on Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation, he was re-echoing some rather common, though new, thinking of the period. In other words, if Trent had not condemned Luther, his views perhaps would have gone largely unnoticed. Luther rejected these books partly on the basis of historical precedent and partly on the basis of his own rather subjective criterion of canonicity, namely, their seeming lack of witness to Christ” (Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmatics*, 9).

18. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 74. The Luther quotation can be found in *LW* 35:132.

Scripture. Therefore, if our opponents attempt to use the Scripture against Christ we assert the authority of Christ against the Scripture.<sup>19</sup>

Luther was convinced that no message of Scripture could conflict with Christ and his gospel message of justification by faith alone.

It was this conviction of the centrality of Christ in Scripture that led to Luther's dictum that a true canonical book needs to preach Christ—*Was Christum treibet*. Althaus comments,

"All genuine books agree in preaching [treiben] Christ." He allows the canon to stand as it was established by the ancient church. But he makes distinctions within the canon. He evaluates the books according to the norm of their apostolic content. "This is the true test of all books, when we see whether or not they preach Christ. For all the Scriptures show us Christ [Rom. 3:21] and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ [1 Cor. 2:2]. Whatever does not teach Christ is certainly not apostolic even though St. Peter or St. Paul teaches it. Again whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic even though Judas, Ananias, Pilate, or Herod were doing it." If this characteristic is missing or inadequate in any of the canonical writings, as it is, for example in James, then the author cannot be an apostle.... Luther was so certain of this, as well as of the interpretation of Scripture, that he did not think of himself as approaching the canon with an arbitrary and autonomously chosen criterion but with the standard which Scripture itself offers in its on-going central proclamation. Luther obtained this standard from nowhere else than the Scripture. To that extent it is the Scripture itself that criticizes the canon.<sup>20</sup>

According to Althaus, Luther's comments on James need to be understood in this light:

Should it happen that a particular passage of Scripture is opposed to such evangelical interpretation and cannot be unified with the witness of all the rest of Scripture, then it simply does not have the authority of the word of God. This is the principle Luther applied to the doctrine of justification in James 2:21ff. He explains that he had been previously accustomed to interpreting the Letter of James according to the meaning of the rest of Holy Scripture—for no one may derive any theological statement from it which conflicts with the obvious meaning of all Scripture. Since, however, some did not allow the validity of his interpretation of this passage, he simply said, "Away with James." "His authority is not great enough to cause me to abandon the doctrine of faith and to deviate from the authority of the other apostles and the entire Scripture."<sup>21</sup>

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19. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 80. The Luther quotation can be found in LW 34:112.

20. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 83. The Luther quotations can be found in WA 12:260 and LW 35:396.

21. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 81. The Luther quotation can be found in WA 39II:219.

Althaus is quick to point out that Luther's criticism of James is of an entirely different nature than that of modern critics of the Bible, since his criticism was based solely on the gospel:

In all this, we should not overlook the fact that Luther expressed theological criticism within the canon only in the name of that gospel proclaimed by Scripture. He was not critical, for example, in the name of reason or in the name of a scientific worldview or the modern understanding of existence. Luther questions that Scripture is the word of God only where he finds that the gospel is obscured. As long as the decisive factor of 'preaching Christ' is not at stake, the Scripture always remains for Luther, as it was in the tradition he received, the book written by the Holy Spirit.<sup>22</sup>

Althaus summarizes Luther's view of the canon in this way:

We shall not canonize Luther's individual opinions about the last books of the New Testament. They remain significant, however, simply because Luther distinguishes the word of God, or the Holy Scripture in its essential sense, from the canon and expressed theological criticism of the canon—precisely for the sake of the word and the gospel.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to Althaus' measured explanation of Luther's comments, it could be added that Luther never outright rejected James or any other New Testament book. He included James and all the *antilegomena* in his translations of the New Testament and used them in his preaching and teaching. It's important to note that in his "epistle of straw" quote about James, he includes the comment, "compared to these others." After lauding the clear message of salvation in Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter, Luther was noting that James does not speak of the message of salvation as clearly as those other epistles do. That can hardly be denied by any reader of the New Testament.

Ultimately, the fact that Luther still considered James a part of the New Testament canon is clear from the beginning and ending words of his *Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude*, which is part of the same written work as his *Preface to the New Testament* quote above:

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22. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 86.

23. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 85.

[Beginning words:] Though this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God.<sup>24</sup>

[Ending words:] Therefore I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him.<sup>25</sup>

Luther's concerns about James were clearly theological and not meant to bind others.

Other WELS writers have addressed Luther's words in greater depth.<sup>26</sup> There is no obligation for Lutherans to defend Luther's individual opinion about books like James, but it is necessary to understand Luther's comments in light of his gospel conviction and his historical context.

### **The Canon according to Orthodox Lutheran Dogmaticians**

The Council of Trent changed everything. In April 1546, two months after Luther's death, the Council of Trent "pronounced anathema on any and all who rejected the 39 canonical books of the Old Testament, the Apocrypha of the Old Testament, and the 27 books of the New Testament Canon."<sup>27</sup> The Catholic Church was now declaring that it had the right to determine which books belonged in the canon. Was it true that the canon was decided by the Church? The Lutherans now needed to react to the Catholic Church's claim of authority over the canon.

This declaration loosened the pens of Lutheran theologians, starting with Martin Chemnitz (1522–1592). In his *Examination of the Council of Trent*, "Chemnitz shows that the

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24. LW 35:395.

25. LW 35:396.

26. For example, see Mark F. Bartling, *Luther and James: Did Luther Use the Historical-Critical Method?* (Essay presented to Pastor-Teacher Conference, Western Wisconsin District, LaCrosse, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, April 12, 1983).

27. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 10–11.

Bible is sufficient and inspired, without the traditions of the Church and papal pronouncements.

He shows the relationship between the two Testaments and points out that the entire Scripture testifies to Christ, thus following Luther.”<sup>28</sup> Chemnitz wrote,

The Scripture has canonical authority principally from the Holy Spirit by whose impulse and inspiration it was produced, secondly, from the writers to whom God Himself showed definite and special testimonies of the truth, afterward, it has authority from the primitive church, as from a witness in whose time those things were written and approved.<sup>29</sup>

According to Chemnitz, the Catholic Church had no right to claim authority over the Scriptures.

All the authority of the Scriptures comes from the Scriptures themselves.

Preus summarizes Chemnitz’s writing in the *Examination of the Council of Trent*:

Chemnitz is the most voluminous of the early Lutherans in regard to the Canon. We should note that he is writing against the background of the Council of Trent. He points out a difference which would never be settled between the Lutheran and the Catholics, namely, the source of the authority of Scripture. He answers, as do all the dogmaticians after him, that Scripture derives its authority not from the Church but from itself. Thus Chemnitz once and for all settles the matter among the Lutherans as to the position of the Fathers and the Councils regarding the Canon. The church can bear witness to the Canon; but the Canon has its own authority and impresses itself upon the church. The church can ratify; it cannot legislate. Chemnitz is very careful. He avoids the extravagant language of Luther. He goes as far as he feels he can in endorsing the antilegomena. He sees no straw epistles. He avoids Luther's use of only one criterion for canonicity, nor does he take refuge in the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*, something he never mentions. His main emphasis is on the witness of the early church. We might summarize Chemnitz’ criteria as being the inspiration of the book, apostolic authorship or apostolic commendation, and the witness of the early church. He retains enough of the spirit of Luther, Erasmus, and others so that he does not hesitate to reject the antilegomena as authoritative for doctrine; yet he represents a more cautious and judicious attitude than his predecessor.<sup>30</sup>

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28. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 11.

29. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 12–13.

30. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 15.

In other words, Chemnitz repeated Luther's concerns about the *antilegomena* without rejecting any individual book, such as some say Luther had done with James, all while emphasizing the self-authenticating authority of the Scriptures.

Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) ushered in a change in the way Lutherans spoke and wrote about the canon. While Chemnitz moved away from Luther's strong rejection of certain *antilegomena*, he still rejected the *antilegomena* as authoritative for doctrine. With the arrival of Gerhard, however, Preus remarks, "Gerhard marks a definite change in thinking among Lutherans on this subject.... After his time the dogmaticians, while still paying lip-service to Chemnitz, for all practical purposes abolished the distinction between homologoumena and antilegomena. This is the state of affairs which continues to the present day."<sup>31</sup>

In his essay, Preus quotes the positions of the subsequent generations of Lutheran dogmaticians, who followed Gerhard's lead. Johannas Andreas Quenstedt (1617–1688) wrote,

We call those books of the New Testament protocanonical, or of the first rank, concerning whose authority and secondary authors there never was any doubt in the church; and those deuterocanonical, or of the second rank, concerning whose secondary authors (not their authority, however) there were at times doubts entertained by some. There was doubt, I say, a discussion concerning these books, yet not among all, merely among a few; not at all times, only occasionally. And these doubts did not have reference so much to their divine authority or primary author, the Holy Spirit, as to their secondary authors.<sup>32</sup>

David Hollaz (1648-1713) echoed: "Since at the present time all evangelical teachers assign divine authority to these deuterocanonical books, there seems to be no occasion any longer for that distinction."<sup>33</sup> As he lists quotations from later dogmaticians, Preus comments, "Note in all

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31. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 21.

32. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 21.

33. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 22–23.

these later men the absence of all reference to Luther and Chemnitz.”<sup>34</sup> Luther’s concerns about the canonicity of James were not adopted or propagated by later dogmaticians. Even the distinction between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*, which was clearly outlined in Chemnitz’ writings, was not emphasized by later Lutheran dogmaticians.

In his *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Adolf Hoenecke freely admits, “We do not conceal that the early Lutheran church certainly made a distinction between the so-called homologoumena and antilegomena of the New Testament. Especially Chemnitz does this, and the reason for his strict distinction is obvious. He doesn’t want to give the papists a pretext at all to argue in favor of the Old Testament Apocrypha.”<sup>35</sup> Similar to the quotations from Preus above, Hoenecke traces how the Lutheran position on the distinction between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena* gradually faded away in the Lutheran dogmaticians, beginning with Gerhard and ending with Hollaz, who dropped this distinction. Hoenecke closes with, “And that is today the position of the Lutheran church in general.”<sup>36 37</sup>

That there have been differences over time in the way that Lutheran theologians have distinguished between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*, and that there remains a certain degree of openness in the Lutheran Church regarding the borders of the canon fit well with the

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34. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 22.

35. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2009), 506.

36. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics I*, 507.

37. It is worth noting that there are certainly some Lutheran theologians who do make reference to a continuing distinction between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*. For example, Schmid writes, “In the New Testament we have no apocryphal books in the same sense as in the Old Testament; but still there are single books of the New Testament in regard to whose origin and authors the evidence is not in all cases equally consentaneous. A certain distinction must therefore be made between them and the others that are equally authenticated by every species of evidence; and yet this distinction, resting as it does merely upon the want of entire agreement in the evidence, whilst very important testimony of various kinds is at hand to prove their canonical authority, is not of so much importance as to prevent us from making a canonical use of these books.” Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1899), 81.

Lutheran teaching of *sola scriptura*. No set list of canonized books has been mandated in

Lutheranism, because no set list of canonized books is mandated in Scripture. Preus says it well:

The Lutherans, holding that all doctrine must be drawn from God's Word, could not make the Canon an article of faith, since no such list is found in Scripture. The Catholics, teaching that the Church can establish doctrine, held that a decree, such as Trent's, made the Canon an article of faith. The Canon is the source of doctrines, but it is not itself an article of faith. The church in testifying to the Canon only recognizes God's Word; it does not establish it.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Autopistia: Definition and Use by John Calvin***

While there have been differences among Lutheran dogmaticians regarding the canon and some of its individual books, all Lutheran dogmaticians adamantly agree on the self-authenticating nature of Scripture. This concept is also referred to as the *autopistia* of Scripture.

The first known theologian to use the word *autopistia* in reference to Scripture was John Calvin. Therefore, before we examine *autopistia* in Lutheran theology, it will be helpful to reference an in-depth study of *autopistia* from Reformed Christianity. In 2006, H. van der Belt published his doctoral thesis for the Universiteit Leiden in The Netherlands with the title: *Autopistia: The Self-Convincing Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology*.<sup>39</sup> Belt's research can aid us greatly in understanding the meaning and roots of *autopistia*.

According to Belt, "Reformed theology states that Scripture has its authority of its own (*autopistia*) and that this is recognized through the work of the Spirit (*testimonium*).” He writes, “Although it is generally acknowledged that the concept of *autopistia* is essential for the

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38. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 27.

39. Hendrik van der Belt, *Autopistia: The Self-Convincing Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology* (Leiden: Leiden University, 2006).

Reformed position on Scripture, thus far no specific study has been made of the background and meaning of the term.”<sup>40</sup> Belt fills that need with his 350-page book.

When it comes to a basic definition of *autopistia*, Belt believes that a good starting point comes from its etymology: “credible in itself.” He prefers to slightly alter that definition to “self-convincing,” because the word refers to a statement that is “convincing without further demonstration.”<sup>41</sup> He favorably quotes a French dictionary which says that *autopistia* “is applied principally to the authenticity of holy Scripture as far as its divine origin is considered as evident *a priori* and not in need of any demonstration.”<sup>42</sup> The term is not used in the Reformed confessions, but it could be applied to statements like this from the Belgic Confession of 1561:

We receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith. And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them – not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God.<sup>43</sup>

It appears that John Calvin first used the word *autopistia* in his own personal writings as early as 1543, and the word *autopistia* first showed up in a revision of Calvin’s *Institutes* that was published in 1559 (*Institutes* 1.7.5). Here is that statement with Belt’s translation:

1. Maneat ergo hoc fixum,
2. quos Spiritus sanctus intus docuit, solide acquiescere in Scriptura,
3. et hanc quidem esse autopiston,
4. neque demonstrationi et rationibus subiici eam fas esse;
5. quam tamen meretur apud nos certitudinem, Spiritus testimonio consequi.

Let this therefore stand:  
those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught, truly find rest in Scripture;  
it is indeed autopistos

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40. van den Belt, *Autopistia*, 12.

41. van den Belt, *Autopistia*, 14.

42. van den Belt, *Autopistia*, 15.

43. van den Belt, *Autopistia*, 16.

– it should not be submitted to demonstration by proofs.  
while it still owes the certainty that it deserves among us to the testimony of the Spirit.<sup>44</sup>

Belt did an in-depth study of the history of the term *autopistia*, beginning in the days of the Reformers. He found that the word was listed in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (1572), the most important Greek-Latin dictionary of the sixteenth century. It was given the following definition: “Per se probabilis seu credibilis, Cui per se fides adhibetur, sine argumentis.” Belt then searched the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, a collection of virtually all Greek texts from the days of Homer (eighth century B.C.) to the fall of Byzantium (1453 B.C.). He found that in all recorded Greek writings, the term is used a total of 88 times in the works of 20 different authors.

The term *autopistos* is rare and comparatively recent; it only occurs once or maybe twice in Greek literature before the fourth century and the total of 88 matches in a collection of more than three thousand authors and twelve thousand works is small. Moreover, the term mostly occurs in a philosophical context; there are a few references in ecclesiastical writings, for instance of John Chrysostomus, but they are a small minority. Most matches occur in commentaries on Aristotle, though the term *autopistos* does not occur in Aristotle’s works.<sup>45</sup>

A study of those 88 uses of *autopistos* in Greek literature did not reveal any clear source for Calvin’s use of the word. It’s hardly mentioned in any of the church fathers. 29 of the 88 uses are found in the writings of a 6<sup>th</sup> century Christian philosopher named John Philoponus, although he was often commenting on Aristotle’s works and not on Christian theology.

In addition to searching the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, Belt searched the writings of other Protestant Reformers for the term, starting with Luther. He concluded: “No occurrence of the term *autopistos* or a word derived from it is found in his [Luther’s] works.”<sup>46</sup>

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44. van den Belt, *Autopistia*, 60.

45. van den Belt, *Autopistia*, 76.

46. van den Belt, *Autopistia*, 96.

It seems as though Calvin was the first to bring this little-used Greek word into theological use at the time of the Reformation. Its first use in Calvin's writings is found in his *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will* (1543). This work was written against Albertus Pighius, who published a book on free will in 1542. Here is the context:

Calvin accuses Pighius of calling Scripture uncertain and obscure because he is unable to settle the controversy over the freedom of the will on the basis of the Word of God. For Calvin, on the one hand, the Word of God is not merely the true and certain rule of faith, but also the only rule. If Pighius calls Scripture uncertain it is inconsistent and ridiculous that he appeals to Scripture to refute the Reformers as heretics. Pighius takes his principle (*principium*) from the Scriptures. "But *principia* ought to be *autopista*, wherefore the uttermost clarity is demanded." If Scripture is a nose of wax it cannot be a *principium* for Pighius at the same time.<sup>47</sup>

From the humble beginnings of that single reference, which wasn't even directly referring to Scripture itself, the word *autopistos* began to be used for the "self-convincing" or "self-authenticating" nature of Scripture as the Word of God.

### ***Autopistia: The Self-Authentication of Scripture in Lutheran Theology***

While he doesn't write with the length or depth of research as Belt, Lutheran theologian Helmet Echternach explains the centrality of *autopistia* to Lutheran theology in his essay, *The Lutheran Doctrine of the "Autopistia" of Holy Scripture*. Echternach defines *autopistia* like this:

In its formal aspect is that Holy Scripture requires no other argument to prove itself the inerrant divine truth than the evidence which it bears within itself and with which it confronts the Church and the individual as the living Word of the living God, that is to say, as the Word which has life in itself and awakens life. In its material aspect it declares that it needs no other interpretation than that which it itself represents and offers. From neither the formal nor the material point of view is the understanding of Scripture dependent on any other factor, such as the official church interpretation (Romanism), or

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47. van den Belt, *Autopistia*, 112.

mystical illumination, or logical proof, or arguments based on reason, or the results of scientific research.<sup>48</sup>

As stated above, the Lutheran Church's emphasis on the *autopistia* of Scripture was at the heart of its division from the Catholic Church. Robert Preus explains, "Fundamental in Catholic theology was the proposition that Scripture derived its authority from the Church. The *status controversiae* between Lutheranism and Romanism lay ... not so much in the authority of Scripture as in the question of whence Scripture derives its authority."<sup>49</sup> While the Catholic Church claimed to have authority over Scripture, Lutherans asserted the *autopistia* of Scripture. "When the Lutherans say that Scripture is *autopistos* they are emphasizing that its authority is absolute and independent. In fact, Scripture must be *autopistos*, if it is authoritative."<sup>50</sup>

This *autopistia* of Scripture is alive and active today. "Scripture supplies for its authority its own proof by creating faith. It is only when we take seriously the present tense in this statement that we give expression to the meaning of Scriptural *autopistia*; for Scripture has not merely attested itself once and for all as the divine inspired truth, but it keeps on proving itself to be such."<sup>51</sup> J.A.O. Preus writes, "Scripture is *autopistos*. It is its own authority, needing neither the decrees of councils and popes, nor the scientifically documented witness of history ... to establish its authority and value. The same Scriptures which convinced the early Christians that they were truly God-breathed books convince us of the same."<sup>52</sup> Deutschlander comments,

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48. Helmut Echterbach, "The Lutheran Doctrine of the 'Autopistia' of Holy Scripture," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 23, no 4 (April 1952): 241–242.

49. Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the 17th-Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), 93.

50. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the 17th-Century Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 90.

51. Echterbach, *The Lutheran Doctrine of the "Autopistia" of Holy Scripture*, 246–247.

52. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 29–30.

This miracle and mystery of inspiration is an article of faith; that is, we believe that the Scriptures are divinely and verbally inspired because God through the Scriptures themselves has convinced us of their inspiration. Thus, we say that the Scriptures are self-authenticating. They do not need some other authority or outside source to convince us of their inspiration. They are inherently capable of convincing us of their inspiration, since God is always with his Word and can never be separated from it.<sup>53</sup>

The self-authenticating nature of Scripture means that no church decree is needed to establish the canon. Far from it! As Echternach writes, “The authority of Scripture does not rest upon the Church or the respective decisions of church councils, but that inversely the Church rests upon the authority of Scripture.”<sup>54</sup> Deutschlander uses the analogy of a mother and child:

The church recognizes the Canon; she does not create it. And when the church recognizes the Canon, she is recognizing her mother. Just as no one would be so insane as to claim that a child makes its own mother by recognizing her, so no one should be so blasphemous as to claim that they have created the Canon by recognizing it.<sup>55</sup>

Although Luther himself never used the word *autopistia*, the self-authenticating nature of Scripture was already apparent to Luther. Althaus writes,

Since Christ is its content, this means that in the Holy Spirit Christ authenticates himself to men as the truth and thereby authenticates the Holy Scripture. Luther uses the Scripture’s capacity to validate itself or to work faith in itself as an argument against the Roman Catholic thesis that it is only the church which has established the canon and therefore actually guarantees the authority of Scripture. According to this view, the canon is established by the decision of the church, and the church therefore stands above the Scripture. Luther replies that it makes just as much sense to say that John the Baptist stands above Christ because he bears witness to Christ by point his finger at him.... The church’s witness to Scripture can never be anything more than the obedient recognition of the witness which Scripture bears to itself as God’s word.... It is not the church which authorizes the Scripture, but quite the contrary: the Scripture validates the Church.<sup>56</sup>

Later Lutheran dogmaticians repeated this same conviction. Consider these quotes:

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53. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2015), 40.

54. Echternach, *The Lutheran Doctrine of the “Autopistia” of Holy Scripture*, 242.

55. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 21.

56. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 75.

Gerhard: We believe the canonical Scriptures because they are the canonical Scriptures, that is, because they were brought about by God and written by the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We do not believe them because the church testifies concerning them... The canonical books are the source of our faith from which the church itself and its authority must be proved. *A principium* is believed on account of itself, not because of something else. *A principium* can be demonstrated *a posteriori*, but it cannot be proved by means of something older. In such a case it would not be *a principium*.<sup>57</sup>

Quenstedt: The final reason, by and because of which we believe with a divine and infallible trust that the Word of God is the Word of God, is the very intrinsic and effective power of the divine Word and the testimony and sealing of the Holy Spirit, who speaks in Scripture.<sup>58</sup>

In his *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Adolf Hoenecke calls this self-authenticating power of the Scriptures “the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.” He credits Hollaz with giving a “beautiful description of the testimony of the Holy Spirit in these words”:

The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is understood to be a supernatural act of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God when it is read, or his divine power in the Holy Scripture having been shared by hearing, the heart of man stirs, opens, lights up, and bends in the submission of faith, so that the man enlightened by these internal, spiritual emotions truly feels that the Word set forth to him originated from God himself and that therefore he firmly assents to it.<sup>59</sup>

In a circle back to Luther and his conviction that Scripture preaches Christ, Echterbach connects the self-authenticating nature of Scripture directly to Law and Gospel. The *autopistia* of Scripture cannot be rightly grasped without a proper understanding of Law and Gospel. The authority of Scripture is rooted in the Means of Grace:

All these internal proofs, as said before, are really only paraphrases of the testimony of the Holy Ghost, which means that Scripture as the Word of God can be known only through faith, the gift of the Holy Ghost. However, since, according to the sense of the

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57. Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmatics*, 31.

58. Echterbach, *The Lutheran Doctrine of the “Autopistia” of Holy Scripture*, 270. Here’s another Quenstedt quote: “Faith, which considers the testimony of the primitive church which witnesses that these books have been written by apostles and evangelists, is a human and historic faith; but faith, which believes that this or that book is divine and canonical, or comes from the Holy Ghost, is divine faith, and this does not rest on the testimony of the church, but on the internal criteria of Holy Scripture and primarily on the testimony of the Holy Spirit” (Preus, *The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmatics*, 27).

59. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics I*, 453.

Reformers, faith is basically assurance of salvation, or the sinner's trust in the promised divine grace, it means that Scripture can be recognized as God's Word only if it is read in the light of the polarity of Law and Gospel. The Lutheran *Schriftprinzip* (*principium cognoscendi*) had its inception in the depths of repentance; it is the necessary expression of one's status between wrath and grace. Whoever perceives in Scripture the threatening, punitive sword of God, as did Luther, or "the thunderbolt of Moses," knows the dreadful conviction, not open to any discussion, that God is here speaking. And again, to whom, as to Luther in his "tower experience," Scripture becomes the saving lifeline, which keeps him from sinking down into the abyss of despair, knows too, with an absolute assurance of faith, that it is God Himself who is here upholding him. Every form of doubt would here be absurd. Its denouement would be immediate: as hybris over against the Law; as *desperatio* over against the Gospel.

Every doubt concerning the authority of Scripture is only the symptomatic result of considering it outside the polarity of Law and Gospel.<sup>60</sup>

This fits with Lutheranism's emphasis on divine monergism in conversion. Faith in the Scriptures cannot be separated from faith in Christ, and faith in Christ is only possible through the Holy Spirit. If even the best of human reason and the finest human arguments are unable to convert a person's heart to faith in Christ, so the best of human reason and the finest human arguments are also unable to convert a person's heart to true faith in Christ's Word. Schmid remarks, "The internal and external criteria [for the canon] may indeed beget in us a human faith, but not a divine; the latter can be produced only by the testimony of the Holy Spirit."<sup>61</sup>

Clearly, the *autopistia* of Scripture is foundational in Lutheran theology. Preus writes,

This attribute of *autopistia* as it attaches itself to Scripture is of far-reaching significance. According to the dogmatists, the fact that Scripture is ... *autopistos* means that *a posteriori* evidence on behalf of Scripture is simply not valid in a discussion of its authority and reliability. Otherwise *sola fide* and the very nature of faith are denied. This explains the fact that the dogmatists pay so little heed to external considerations in their discussion of the authority of Scripture. It is needless to say that *sola scriptura* and

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60. Echternach, *The Lutheran Doctrine of the "Autopistia" of Holy Scripture*, 250–51.

61. Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 86.

the doctrine of verbal inspiration lose their force if the *autopistia* of Scripture is not upheld.<sup>62</sup>

Based on Preus' words, for a Lutheran to search for evidence of the canonicity of Scripture within Scripture itself is a most Lutheran endeavor. This is what *sola scriptura* leads us to do.

Deutschlander provides an excellent summary of this discussion of *autopistia*, along with a fitting encouragement to lead us into the main body of this essay:

Our trust in the unique origin and the divine and verbal inspiration of the Scriptures is not a mindless trust. We have ample reason for it in the Scriptures and especially in the record of promise and fulfillment. But, ultimately, we do not trust what the Bible says about the Bible simply because it makes more sense than anything else, nor because we just feel that way about it, nor because of any arguments that might be marshaled outside of the Scriptures in their defense. We believe, teach, and confess that the Bible is the verbally inspired Word of God because God has moved our hearts to trust what he says in the Bible about the Bible. So, again, the doctrine of inspiration, like all the great teachings of God's Word, is an article of faith. The best advice we can give to one who needs to be persuaded of the inspiration of the Bible and the absolute truthfulness of its message is this: Read it! All of the arguments that make it sensible to accept the Scriptures, their message and their authority, are useful; but, ultimately, the Holy Spirit working through his Book convinces us that it is his Book. That's what we mean when we say that the Scriptures are self-authenticating.<sup>63</sup>

So, let's read it. Since the best way to become convinced of the authority of the Bible is to allow the Bible to authenticate itself, the rest of this essay will allow the Bible to speak about its own formation. May the Holy Spirit use his inspired Word to convince our hearts of Scripture's truthfulness and fill us with faith in Jesus Christ and his salvation.

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62. Preus, "Dogmaticians," 91. Preus includes this quote from Calov: "Every Word of God is ... *autopistos* and must be believed *per se* simply because it is the Word of God, because God has declared it and said it, even though our reason may not understand or grasp it. This is demanded by the divine authority and unfailing truth of the divine Word. Because it is the Word of very God it has a divine authority which is under no obligation to give an account of itself and it is above every limitation and worthy of faith *per se*. It must be accepted by faith *per se*, not on account of something else, because God cannot receive authority from another. Because it is the infallible truth of God our faith must be grounded in it unquestionably" (90).

63. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 42–43.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

### **The First Words of God**

We don't have to read very far into the Bible to hear God speak. In fact, we first hear God's voice in the third verse of Genesis: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3). We can begin to understand some important concepts about the Word of God from those very first words of God. First, no human being had yet been created. Does God's Word depend on human beings to confirm or authenticate it? By no means! The Word of God is the Word of God, regardless of whether human beings hear or believe it. Even before there were humans, there was the Word. Second, did time need to pass before God's Word was recognized as authoritative? Most certainly not! When God spoke, it immediately came to be. The Word of God is the Word of God from the very first moment it is spoken. No human being made those words powerful. They were powerful and effective because they were the Word of God. Third, were those first words of God—"Let there be light"—immediately written down? Of course not. Moses didn't write the book of Genesis until thousands of years after the creation of the world. Yet, the Word of God is the Word of God, regardless of whether it is written down or not.

These are key truths for us to take to heart: The Word of God does not depend on human beings to authenticate it. The Word of God is living and active, regardless of whether human beings believe it or not. The Word of God is just as powerful in oral form as in written form. From their very first verses, the Scriptures focus our attention on the power of the Word of God. Franz Pieper comments, "The Christian Church is indeed older than Holy Scripture, that is, older

than the written Word of God. Until the time of Moses, God called His Church into existence and preserved it by His oral Word (*viva voce*).”<sup>64</sup>

It’s striking to see how often Genesis records God speaking. Still in its very first chapter, we hear the Trinity speak to himself, “Let us make mankind in our image” (Gen 1:26). Then, that same Trinity speaks to the people he created, “Be fruitful and increase in number” (Gen 1:28). As far as we know, none of those words were immediately written down. None of them were officially accepted by any human council as the Word of God. Instead, they were immediately true and immediately powerful and immediately to be remembered for generations to come. Already in Gen, we learn that the canonization of the Word of God is immediate. The moment God speaks, his Word is binding and eternal for mankind.

As further proof, consider the temptation of Eve in Genesis 3. It didn’t take the devil long to realize what he needed to attack if he wanted to destroy God’s perfect creation: The Word. So, from the very first temptation, he sought to plant doubt about the truthfulness of God’s words: “Did God really say?” (Gen 3:2). Yet, consider Eve’s initial response: “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die’” (Gen 3:3). How did Eve respond to the devil’s temptation? By quoting the Word of God! Already in the Garden of Eden, the Word of God was viewed by Adam and Eve as authoritative and true.

One added detail is that Eve’s words in Genesis 3:3 weren’t actually spoken by God to Eve. They were spoken by God to Adam in Genesis 2:16–17 before the creation of Eve. While it is certainly possible that God repeated his command about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the hearing of Eve, it’s also certainly possible that Eve heard about God’s command from

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64. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 193.

Adam. Was this the first sharing of God’s Word from one person to another? When God speaks, his Word is immediately “canon” and authoritative for all.

Fast forward to the days of Noah. In Genesis 7:1–5, the LORD spoke to Noah and explained his plans for the flood. It’s natural for us to wonder how it worked for God to speak to a human being. Did Noah actually hear his voice? Did others hear it too? Did God speak directly into Noah’s mind? Did he use a vision or a dream? We’re not told, but one thing is clear: God’s communication with Noah involved words. God didn’t just instantaneously fill Noah with knowledge. God has not made it so that people intuitively know his thoughts, especially his thoughts concerning his plan to save human beings by grace through faith. In contrast, Isaiah wrote, “Who has known the mind of the LORD?” (Isa 40:13—see 1 Cor 2:16). In his wisdom, God has decided to communicate with people through human speech and language. If we want to know the mind of the LORD, we should not be surprised to have God express his thoughts to us through human words. It’s been that way from the very beginning.

In the New Testament, Peter adds an interesting comment about Noah: “If God did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness...” (2 Pet 2:5). Notice what Peter calls Noah: A “preacher of righteousness.” Noah did not have the written Word of God, but he still had the Word of God. Noah was able to preach God’s Word, even before there was a written Scripture. Clearly, Peter considered Noah’s preaching of God’s Word to be a true and authoritative message from God.

Genesis is filled with instances of God speaking to his people. In Genesis 4, God spoke to Cain both before and after he murdered his brother Abel. In Genesis 12, God communicated with Abram by speaking, and those words of God were so powerful that they led Abram to uproot his family and move across the known world. God spoke again to Abram in Genesis 13 and 15. He

even spoke with Hagar, Abram's Egyptian maidservant in Genesis 16. Abram had more one-on-one conversations with God in Genesis 17 and 18, and God communicated with Lot through angels in Genesis 19, before God spoke with Abimelek king of Gerar in a dream in Genesis 20. We could go on, but this much is clear: God desires to speak to people. When he does, God communicates using human language which is instantly the Word of God.

Yet, there is one thing we don't hear in Genesis: A command to write. In all these instances of God speaking to Adam, Noah, the Patriarchs, and others, we never hear God command someone to write down his Word. One interesting exception, however, is found in Genesis 5:1: "This is the written account of Adam's family." The Hebrew phrase actually uses the word "book": *וְזֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדֹת*. This is the only place that the word "book" or "scroll" is used in Genesis. Jeske comments:

In the Old Testament *סֵפֶר* is always a written document, a self-contained unit, complete in itself, most likely in the form of a scroll.... God made available to Moses an old document, a written tradition which had been handed down from generation to generation and which listed important data about the ten patriarchs from Adam to Noah.... The Holy Spirit wanted this information in your Bible, and so he led Moses to incorporate the document into the biblical text. Through the miracle of inspiration, therefore, biographical data some scribe had painstakingly compiled became for us an integral part of the sacred Scripture.<sup>65</sup>

That one surprising phrase, "this is the written account," suggests that perhaps even before the flood the Holy Spirit was inspiring written accounts of God's relationship with mankind.

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<sup>65</sup> Carl J. Lawrenz, and John C. Jeske, *A Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2004), 211.

### **The Written Word**

The absence of a command to “write” in Gen is not continued in the book of Exodus. Rather, it’s in Exodus 17 that we first hear God command a man to write down his words. After God empowered the Israelites to defeat the Amalekites as Aaron and Hur held up Moses’ hands, the LORD said to Moses, “Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it” (Exod 17:8). This was a new command: “Write!”

Thankfully, God also told Moses the very clear reason why he wanted the story of this battle written down: “...as something to be remembered.” The purpose of writing down God’s words was so that they could be remembered, remembered by those who were there as eyewitnesses (like Joshua), and remembered in the future by those who weren’t there.

While the oral sharing of God’s Word is most certainly God’s Word, as we saw in Genesis, writing down God’s Word has some distinct advantages over the oral transmission of the Word. 1) Writing down the Word preserves the Word of God in an exact form without paraphrases or “telephone game” changes. 2) Having access to the written Word means that access to God’s Word is not limited to those who have a family member able to tell it to them. 3) A written Word is more easily able to be translated and shared across cultures and languages. 4) As the passage from Exodus clearly states, a written Word is able to be read and reread so that it is remembered for generations to come. Our God who communicates with human words and human language also wants his Word to be written down for all to know and remember.

As for writing down God’s word on a scroll, the Concordia Self-Study Bible shares these insightful comments:

A long strip of leather or papyrus on which scribes wrote in columns (see Jer 36:23) with pen (see Isa 8:1) and ink (see Jer 36:18), sometimes on both sides (see Eze 2:10; Rev 5:1). After being rolled up, a scroll was often sealed (see Isa 29:11; Da 12:4; Rev 5:1–2, 5, 9) to protect its contents. Scrolls were of various sizes (see Isa 8:1; Rev 10:2, 9–10).

Certain Egyptian examples reached lengths of over 100 feet; Biblical scrolls, however, rarely exceeded 30 feet in length, as in the case of a book like Isaiah (see Lk 4:17). Reading the contents of a scroll involved the awkward procedure of unrolling it with one hand while rolling it up with the other (see Isa 34:4; Eze 2:10; Lk 4:17, 20; Rev 6:14). Shortly after the time of Christ the scroll gave way to the book form still used today.<sup>66</sup>

It should come as no surprise that Moses was the first man whom God tasked with writing down his Word. Moses' upbringing was nothing short of miraculous. He was rescued from certain death in a basket on the Nile River by a daughter of Pharaoh. He was raised as a true believer in the LORD by his faithful mother, yet he was trained in Pharaoh's household for over 35 years. What did he learn? One of the things he most certainly learned was to write in the language of the Egyptians, who are often credited with developing the technology of writing. God ensured that Moses received the best possible education to write down his words forever.

God's command to "write" in Exodus 17 is just a preview of the rest of the book of Exodus. As the LORD confirmed his covenant with Israel, we hear, "When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, 'Everything the LORD has said we will do.' Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said" (Exod 24:3-4). The written word of God was no longer limited to the history of one battle. It now included "everything the LORD had said" to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Notice the content of the written Word. It was not a compilation of Moses' thoughts. It was what the LORD had said. It was not just a short paraphrase of the parts Moses considered important. It was everything.

To further confirm his will for a written covenant with his people, we hear the LORD say to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction" (Exod 24:12). God himself

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66. Robert G. Hoeber, *Concordia Self-Study Bible*, electronic ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), Exod 17:14.

wrote down the words of the Ten Commandments on stone tablets. His people were clearly entering a new age: An age in which the Word of God was preserved in written form.

Writing down God's words didn't just help with their preservation and remembrance, however. The story of the Israelites encamped at the foot of Mt. Sinai provides another clear reason why the written Word was necessary. "When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die'" (Exod 20:18–19). The giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai impressed upon the Israelites their sinfulness in the face of God's holiness. They recognized that sinners have no business speaking with God face-to-face. That was terrifying! Instead, God came to his people cloaked in words. What a concept! The written Word is how God can come to us without destroying us. The written Word is how we can hear the voice of God without being terrified.

The Pentateuch contains additional commands for Moses to write down God's Word.

Here are two examples:

<sup>27</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." <sup>28</sup> Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments. (Exod 34:27–28)

Here are the stages in the journey of the Israelites when they came out of Egypt by divisions under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. <sup>2</sup> At the LORD's command Moses recorded the stages in their journey. (Num 33:1–2)

In these commands, notice that God didn't just have Moses write down his commands. God also had Moses write down historical events like the victory over the Amalekites and the stages of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. Both the law and the history of the Pentateuch were commanded by God and the Word of God.

That authority of the Word of God is seen in passages like Deuteronomy 12:32: “See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.” From the moment the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Law were written down, total obedience was expected. There was no trial period. There was no authentication period in which the Israelites were to decide if the written Word was really right for them. The written words of God were immediately “canon.” They were immediately authoritative. The Israelites were to accept the written words of Moses as the very Word of God, without adding to it or subtracting from it.

Jesus agreed! In the New Testament, Jesus powerfully confirmed these conclusions we’re making about the Pentateuch. He told the Sadducees: “<sup>26</sup> Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? <sup>27</sup> He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!” (Mark 12:26–27). According to Jesus, the historical accounts of Exodus, like the account of the burning bush, were written by Moses and were the Word of God. After healing a man with leprosy, Jesus told him, “Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them” (Luke 5:14). According to Jesus, the laws of Leviticus were written by Moses and were the Word of God. Clearly, Jesus believed that both the history and the laws contained in the Pentateuch were written by Moses and were God’s Word.

In addition, Jesus once said to the Jewish leaders, “But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. <sup>46</sup> If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. <sup>47</sup> But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” (John 5:45–47). According to Jesus, the Old Testament was not established at some Council of Jamnia in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. On the

contrary, God's Word was God's Word the moment it was written down by Moses, and that Word is focused on Jesus. Clearly, the Bible teaches us the concept of immediate canonization: The words written down in Scripture were immediately recognized as the Word of God and the absolute authority for all.

### **The Preservation and Copying of the Written Word**

Not only does the Pentateuch provide clear commands for the writing down of God's Word, but God also gave his people specific instructions for the preservation and copying of his Word. After the first stone tablets of the Ten Commandments were destroyed in the incident of the golden calf, we read:

At that time the LORD said to me, "Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones and come up to me on the mountain. Also make a wooden ark. <sup>2</sup> I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Then you are to put them in the ark."

<sup>3</sup> So I made the ark out of acacia wood and chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I went up on the mountain with the two tablets in my hands. <sup>4</sup> The LORD wrote on these tablets what he had written before, the Ten Commandments he had proclaimed to you on the mountain, out of the fire, on the day of the assembly. And the LORD gave them to me. <sup>5</sup> Then I came back down the mountain and put the tablets in the ark I had made, as the LORD commanded me, and they are there now. (Deut 10:1–5)

In the introduction to this essay, we were reminded that "the word of our God endures forever" (Isa 40:8). Included in that promise is the fact that destroying a written copy of God's Word in no way destroys the Word of God. Even if some copies are destroyed, like the first two stone tablets, God ensures that his Word is not lost. Once God's Word is written down, God is committed to preserving his revelation. To aid in the preservation of his written Word, God commanded that the new stone tablets with the Ten Commandments be stored in the ark of the

covenant. If ever other copies were lost, or if ever there was doubt about the original wording, the original copies of the Ten Commandments could be found in the ark.

It wasn't just the Ten Commandments that were stored in connection with the ark of the covenant, however. Later in Deuteronomy, we read:

<sup>24</sup> After Moses finished writing in a book the words of this law from beginning to end,  
<sup>25</sup> he gave this command to the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD:  
<sup>26</sup> "Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God. There it will remain as a witness against you." (Deut 31:24–26)

While God had inscribed the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets, it was Moses who wrote the Book of the Law. That Book of the Law needed to be preserved, because after the days of Moses, people would forget God's teaching and turn away from the LORD. Therefore, the Book of the Law was to be placed beside the ark of the covenant. This is an important detail! It is safe to assume that the official copies of God's Word were always to be kept wherever the ark of the covenant was kept. That this was the case, even centuries later, is confirmed when Hilkiah the high priest finds the Book of the Law in the temple in the days of King Josiah (see 2 Kings 22). Based on Moses' words in Deuteronomy 31, it is no surprise that the Word was there in the temple, stored beside the ark of the covenant for hundreds of years.

This practice of storing sacred writings in the presence of God was not unique to Israel. "Ancient treaties specified that a copy of the treaty was to be placed before the gods at the religious centers of the nations involved. For Israel, that meant to place it in the ark of the covenant."<sup>67</sup> God ensured not only the writing, but also the preservation of his Word.

Now what? It was meant to be used! Far from gathering dust in the tabernacle, the Book of the Law was meant to be used immediately by every Israelite. Moses commanded:

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67. Hoeber, *Concordia Self-Study Bible*, Deut 31:9.

<sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup> Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deut 6:6–9)

The many verbs in these verses stand out: Impress. Talk about. Tie. Bind. Write. God's Word was immediately ready to be used as God's Word. The Israelites had no role in establishing what the Word of God was. Instead, they were to eagerly use the Word in as many ways as possible.

This was true not just individually, but also as a nation. The public reading of the Book of the Law was to be a regular practice in the life of God's people:

<sup>9</sup> So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the Levitical priests, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. <sup>10</sup> Then Moses commanded them: "At the end of every seven years, in the year for canceling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, <sup>11</sup> when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. <sup>12</sup> Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. <sup>13</sup> Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess." (Deut 31:9–13)

As we've already heard, the Book of the Law was to be kept by the priests who were responsible for the ark of the covenant. Every seven years, when all the people were gathered at the Festival of Tabernacles, the whole law was to be read to them. Wouldn't that have taken hours? Yes! It was worth it. We don't know how often this was actually done. It certainly doesn't sound like the Israelites did this every seven years as God had commanded. Yet, we know that it was done in the days of Ezra. In his case, the people heard from the Book of the Law for hours each day for seven days (see Neh 8). There are great benefits to the public reading of God's Word.

There are also great benefits to copying God's Word. Tucked away in the Mosaic legislation of Deuteronomy are these instructions for every future king of Israel:

<sup>18</sup> When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. <sup>19</sup> It is to be with him, and he is to

read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees<sup>20</sup> and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel. (Deut 17:18–20)

Again, we hear that the Levitical priests were responsible for the official copies of the Word of God. This fits with the command to have the Book of the Law stored beside the ark of the covenant. What's new is the command that a copy of the Book of the Law was to be made for the king. Clearly, copies of the Book of the Law were the Word of God, just as certainly as the original manuscripts were. The kings were to read the Bible every day!

Were these instructions actually carried out by the kings of Israel? Occasionally. Perhaps this is what King David was referring to when he told his son Solomon,

<sup>2</sup>“I am about to go the way of all the earth,” he said. “So be strong, act like a man,<sup>3</sup> and observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in obedience to him, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and regulations, as written in the Law of Moses. Do this so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go<sup>4</sup> and that the LORD may keep his promise to me: ‘If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.’” (2 Kings 2:2–4)

Faithful David knew that Solomon's success or failure as a king would depend on his faithfulness to God's Word. Perhaps David handed Solomon a copy of the Book of the Law.

Later in the Old Testament, we hear that godly king Jehoshaphat sent his officials throughout Judah to teach the Book of the Law: “They taught throughout Judah, taking with them the Book of the Law of the LORD; they went around to all the towns of Judah and taught the people” (2 Chr 17:9). When the high priest Jehoida crowned young Joash as king, “they presented him with a copy of the covenant and proclaimed him king” (2 Chr 23:11). Even the king, or especially the king, was to live his life in accordance with the Word of God!

Already in the days of Moses, the people of God had a canon of Scripture, which was authoritative from the very first day it was written down. God's people were not to add or

subtract from that Book of the Law. Instead, they were to carefully store it next to the ark of the covenant and carefully copy it as needed for public reading and for the instruction of their kings. The Israelites were to incorporate the Book of the Law into their daily lives as much as possible.

I can't help but notice that this sounds very much like how Christians use the Bible today. The Bible's authority doesn't come from a decree of the Christian Church. The authority of the Bible comes from God himself. We are not to add or subtract from the Bible (Rev 22:18–19), since it is not our Word, but God's Word. We are to carefully preserve it, copy (and publish) it for all to read, and incorporate the Bible into our daily lives as much as possible. A study of the Pentateuch reveals that Christians today use the Bible in the very same ways as the Israelites did 3,500 years ago. God's people have respect for the Word of God!

### **Use It or Lose It**

It's striking to note the immediate use of and reverence for the Book of the Law in the days of Joshua. After Moses' death, the LORD said to Joshua,

“Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. <sup>8</sup> Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.” (Josh 1:7–8)

Again, there was no process of canonization for the Pentateuch. Instead, the Book of the Law was immediately recognized as the Word of God. God gave Joshua wonderful promises connected to the Book of the Law, and he encouraged him to meditate on it day and night.

And Joshua did! The Book of Joshua testifies to Joshua's trust in the LORD and his Word. One powerful example is the renewal of the covenant at Mount Ebal:

<sup>30</sup> Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, <sup>31</sup> as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites. He built it according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses—an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used. On it they offered to the LORD burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings. <sup>32</sup> There, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua wrote on stones a copy of the law of Moses. <sup>33</sup> All the Israelites, with their elders, officials and judges, were standing on both sides of the ark of the covenant of the LORD, facing the Levitical priests who carried it. Both the foreigners living among them and the native-born were there. Half of the people stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had formerly commanded when he gave instructions to bless the people of Israel.

<sup>34</sup> Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses—just as it is written in the Book of the Law. <sup>35</sup> There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the foreigners who lived among them. (Josh 8:30–35)

It's hard not to be impressed at the prominence given to the Book of the Law by Joshua. Not only did he do everything prescribed in it, but he also copied it on stones and read all the words of the law aloud to the people. Of course, this renewal of the covenant had been commanded by God through Moses in Deuteronomy 27. Joshua treated the Book of the Law as God's Word and immediately sought to put into action what is written in it.

That adherence to God's Word didn't change throughout Joshua's life. In his final address to Israel's leaders, he encouraged: "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left" (Josh 23:6).

In fact, Joshua didn't just encourage faithfulness to the Book of the Law, he was guided by God to add to it. At the end of Joshua, we read: "<sup>25</sup> On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws. <sup>26</sup> And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD" (Josh 24:25–26). Clearly, there was already the idea in Joshua's day that God would add additional writings to the Book of the Law. To not turn aside from the Book of the Law to the right or to the left did not mean that God's

Word was a closed, finished canon. Joshua himself recorded additional things in the Book of the Law. Did that include the whole book of Joshua? Joshua 24:25 certainly points to the possibility that Joshua himself wrote the book of Joshua. God's Word, beginning with the Book of Moses, was the authoritative Word of God that no one was to add to or subtract from, but God's people understood that God would add to that Book of the Law according to his wisdom and grace. Joshua is an excellent example of how to put the Word of God into use in a believer's life.

It's at this point, however, that readers of the Old Testament are in for a surprise. After Joshua's faithful focus on the Book of the Law, do you know how many times the Book of the Law is mentioned in Judges, Ruth, or 1 Samuel? Zero. Not a single time. And it showed. The old saying, "Use it or lose it," can certainly be applied to the Word of God. While God promises that his Word will endure forever, it is also apparent that a group of people has the terrifying ability to reject that Word and lose it for themselves and for their immediate descendants.

The book of Judges cues us in on how quickly the Israelites turned away from the LORD:

<sup>10</sup> After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. <sup>11</sup> Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. <sup>12</sup> They forsook the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the LORD's anger <sup>13</sup> because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. <sup>14</sup> In his anger against Israel the LORD gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. <sup>15</sup> Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress. (Judg 2:10–15)

We are always just one generation away from losing the Word of God. Joshua warned the people not to turn away from God's Word and not to intermarry with the pagan nations around them. What did the Israelites do? They turned away from God's Word and intermarried with the pagan nations around them. The book of Judges describes the sad spiritual state of God's people by saying, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judg 21:25).

Although the Book of the Law is not mentioned in this period, we find hints of the people's use—or disuse—of God's Word. God's nighttime visit to young Samuel is introduced with this statement, "In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions" (1 Sam 3:1). While there is debate about whether that is referring to the disuse of the Book of the Law or the lack of people receiving new revelations from God, the message is clear, "The word of the LORD was rare." In the next chapter, we hear how the ark of the covenant was taken captive by the Philistines (1 Sam 4). In light of what we learned about the storage of the Book of the Law in the Pentateuch, that capture of the ark has added meaning. When the ark was taken, so were the two tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments. When the ark was taken, was the whole Book of the Law also taken with it? If not, without the ark of the covenant, where was the Book of the Law stored? The danger of the days of the judges wasn't just that the people were ignoring God's Word. The written copies of the Word themselves were in danger.

Yet, as God always does, he found a way for his Word to endure. Perhaps the miraculous return of the ark (1 Sam 6) was God's way of ensuring the preservation of his Word. The raising up of the prophet Samuel was a gift of God's grace to his undeserving people. In addition, we read this about Samuel in connection with the anointing of Saul as Israel's first king: "Samuel explained to the people the rights and duties of kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the LORD. Then Samuel dismissed the people to go to their own homes" (1 Sam 10:25). Even when it seemed like the Word had been lost, God still spoke through his prophet Samuel. While we can't identify exactly what was written on that scroll or whether it became part of the Old Testament, it's noteworthy that Samuel does with that scroll what was always to be done with God's written Word: He deposited it before the LORD, perhaps right next to the Book of the Law and the additions to the Book of the Law that Joshua had written.

Even though the people's despising of the Word led them to lose it for a time, God was still preserving his Word for generations to come.

### **Written Works Outside the Canonical Scriptures**

That last verse about the scroll that Samuel deposited before the LORD raises an additional question: Were there other ancient Hebrew writings that were not considered inspired Scripture? The answer is, "Yes!" It's good to realize that there were many other ancient writings that weren't preserved for us as God's Word. In fact, the Old Testament refers to a number of writings that aren't included in our 39-book canon of the Old Testament. Here are examples:<sup>68</sup>

That is why the Book of the Wars of the LORD says: "... Zarah in Suphah and the ravines, the Arnon<sup>15</sup> and the slopes of the ravines that lead to the settlement of Ar and lie along the border of Moab." (Num 21:14–15)

<sup>12</sup> On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: "Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon." <sup>13</sup> So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. (Josh 10:12–13)

<sup>19</sup> The other events of Jeroboam's reign, his wars and how he ruled, are written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel. (1 Kings 14:19)

As for the other events of Rehoboam's reign, and all he did, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Judah? (1 Kings 14:29)

Dating all the way back to the days of Moses and the Book of the Wars of the LORD, there were other Hebrew books written by believers in the Lord. That certainly doesn't surprise us. Given that there were six hundred thousand Israelite men who left Egypt in the Exodus (Num 1:46), it would be surprising if none of them wrote about God's wondrous deeds for his people.

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68. Adolph Harstad has a helpful chart of other ancient records that corroborate the sacred Scriptures in his *Joshua* commentary. Adolph L. Harstad, *Joshua*, ConC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004), 420.

That the kings of Israel and Judah would have annals written about their reigns is certainly in line with royal writings from other nations and cultures. The fact that some Hebrew writings are inspired by God and preserved to this day certainly does not mean that all Hebrew writings were inspired. Already in the days of Moses, believers recognized that some writings came from God and were authoritative for all (like the Book of the Law), and some writings were helpful human writings that weren't meant to be authoritative (like the Book of the Wars of the LORD).

How did the Israelites know the difference? That's not revealed to us in the Word, and it's beyond the scope of this essay. When well-meaning Christians ask if somehow part of God's Word is lost or missing for us today, we can return to God's promise: "The word of our God endures forever" (Isa 40:8). The fact that God did not see fit for the annals of the kings of Israel and Judah to be preserved for us today indicates that they were not part of his Word.

### **A Man After God's Own Heart**

After the dark days of the judges, God in his grace allowed a resurgence of trust in the LORD—and the writing of God's Word—in the days of King David. In fact, David's ascendance to the throne of Israel was based on the Word of God. Samuel declared to King Saul, "Because you rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king" (1 Sam 15:23). When Saul turned away from the Word of God, God turned away from him, just as Moses had written in Deuteronomy 17:14–21. In his place, God had already selected a man after his own heart. Samuel told Saul, "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command" (1 Sam 13:13–14).

That man after God's own heart was David, whom God used not only as a great leader of his people, but also as an instrument to write his Word in the book of Psalms. Pertinent to our study are some of the last words of David recorded in 2 Samuel 23:1–5:

“The inspired utterance of David son of Jesse, the utterance of the man exalted by the Most High, the man anointed by the God of Jacob, the hero of Israel's songs: <sup>2</sup> The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue. <sup>3</sup> The God of Israel spoke, the Rock of Israel said to me: ‘When one rules over people in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, <sup>4</sup> he is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain that brings grass from the earth.’ <sup>5</sup> If my house were not right with God, surely he would not have made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part; surely he would not bring to fruition my salvation and grant me my every desire.”

In these words, David made a profound claim: “The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue.” When David wrote his psalms, it was the Holy Spirit who spoke through him. When David sang his songs to God's people, it was the Lord who placed his Word on his tongue. David understood and believed that the words he wrote in his psalms were not his own. They were the very words of God.

David's bold claim matches perfectly with what we hear about God's Word in the New Testament. Paul wrote, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). Peter concurred, “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” (2 Pet 1:21). Paul and Peter believed that the writers of the Old Testament were inspired by God and carried along by the Holy Spirit. Already 1,000 years earlier, David recognized and believed the same thing! In the Scriptures, God speaks through men. The divine inspiration of the Bible is a biblical teaching found in both the Old and New Testaments.

That reverence and awe for God and his Word is seen throughout the psalms, but perhaps most clearly in David's words in Psalm 19:7–14:

<sup>7</sup> The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. <sup>8</sup> The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. <sup>9</sup> The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. <sup>10</sup> They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. <sup>11</sup> By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward. <sup>12</sup> But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. <sup>13</sup> Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression. <sup>14</sup> May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

How could anyone read those words and conclude, “David viewed the Scriptures as traditions passed down from men”? No way! David recognized that the written words of Scripture, even words that he himself was writing down, were perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, enduring forever, firm, righteous, and precious. When Christians praise and preach the Word of God, we are doing what God’s people have always done for thousands of years.

Jesus himself pointed to both the Davidic authorship of the psalms and David’s trust in the Messiah in his Holy Week discussion with the Jewish leaders. He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet”’” (Matt 22:43–44). Not only did Jesus concur that David wrote Psalm 110, but Jesus also emphasized that David wrote by the Spirit. Just like David claimed in 2 Samuel 23, the writings of David are divinely inspired.

Peter emphasized the same truth about the divine inspiration of the Old Testament. When it came time to choose Judas’ replacement, he said to the Christians in Jerusalem, “Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Jesus, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus” (Acts 1:16). Who spoke through David? The Holy Spirit! On Pentecost, Peter used David’s words in Psalms 16 and 110 as his proofs for Jesus’ Messiahship, and he boldly proclaimed,

<sup>29</sup> Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. <sup>30</sup> But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. <sup>31</sup> Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. (Acts 2:29–31)

Both Jesus and the early Christian Church viewed David's writings as the inspired Word of God and referred to them often for their testimony about Jesus' deity and resurrection.

### **The Teacher**

As instrumental as David was in writing and sharing the Word of God, God actually used his son Solomon to write more of God's Word than David did. We have already referenced David's final charge to Solomon to remain faithful to God's Word in 1 Kings 2:1–5. The responsibility of his position as king over God's people was not lost on Solomon, which is clearly seen in the fascinating account of 1 Kings 3. After Solomon went to Gibeon to offer a thousand burnt offerings to the Lord, the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you" (1 Kings 3:5). Solomon answered:

<sup>7</sup> "Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. <sup>8</sup> Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. <sup>9</sup> So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" (1 Kings 3:7–9)

In response to his humble request, God said to him, "I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be" (1 Kings 3:12). God made Solomon the wisest and most discerning person who ever lived. The next chapter of 1 Kings describes the God-given wisdom of Solomon:

<sup>29</sup> God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. <sup>30</sup> Solomon's wisdom was greater than the

wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. <sup>31</sup> He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Kalkol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. <sup>32</sup> He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. (1 Kings 4:29–32)

What would we expect a man with such God-given wisdom to do? Write down God’s Word!

Solomon most certainly did. The book of Proverbs begins with this clear declaration:

“The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel” (Prov 1:1). Who better to write the book of Proverbs than the man who spoke three thousand proverbs with the wisdom of God? It was that God-given wisdom that led him to write, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7). Proverbs isn’t just practical advice written by a man with many life experiences. Life experiences don’t bring true wisdom. True wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord.

In addition to the book of Proverbs, it seems very likely that God also used Solomon to write the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes begins, “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl 1:1). While Solomon is not explicitly named as the author, he is the perfect fit as the great Teacher of Israel and the son of David. The book of Song of Songs does explicitly list Solomon as its author, as it begins with the title: “Solomon’s Song of Songs” (Song 1:1). With such an explicit statement, I see no reason to doubt the Solomonic authorship of Song of Songs, although it has been questioned by some.

Studying the three books of Solomon adds perspective to our understanding of divine inspiration. Clearly, it was Solomon’s Spirit-given wisdom that enabled the writing of these portions of Scripture. Yet, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs offer very different perspectives on life. It has been said that perhaps Solomon wrote Song of Songs as a young man, Proverbs in middle age, and Ecclesiastes as an old man. Those three books testify to the reality that God speaks his Word through human instruments at different times and in various ways (see

Heb 1:1). While Solomon was a different person with very different attitudes at different stages of his life, God worked through him and his changes and his weaknesses to give us his Word.

### **Lost and Found**

Sadly, Solomon's God-given wisdom didn't prevent him from falling away from the LORD. As much as the world was blessed through Solomon's Spirit-inspired writings, Solomon's spiritual downfall had tremendously negative implications for generations of God's people. The same man whom God used to write down his Word was also the cause of generations of people being separated from God's Word in the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah. We read of Solomon's downfall and the resulting consequences in 1 Kings 11:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. <sup>2</sup> They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. <sup>3</sup> He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. <sup>4</sup> As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. <sup>5</sup> He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. <sup>6</sup> So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done....

<sup>9</sup> The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. <sup>10</sup> Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command. <sup>11</sup> So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. <sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. <sup>13</sup> Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen." (1 Kings 11:1–6,9–13)

For our purposes of tracing the formation of the Bible, Solomon's downfall ushered in a tumultuous age in which the Word of God seemed perilously close to being lost completely

under the godless rulers of Israel and Judah. It's well-known that the northern kingdom of Israel did not have any kings who were faithful to the LORD. The prophet Elijah even wondered if he was the only believer remaining in the land (see 1 Kings 19). How could the Word of God continue to endure under the likes of Ahab and Jezebel? Even in Judah, the Word of the Lord seemed destined to die out under the evil reigns of rulers like Athaliah, Manasseh, and Amon.

Yet, "the word of our God endures forever" (Isa 40:8). In Israel, God assured Elijah that he had reserved 7,000 who remained faithful to the Lord and his Word (1 Kings 19:18). In Judah, God used a woman named Jehosheba to rescue Joash from Athaliah's rage. God allowed Joash to grow up at the temple under the high priest Jehoiada. As we have already heard, at young Joash's coronation, Jehoiada presented him with a copy of the covenant, just as Moses had commanded in Deuteronomy 17. In the face of godlessness and idolatry, the Word endured.

Before we move on from Solomon, there is another important lesson we can learn from Solomon's idolatry: The power of God's Word is not dependent in any way on the faithfulness of its human authors. In our world today, best-selling books are quickly relegated to the rubbish heap when their authors fall from favor. That is not the case with the Word of God, since its true source is not the human author but God himself. While the book of Ecclesiastes gives us hope that Solomon repented in his old age, Solomon clearly fell away from God for an extended time. His fall, however, had no impact on the Word of God which God had inspired him to write, because Scripture does not receive its authority from man. Even in the face of apostasy, even in the face of the apostasy of one of the very writers of Scripture, the Word endured.

That is clearly seen in the fascinating account of King Josiah. After the long, godless reign of Manasseh and the short reign of his son Amon, Josiah was eight years old when he inherited a kingdom that had seemingly lost the Word of God. It seems there was a period in

which no one had access to the written Word until the Book of the Law was found during repairs in the temple. Ironically, that was just where the Book of the Law was supposed to be! We read:

<sup>8</sup> Hilkiyah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD.” He gave it to Shaphan, who read it. <sup>9</sup> Then Shaphan the secretary went to the king and reported to him: “Your officials have paid out the money that was in the temple of the LORD and have entrusted it to the workers and supervisors at the temple.” <sup>10</sup> Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, “Hilkiyah the priest has given me a book.” And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.

<sup>11</sup> When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. <sup>12</sup> He gave these orders to Hilkiyah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Akbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king’s attendant: <sup>13</sup> “Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD’s anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us.” (2 Kings 22:8–13)

That the temple of the Lord had fallen into disrepair (2 Chr 34:8–11) and that the Book of the Law needed to be “found” indicate the extent to which the truth of God had been lost. “When the king heard the words of the Law, he tore his robes” (2 Chr 34:19). Josiah’s reaction seems to indicate that he was hearing from the Book of the Law for the very first time.

Here’s what godly Josiah did with the Word of God that had been found:

Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> He went up to the temple of the LORD with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD. <sup>3</sup> The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD—to follow the LORD and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant. (2 Kings 23:1–3)

Once that Book of the Law was found, King Josiah did exactly what God wants his people to do with his Word: He used it! He read it aloud to his people, just as Moses had commanded to be done every seven years (Deut 31:9–13). 2 Kings 23 and 2 Chronicles 35 describe the many religious reforms that Josiah carried out in Judah, including a grand celebration of the Passover. The Chronicler writes: “The Passover had not been observed like

this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel; and none of the kings of Israel had ever celebrated such a Passover as did Josiah, with the priests, the Levites and all Judah and Israel who were there with the people of Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup> This Passover was celebrated in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign" (2 Chr 35:18–19). Not only was the Book of the Law found, but the Spirit used it to work repentance and faith in the hearts of King Josiah and his people.

It's hard to overemphasize the importance of this account to our understanding of the formation of the Old Testament canon. By the time Josiah became king in 640 B.C., roughly 800 years had passed since Moses wrote the Book of the Law. Centuries of poor leadership and outright apostasy had clouded God's people and eroded their trust in the Lord. Yet, we find the Word of God exactly where it was supposed to be: In the temple (Deut 31:26). The Book of the Law had been faithfully preserved. It's not far-fetched to assume that other writings of the Old Testament had been faithfully preserved too.

Josiah's discovery of the Book of the Law in the temple also proves that the practice of storing canonical writings in the temple continued throughout Israel's history. Steinmann writes,

The well-known incident of the discovery of the book of the Law in the temple during Josiah's reign assumes that the official archives of the Scriptures were in the temple. Vasholz claims that "the placing of writings in a nation's holy shrine is tantamount to and a consequence of being deemed sacred and divine." If he is correct, then the process of canonization of books reaches back at least to the first storing of books in the Temple.<sup>69</sup>

The fact that this practice continued even into the second temple period is attested to by the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees: "The same things are narrated in the records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah, and also that he founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings" (2 Macc

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69. Steinmann, *Oracles of God*, 59.

2:13–14).<sup>70</sup> In addition, Josephus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. mentions in a number of his writings that Israel’s holy books were archived at the temple, including the books of Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua. According to Josephus, these books of the law were carried away by the Romans in 70 A.D. when the temple was destroyed. Steinmann concludes, “Thus, Josephus confirms on several occasions that the sacred Jewish books were in an archive in the Temple.” Steinmann argues that the “canon” for Old Testament Israel was determined by which books were stored at the temple, although he admits that some non-canonical books were also stored at the temple, especially priestly records that proved the priests’ legitimacy.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Prophets**

In broad strokes, we’ve studied what the Bible says about the writing of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. We’ve learned that the written Word of God was immediately canonized. In other words, it was immediately authoritative for God’s people and for the generations to come. There was no process of canonization. What God said through Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon was to be immediately put into practice in the lives of God’s people. We’ve seen repeatedly that the Book of the Law and other writings of Scripture were kept next to the ark of the covenant, first at the tabernacle and later at the temple. We’ve been warned that while God’s Word will endure on earth forever, God’s people are still just one generation away from losing that Word for themselves and for their children.

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70. Steinmann, *Oracles of God*, 60.

71. Steinmann, *Oracles of God*, 111–13.

That's why, beginning with Samuel in the era of the judges, God called men to be his prophets. The final 17 books of the Old Testament are named after prophets, with the exception of Lamentations, which was written by the prophet Jeremiah. Studying the prophets is vital to understanding the writing of the Bible. While an exhaustive study of what the prophetic writings say about the Word of God is beyond the scope of this essay, we will look at two of the major prophets and appreciate the clear way they testify to the divine inspiration of their messages.<sup>72</sup>

A great summary of how God inspired his prophets with his Word is found in the call of Ezekiel. As you read these verses, take note of how often the LORD emphasizes that Ezekiel would be speaking the Word of the Lord:

He said to me, "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you."<sup>2</sup> As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

<sup>3</sup> He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. <sup>4</sup> The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' <sup>5</sup> And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them. <sup>6</sup> And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or be terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people. <sup>7</sup> You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. <sup>8</sup> But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious people; open your mouth and eat what I give you."

<sup>9</sup> Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, <sup>10</sup> which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.

<sup>3</sup> And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel."<sup>2</sup> So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.

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72. For a confessional Lutheran study of the inspiration of Scripture, with multiple references to both the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, see: Siegbert W. Becker, *The Verbal Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (essay delivered to the teachers of the Texas District Teachers Conference: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, August 17, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.

<sup>4</sup> He then said to me: “Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them. <sup>5</sup> You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and strange language, but to the people of Israel—<sup>6</sup> not to many peoples of obscure speech and strange language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. <sup>7</sup> But the people of Israel are not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for all the Israelites are hardened and obstinate. <sup>8</sup> But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. <sup>9</sup> I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people.”

<sup>10</sup> And he said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. <sup>11</sup> Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says,’ whether they listen or fail to listen.” (Ezek 2:1–3:11)

There could be no doubt: Ezekiel was called to speak the very words of God to God’s people.

The repetition of that key truth is striking: “I will speak... This is what the Sovereign LORD says... You must speak my words to them... Open your mouth and eat what I give you... Speak my words to them... Speak to them... Say to them... This is what the Sovereign LORD says.”

There could be no doubt: Ezekiel was called to speak God’s Word!

God didn’t just say that. He powerfully demonstrated it by commanding Ezekiel to eat a scroll. Obediently, Ezekiel opened his mouth and ate the scroll. That scroll went into Ezekiel’s mouth and filled his stomach. That would be the source of Ezekiel’s message: The Word of God that he had personally tasted. It filled his heart and soul. It was as sweet as honey in his mouth!

It didn’t matter what his hearers thought. Three times God repeated this phrase, “Whether they listen or fail to listen... Whether they listen or fail to listen... Whether they listen or fail to listen....” The validity of Ezekiel’s message didn’t depend on how it was received. It wouldn’t be Ezekiel’s hearers who would decide if his word was really the Word of God. In fact, every one of Ezekiel’s hearers could reject his message, and that wouldn’t change the fact that it was the Word of God. The authority of the Word of God doesn’t depend on the rebellious, hardened,

and stubborn hearts of men. It depends on the inspiration of God. It wasn't the Israelites who canonized Ezekiel's message. It was the Word of God from the moment God placed it in him.

Lest we think that Ezekiel was the only prophet truly inspired in this way, other Old Testament prophets received similar calls from God. Jeremiah recorded his call like this:

<sup>4</sup> The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

<sup>5</sup> "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."

<sup>6</sup> "Alas, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young."

<sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. <sup>8</sup> Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.

<sup>9</sup> Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. <sup>10</sup> See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." (Jer 1:4–10)

As with Ezekiel, note how powerfully the LORD emphasized that Jeremiah would be speaking the Word of the Lord: "The word of the LORD came to me... Say whatever I command you... I have put my words in your mouth...."

While Jeremiah wasn't asked to eat a scroll like Ezekiel was, God did something that was perhaps even more unexpected: "The LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth." What would it be like for the hand of the LORD to touch your mouth? It's unimaginable, but the message is clear: "This mouth is mine. I made it. I will speak through it. Don't think you're too young. Don't think you can't speak. I will speak through you!" The words of the prophet Jeremiah, like the words of the prophet Ezekiel, would be the inspired words of God.

A case study of God speaking through his prophets is found in Jeremiah 36. This fascinating chapter gives us a window into the writing and preservation of God's Word.

In the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup>“Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now. <sup>3</sup> Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, they will each turn from their wicked ways; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin.”

<sup>4</sup> So Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and while Jeremiah dictated all the words the LORD had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll. <sup>5</sup> Then Jeremiah told Baruch, “I am restricted; I am not allowed to go to the LORD’s temple. <sup>6</sup> So you go to the house of the LORD on a day of fasting and read to the people from the scroll the words of the LORD that you wrote as I dictated. Read them to all the people of Judah who come in from their towns. <sup>7</sup> Perhaps they will bring their petition before the LORD and will each turn from their wicked ways, for the anger and wrath pronounced against this people by the LORD are great.” (Jer 36:1–7)

God personally commanded Jeremiah to write on a scroll all the words that God has spoken to him. The writing of God’s Word wasn’t undertaken on a personal whim or as a pet project of the prophets. It was commanded by the Lord himself! That written Word had a clear, God-given purpose. God wanted his people to hear his Word read to them so that they would repent of their sin and be forgiven by his grace.

Not only do we hear God’s command to write, but the actual writing process is also described. In this case, Jeremiah dictated to his scribe Baruch “all the words the LORD had spoken to him.” Those words from God to Jeremiah to Baruch were to be read to the people.

<sup>8</sup> Baruch son of Neriah did everything Jeremiah the prophet told him to do; at the LORD’s temple he read the words of the LORD from the scroll. <sup>9</sup> In the ninth month of the fifth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, a time of fasting before the LORD was proclaimed for all the people in Jerusalem and those who had come from the towns of Judah. <sup>10</sup> From the room of Gemariah son of Shaphan the secretary, which was in the upper courtyard at the entrance of the New Gate of the temple, Baruch read to all the people at the LORD’s temple the words of Jeremiah from the scroll.

<sup>11</sup> When Micaiah son of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, heard all the words of the LORD from the scroll, <sup>12</sup> he went down to the secretary’s room in the royal palace, where all the officials were sitting: Elishama the secretary, Delaiah son of Shemaiah, Elnathan son of Akbor, Gemariah son of Shaphan, Zedekiah son of Hananiah, and all the other officials. <sup>13</sup> After Micaiah told them everything he had heard Baruch read to the people from the scroll, <sup>14</sup> all the officials sent Jehudi son of Nethaniah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Cushi, to say to Baruch, “Bring the scroll from which you have read to the people

and come.” So Baruch son of Neriah went to them with the scroll in his hand. <sup>15</sup> They said to him, “Sit down, please, and read it to us.”

So Baruch read it to them. <sup>16</sup> When they heard all these words, they looked at each other in fear and said to Baruch, “We must report all these words to the king.” <sup>17</sup> Then they asked Baruch, “Tell us, how did you come to write all this? Did Jeremiah dictate it?”

<sup>18</sup> “Yes,” Baruch replied, “he dictated all these words to me, and I wrote them in ink on the scroll.”

<sup>19</sup> Then the officials said to Baruch, “You and Jeremiah, go and hide. Don’t let anyone know where you are.” (Jer 36:8-19)

Whose words were on that scroll? “All the words of the LORD.” The fact that Jeremiah had dictated the scroll didn’t change the fact that these were God’s words. The fact that Baruch had written the scroll didn’t change the fact that these were God’s words. These words from God were alive and active and cut the hearts of the people who heard them, even the wicked king:

<sup>20</sup> After they put the scroll in the room of Elishama the secretary, they went to the king in the courtyard and reported everything to him. <sup>21</sup> The king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and Jehudi brought it from the room of Elishama the secretary and read it to the king and all the officials standing beside him. <sup>22</sup> It was the ninth month and the king was sitting in the winter apartment, with a fire burning in the firepot in front of him. <sup>23</sup> Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe’s knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire. <sup>24</sup> The king and all his attendants who heard all these words showed no fear, nor did they tear their clothes. <sup>25</sup> Even though Elnathan, Delaiah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them. <sup>26</sup> Instead, the king commanded Jerahmeel, a son of the king, Seraiah son of Azriel and Shelemiah son of Abdeel to arrest Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet. But the LORD had hidden them. (Jer 36:20-26)

What fascinating details about this ancient manuscript of God’s Word! The scroll written by Baruch had columns on it. When three or four columns had been read, the king cut them off and threw them into the fire. We can only guess how long the scroll was. Clearly, it had multiple sections of three or four columns. Whatever material it was made of was highly flammable and could easily be cut with a knife. Did that mean that God’s Word could be destroyed? No!

<sup>27</sup> After the king burned the scroll containing the words that Baruch had written at Jeremiah’s dictation, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: <sup>28</sup> “Take another scroll and write on it all the words that were on the first scroll, which Jehoiakim king of

Judah burned up.<sup>29</sup> Also tell Jehoiakim king of Judah, ‘This is what the LORD says: You burned that scroll and said, “Why did you write on it that the king of Babylon would certainly come and destroy this land and wipe from it both man and beast?”’<sup>30</sup> Therefore this is what the LORD says about Jehoiakim king of Judah: He will have no one to sit on the throne of David; his body will be thrown out and exposed to the heat by day and the frost by night.<sup>31</sup> I will punish him and his children and his attendants for their wickedness; I will bring on them and those living in Jerusalem and the people of Judah every disaster I pronounced against them, because they have not listened.’”

<sup>32</sup> So Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah, and as Jeremiah dictated, Baruch wrote on it all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire. And many similar words were added to them. (Jer 36:27-32)

Could the wicked king destroy the Word of God by throwing it in the fire? No way! God ensured that all his words were copied again on another scroll, and “many similar words were added to them.” Perhaps that scroll contained some or much of the book of Jeremiah. As another prophet wrote, “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever” (Isa 40:8). God ensures both the writing and the preservation of his Word.

In his commentary on Romans, Middendorf sees this account of Jeremiah and Baruch as illustrative of the writing process for many biblical books, including Romans. He writes:

The example of Jeremiah illustrates the kind of writing process that might have produced other biblical books too, including Romans. Jer 1:1–2 states that the book consists of ‘the words of Jeremiah’ which resulted from ‘the Word of Yahweh’ coming to him. Later, however, we learn more about the process of composition: Yahweh instructed Jeremiah to dictate Yahweh’s words to the scribe Baruch (Jer 36:1–18). Yet Baruch still could assert that he ‘wrote’ the words. After King Jehoiakim burned the original scroll penned by Baruch, Jeremiah repeated the dictation of the same words of Yahweh to Baruch to produce another scroll, to which further divine oracles were added (Jer 36:27–32). Jeremiah thus obeyed the divine command for him to ‘write’ the second scroll even though it was Baruch who actually ‘wrote’ it.<sup>73</sup>

Much could be written about the divine inspiration of the prophets and the immediate canonization of these God-given writings. In his commentary on Joel, Thomas Nass includes an

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73. Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 9–16*, ConC (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016), 1951–1952.

excursus entitled, “The Divine Inspiration of the Old Testament Prophets.”<sup>74</sup> He states, “By my count, there are 1,159 references [to divine inspiration] in 233 chapters.”<sup>75</sup> These references to divine inspiration are repeated so often that readers of the Old Testament often cease to even notice them, such as “The LORD declares,” “Thus says the LORD,” “The Word of the LORD came,” “The LORD spoke,” and “Hear the Word of the LORD.” He includes this chart:<sup>76</sup>

| Prophet    | Number of Chapters | “Declares the LORD” | “Thus says the LORD” | “The Word of the LORD was/came” | Other Expressions of Inspiration | TOTAL |
|------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|
| Isaiah     | 66                 | 25                  | 44                   | 1                               | 66                               | 136   |
| Jeremiah   | 52                 | 175                 | 154                  | 43                              | 91                               | 463   |
| Ezekiel    | 48                 | 85                  | 126                  | 50                              | 98                               | 359   |
| The Twelve | 67                 | 70                  | 44                   | 20                              | 67                               | 201   |
| TOTAL      | 233                | 355                 | 368                  | 114                             | 322                              | 1,159 |

It is truly amazing how often the Bible claims that its message came directly from God. On average, the Old Testament prophets reiterated five times in each chapter that their message was God’s Word from the very moment it left their mouths or their pens.

### **Putting It All Together—Ezra**

Some final clues to the writing of the Old Testament can be found in the story of Ezra. In 458 B.C., Ezra the priest was granted permission by Artaxerxes of Persia to return to Jerusalem. In

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74. Thomas P. Nass, *Joel*, ConC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2023), 50–56.

75. Nass, *Joel*, 50.

76. Nass, *Joel*, 51.

Ezra 7:1, Ezra is described as the son of Seraiah. Since Seraiah was the high priest in the days of King Zedekiah of Judah almost 130 years earlier, it's likely that Seraiah was actually Ezra's ancestor rather than his father. In any case, Ezra came from the family of the high priests.

Ezra was “a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given” (Ezra 7:6). Notice two things in this verse. First, there is another assertion that Moses wrote God's Word. Moses' divinely-inspired authorship of the Pentateuch is assumed throughout Scripture. Second, marvel how God preserved his Word even in the most trying of times. Even during the exile in Babylon, even almost 130 years after the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, there were still faithful priests of God who were taught the Law of Moses.

This is critical to our understanding of the formation of the Old Testament. From what we've learned, the Book of the Law, along with the other writings of the Old Testament, were kept at the temple next to the ark of the covenant. So, what happened to those sacred writings when the temple was burned to the ground by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.? Were they lost, just as the ark of the covenant has been lost? No! Clearly, the priestly families—like the family of Ezra—were able to preserve the Law of the Moses. Not only did they preserve it and carry it to Babylon, but they continued to teach their children the Word of God, so that over a hundred years later, there were men like Ezra who were well versed in the Law of Moses.

Take note of how Ezra is described in the rest of Ezra 7:

<sup>11</sup> This is a copy of the letter King Artaxerxes had given to Ezra the priest, a teacher of the Law, a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the LORD for Israel:

<sup>12</sup> Artaxerxes, king of kings,

To Ezra the priest, teacher of the Law of the God of heaven:

Greetings.

<sup>13</sup> Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who volunteer to go to Jerusalem with you, may go. <sup>14</sup> You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand. (Ezra 7:11–14)

Twice more, Ezra is described as “a teacher of the Law.” In fact, the Law of God was in his hand! Did that mean that Ezra carried a physical copy of the Book of the Law back to Jerusalem? It certainly sounds that way. Copies of the Book of the Law had been preserved in Babylon. They were used to teach the next generation of teachers of the Law—like Ezra. Now, Ezra himself was bringing a copy of that Book of the Law back to Jerusalem.

In addition, Ezra had clear instructions on what to do with it: “And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them” (Ezra 7:25). Ezra was given the clear command from King Artaxerxes to teach God’s laws to all in Israel who did not know them.

That is exactly what Ezra did. Nehemiah continues the story of Ezra:

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

<sup>2</sup> So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

<sup>3</sup> He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

<sup>4</sup> Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

<sup>5</sup> Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. <sup>6</sup> Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

<sup>7</sup> The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. <sup>8</sup> They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. (Neh 8:1–8)

Doesn't this sound exactly like God had commanded in Deuteronomy 31:9–13? The public reading of the Law which was supposed to have happened every seven years finally happened under Ezra. Ezra had the Book of the Law of Moses. Everyone who was old enough to understand assembled around him, and they listened attentively to the Book of the Law. Ezra didn't just read, but he and the other Levites instructed the people as to what was being read.

That last verse adds an additional layer to our understanding of the preservation of the Old Testament. Rabbinic tradition understands the phrase “making it clear and giving the meaning” to refer to translating the Book of the Law from Hebrew into Aramaic. The thought is that due to their extended time in Babylon, the returning exiles were more conversant in Aramaic than in Hebrew. Therefore, teaching God's Word didn't just involve reading the original Hebrew text, it also included translating that text into the language of the people. While there is no manuscript evidence of Aramaic Targums from the time of Ezra, the idea that it was acceptable for the Hebrew words of the Old Testament to be translated into Aramaic shows that the Word of God most certainly survives translation. In fact, the Word of God is meant to be translated. God wants teachers of the Word to make it clear and give the meaning so that people can understand.

While we're not told exactly how much of the Book of the Law was read by Ezra, we are told that a day was not enough time to read through it all. Clearly, Ezra was reading a significant portion of the Old Testament to God's people. This was more than just the Ten Commandments. It was more than just the Mosaic Law. Here's what happened on the second day:

<sup>13</sup> On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law.

<sup>14</sup> They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month

<sup>15</sup> and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters”—as it is written.

<sup>16</sup> So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. <sup>17</sup> The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great. (Neh 8:13–17)

On that second day, the people heard about the Festival of Tabernacles. While apparently the knowledge of this festival had been lost among the people, it had not been lost. It was still right where it always had been—in the Word of God. The people joyously celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles, unlike the Israelites had done in the thousand years since the days of Joshua.

Even those two days weren’t enough, however. “Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly” (Neh 8:18). There were seven full days of reading from the Book of the Law. What a joyous week that must have been! God’s people and God’s Word were reconnected as had never happened before.

As if that weren’t enough, we’re told:

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. <sup>2</sup> Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. <sup>3</sup> They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God. (Neh 9:1–3)

God’s Word as read and preached through Ezra did what God’s Word does in every time and place: It convicted God’s people of their sins and threw them before God in confession and trust in his forgiveness. You can’t read this story of Ezra’s proclamation of the Word and not think of the simple message of Law and Gospel that resounds from all of Scripture. God’s people had

been through incredibly trying times. They had faced the punishment of God for their unbelief and endured decades in captivity. Their temple had been burned, and their lives had been forever changed, but the Word of God remained the same: Convicting, comforting, and saving.

The result was that the Israelites recommitted themselves to following the Book of the Law. They said, “In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it” (Neh 9:38).

<sup>28</sup> The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand—<sup>29</sup> all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord. (Neh 10:28–29)

Even after so much change, even among these returnees making a new life in the Promised Land, there wasn’t the slightest hint of doubt that the Book of Moses was the Word of God. There wasn’t the slightest suggestion that more time was needed to evaluate whether the ancient writings really were true. There wasn’t a long process of examining what holy writings to consider as authoritative. There was no discussion of a “canon.” There was the Word. It had been the canon from the moment it was written. Not even the exile in Babylon could change that.

This story of Ezra also highlights what could be called the “ministerial cause” in the preservation of God’s Word. Just as God uses ministers—people—to share the message of salvation, God also uses ministers—people—to preserve his Word for future generations. In the days of Ezra, God used people—especially the priests—to preserve his Word. In a similar way, God calls on his people in every generation to preserve his Word. In some small way, God uses even you and me to preserve his Word for future generations, just as he used Ezra.

While we are not given a definitive description in the Old Testament of how the books of the Old Testament were compiled, it’s not hard to imagine Ezra being involved in that important

work. This gifted priest, who was trained in the Book of the Law in Babylon and brought that Book of the Law back to those in Jerusalem, certainly could have been used by God to establish a new, post-temple system for storing and preserving the written Word.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT CONFIRMS THE OLD TESTAMENT

### **A Continuous Message**

We have an abundance of evidence for what the Old Testament says about itself. Before we move on to the formation of the New Testament, it's important to appreciate how the New Testament continues and confirms the Old. After the prophet Malachi finished his book of prophecy, over 400 years passed before Christ was born—and before any additional Word of God was written. Yet, the continuity between the Old and New Testaments is clearly seen in how the New seamlessly proceeds from the Old. Malachi ended his book with these words from God: “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction” (Mal 4:5–6).

The Old Testament ends with the proclamation that a prophet like Elijah would come to prepare the way for the promised Messiah. How does the New Testament begin? With the fulfillment of that very prophecy! Many scholars regard Mark as the first Gospel to be written. Here's how Mark begins his Gospel—and the New Testament:

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, <sup>2</sup> as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”—  
<sup>3</sup> “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”

<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:1–4)

Despite the over 400-year period of silence, the New Testament seamlessly picks up God's story right where the Old Testament had left it. Already in the second verse of his Gospel, Mark quotes the Old Testament and points to its fulfillment in Christ and his coming. The Old and New Testaments are not conflicting messages written by different people with different worldviews. The message of the New Testament seamlessly continues the story of the Old.

### **The Testimony of Jesus**

That Jesus and his followers considered the Old Testament as we have it today to be the inspired Word of God is indisputable. Consider these statements from Jesus:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Matt 5:17)

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (Matt 7:12)

For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. <sup>14</sup> And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. (Matt 11:13–14)

<sup>37</sup> Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt 22:37–40)

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it. <sup>17</sup> It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law. (Luke 16:16–17)

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:27)

<sup>44</sup> 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.”

<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. <sup>46</sup> He told

them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,<sup>47</sup> and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:44–47)

Jesus repeatedly referred to “the Law and the Prophets” as the authority in spiritual matters. It certainly sounds like the books of Moses, along with the writing of the Prophets, were accepted as “canon” and the Word of God in Jesus’ day. Jesus specifically mentioned the Psalms as also being part of Scripture. Most importantly, he insisted that all those writings testified to his suffering, death, and resurrection as the Savior of the world. Scripture presents to us the continuous, unbroken story of God’s plan of salvation through Jesus.

Notice that there is no doubt in Jesus’ mind about these writings. There was no, “Why don’t you wait until an official council of the Jews officially certifies which writings are God’s Word.” There was no, “Well, some people think this writing is from God, and some people don’t, so it’s hard to know for sure.” The writings of Moses, the writings of the Prophets, and the writings of David were immediately the Word of God because their authority came from divine inspiration. If anyone claims that there was doubt at the time of Jesus about the authority of the Old Testament, they are not taking the New Testament at face value.

Consider two additional testimonies from Jesus to the veracity of the Old Testament. First, Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan at the beginning of his ministry. Matthew and Luke record three specific temptations. How did Jesus respond to each? With quotations from Deuteronomy! Jesus used the Old Testament as his defense against the devil’s lies:

It is written: “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt 4:4—from Deut 8:3)

It is also written: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” (Matt 4:7—from Deut 6:16)

It is written: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” (Matt 4:10—from Deut 6:13)

Do you notice the refrain that's repeated in each of those verses? "It is written... It is written... It is written..." Surely the Son of God would not need to quote 1,500-year-old writings to defend himself, would he? Surely the Son of God would not resort to dusty old Scripture passages to ward off the devil, would he? Yes, he would, and he did! When faced with trial and temptation, Jesus' response was to point to the sure foundation of the Old Testament: "It is written!"

Read Jesus' first response again: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." That verse includes a powerful claim: The words of the Book of Moses come from the mouth of God. Surely, Jesus wouldn't agree with that, would he? Yes! Yes, he would! Jesus considered the words of the Old Testament to be words that came from the mouth of God. Jesus considered the words of the Old Testament to be his shield against the temptations of Satan. If Jesus thought so highly of the Old Testament and used it to ward off Satan's temptations, surely the Old Testament will be dear to Jesus' followers today too.

Second, Jesus' long discourses with the Jewish leaders in the Gospel of John give powerful testimonies to his confidence in the authority of the Old Testament. For example, in John 5, Jesus miraculously healed a paralyzed man near the Pool of Bethesda. Because Jesus did this on the Sabbath, and because Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, the Jewish leaders persecuted him. In Jesus' response, he said to them, "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39–40).

Jesus didn't criticize their study of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus also didn't criticize their belief that those Old Testament Scriptures offered eternal life. Jesus shared their same belief in the Scriptures as the Word of God. One thing was missing, however. They were missing the point—the subject matter—of the whole Old Testament. What is it? Jesus! "These

are the very Scriptures that testify about me,” Jesus declared. Not only did Jesus validate the message of the Old Testament, but he clarified that the Old Testament is vital to understanding Jesus himself and his role as the promised Messiah.

In that same conversation, Jesus goes even further. He declares: “Do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” (John 5:45–47). Again, notice Jesus’ clear testimony to the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. More importantly, notice Jesus’ insistence on the one, continuous message of the Old and New Testaments: Salvation in him.

### **The Fulfilled Prophecies**

It’s not surprising to see Jesus’ confidence in the Old Testament reflected in the New Testament writings of his apostles. Again and again, the New Testament writers quote the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God, and they take great pains to show how the prophecies of the Old Testament were perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. For example, the footnotes in the New International Version cite almost sixty Old Testament passages that are directly referenced just in the Gospel of Matthew. That’s more than two per chapter! The sheer number of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament provide a mountain of evidence to the continuity of Scripture and the truth that the Old Testament was “canon” in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.

While literally hundreds of examples of fulfilled prophecies could be cited, let’s look at two of the instances in which the New Testament quotes the Old. First, the epistles of Paul powerfully proclaim that justification is by faith in Jesus. The theme of the book of Romans is found in Romans 1:16–17: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that

brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Rom 1:16–17).

Paul insisted that this teaching of righteousness by faith was not a new message in New Testament times. On the contrary, it was exactly what the Scriptures—the Old Testament —also proclaimed. As proof, Paul cites the verse, “The righteous will live by faith.” It’s surprising to find that verse in a most unexpected place in the Old Testament: The little book of Habakkuk. Even within the book of Habakkuk, it’s surprising to find where that verse is found: In the middle of an oracle of God’s judgment against the Babylonians. Here’s the point: Even rather obscure little books of the Old Testament Scriptures—like Habakkuk—were clearly “canon” to the apostle Paul. What’s more, even rather obscure little verses about judgment on the Babylonians ultimately find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ and faith in him.

In fact, Romans 1 isn’t the only place where Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4. He also quoted it in Galatians 3:11, in the heart of another powerful defense of justification by faith. There, Paul wrote, “Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because ‘the righteous will live by faith’” (Gal 3:11). In that same chapter, Paul repeatedly referred to the Book of the Law and also quoted verses from Genesis, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. All that was Scripture to Paul. All that was God’s Word. All that pointed so powerfully to Christ.

As a second example, consider the Bible’s teaching about Melchizedek. In Genesis 14, Abram rescued his nephew Lot from four eastern kings who had defeated five Canaanite kings, including the king of Sodom. After Abram’s victory, Melchizedek—the king of Salem and the priest of God Most High—blessed Abram, and Abram give him a tenth of everything (see Genesis 14:18–20). This is a rather obscure account and raises many questions.

Throughout the rest of Genesis and the Old Testament, Melchizedek isn't mentioned again except in Psalm 110. There, King David prophesied about his coming Son and Lord—the Messiah—and said, “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek’” (Ps 110:4). According to King David, his future Son would be a priest without beginning or ending, like this shadowy figure Melchizedek was.

In the whole Bible, Melchizedek isn't mentioned again until the epistle of Hebrews in the New Testament. After mentioning Melchizedek briefly in Hebrews 5, the author of Hebrews wrote extensively about Melchizedek in Hebrews 7 and fully elaborated on this biblical comparison of Melchizedek with the Messiah—Jesus.

Tracing the mention of Melchizedek throughout Scripture provides powerful testimony to the Bible's teaching about itself. Genesis was written by Moses around the year 1400 B.C. In Genesis, Moses mentioned Melchizedek one time in a total of three verses. Yet, about 400 years later, King David expected the readers of his psalms to know exactly who Melchizedek was. This is rather mind-boggling. In 1000 B.C., the books of Moses were most certainly accessible to God's people, and King David expected his subjects to know and believe them, even rather obscure references to rather obscure people who were only mentioned one time.

That would be surprising enough, but the way that the book of Hebrews references Melchizedek takes this continuity of the Bible's message to another level. Writing over 1000 years after King David, the anonymous writer to the Hebrews expected his readers—Jewish Christians in the first century A.D.—to know not only about Melchizedek from the book of Genesis, but also to know about King David's brief mention of Melchizedek in Psalm 110. Isn't the Word of God amazing? The canon wasn't developed in bits and pieces. The Old Testament is not a disjointed collection of books, nor is the New Testament the result of selective choosing by

later Christians. The Scriptures are the united Word of God, written and preserved only by the power of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament fully confirms the canonicity of the Old.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

### **The Gospels**

As our study proceeds to what the New Testament says about itself, we start with the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. A reader of these four Gospels immediately notices that none of the four tell us who their author is. The identity of the authors as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John comes to us through the testimony of the early Christian Church. The New Testament, however, does give us information about each of those four men. We'll study each writer briefly in the order of their books in the New Testament.

### **Matthew**

While Matthew doesn't directly identify himself as the author of his Gospel, he does give us a detailed account of how he became Jesus' disciple:

<sup>9</sup> As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

<sup>10</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

<sup>12</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matt 9:9–13)

What a powerful story of Jesus’ grace! Matthew had been a tax collector, perhaps the most hated occupation in ancient Israel. He was one of the “sinners”! Yet, that meant he was exactly whom Jesus had come to save. Like a doctor who comes to heal the sick, Jesus came to save sinners, including sinners like Matthew. In the next chapter, we learn that “Matthew the tax collector” was one of Jesus’ twelve disciples (Matt 10:3). What a perfect candidate to preach and teach others about Jesus’ salvation! Matthew was living proof that Jesus did not come for the [self]-righteous, but for sinners.

We should note that the Gospel of Luke includes the same story of Matthew’s calling, except Luke calls him “Levi,” instead of “Matthew” (see Luke 5:27–32). This certainly doesn’t trouble a reader of the Bible who is used to hearing about people who have multiple names, not unlike our system of first, middle, and last names today. It was this Matthew/Levi whom the early Christian Church identified as the author of the Gospel of Matthew.

## **Mark**

In contrast to Matthew, Mark was not one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. In fact, he is not mentioned by name in any of the Gospels. Mark, however, is mentioned repeatedly in the book of Acts and in the epistles of the New Testament. Like Matthew/Levi, it seems like Mark also went by the name “John” and is often referred to by Christians as “John Mark.”

We first meet Mark in Acts 12. There, an angel miraculously released Peter from prison in Jerusalem. Upon his release, Peter “went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying” (Acts 12:12). Apparently, the home

of Mark's mother was an early gathering place for Christians in Jerusalem. There, Peter reported to them about his miraculous escape from prison.

Later in that same chapter, we learn that Barnabas and Paul brought Mark with them from Jerusalem to Antioch (12:25). When the church at Antioch prayerfully sent Barnabas and Saul on a missionary journey, they took Mark with them. Instead of faithfully accompanying Barnabas and Saul throughout their trip, however, Mark decided to leave them in Pamphylia and return to Jerusalem (13:13). This did not sit well with Paul. When Barnabas and Paul were preparing to embark on a second missionary journey, we're told:

<sup>37</sup> Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark with them, <sup>38</sup> but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work. <sup>39</sup> They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, <sup>40</sup> but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. (Acts 15:37–40).

Thankfully, that wasn't the end of Mark's story. Nor was it the end of Mark's relationship with Paul. In his epistles, Paul mentions Mark three times, all in positive ways:

My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) (Col 4:10)

<sup>9</sup> Do your best to come to me quickly, <sup>10</sup> for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. <sup>11</sup> Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. (2 Tim 4:9–11)

<sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. <sup>24</sup> And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. (Phlm 23–24)

Mark not only regained Paul's trust, but he became his valuable ministry partner.

It's Mark's relationship with Peter, however, that many view as more applicable to his writing of the Gospel of Mark. At the end of 1 Peter, Peter writes: "She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark" (1 Pet 5:13).

Mark's close relationship with Peter leads to the traditional understanding that the Gospel of Mark is heavily influenced by Peter.

Just like with Matthew, the former tax collector, Mark could personally attest to Jesus' grace and kindness in his life. Jesus not only restored the fractured ministry relationship between Mark and Paul, but he used Mark to write the good news of his life, death, and resurrection.

### **Luke**

While Matthew and Mark don't tell us anything about their authors, the Gospel of Luke gives us hints at its writing, especially in its opening verses:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. <sup>3</sup> With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4)

From those opening words, we learn a number of details about this Gospel: 1) The author of Luke was not an eyewitness of Jesus' life and ministry. 2) The Gospel of Luke was not one of the first written accounts of Jesus' life. 3) The author of Luke was in direct contact with eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and ministry. 4) The author of Luke seems to be a scholarly individual who put time and energy into investigating the events of Jesus' life.

Further clues to the authorship of Luke are found in the book of Acts, which was clearly written by the same individual: "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach" (Acts 1:1). The author of Acts begins to use the pronoun "we" in Acts 16:10, seeming to indicate that the author joined Paul on his second missionary journey when he

was in Troas. In addition, Acts 28:11–16 indicate that the author of Luke was with Paul when he arrived in Rome for his first imprisonment and appeal to Caesar.

Luke fits each of these details found in Luke and Acts. He was a close associate with Paul, as is clear from Colossians 4:14: “Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.” That Luke was a doctor fits well with the scholarly investigation described in Luke 1:1–4. That Luke was with Paul during his first imprisonment in Rome is supported by Philemon 23–24: “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.” That Luke’s relationship with Paul continued to the end of Paul’s life is shown in 2 Timothy 4:9–11: “Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me.” As Mark is often referred to as Peter’s Gospel, so Luke’s Gospel was certainly influenced by the apostle Paul.

## **John**

The Gospel of John’s approach to its own authorship is unique among the four Gospels. Not only is Jesus’ disciple John not credited with being the author of the book, but John isn’t even mentioned by name a single time in the Gospel of John. That fact, however, serves as one of the primary proofs of Johannine authorship. Considering the prominent place that John held among Jesus’ disciples, as attested frequently by the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is inconceivable that John would not be mentioned in the Gospel of John, unless the omission of his name was purposeful. Since the early Christian Church, it has been assumed that John didn’t mention his name in his Gospel out of his humility and his desire that all the focus be on Christ.

Even though his name is never mentioned, John himself does show up in his Gospel. In John 1:35–42, we hear how two of John the Baptist’s disciples followed Jesus. One of the men was Andrew, while the other isn’t named. When compared with the accounts of Jesus’ first disciples in Matthew 4:18–22, Mark 1:16–20, and Luke 5:1–11, it’s clear that Jesus’ first disciples were two pairs of brothers: Andrew and his brother Simon Peter, along with John and his brother James. Interestingly, not only is John not mentioned by name in the Gospel of John, but his brother James isn’t mentioned by name either.

The key feature relating to the authorship of the Gospel of John is a unique phrase that is used in the second half of the book. During the Last Supper in John 13, we read:

<sup>21</sup> After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, “Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.”

<sup>22</sup> His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. <sup>23</sup> One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. <sup>24</sup> Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, “Ask him which one he means.”

<sup>25</sup> Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?”

<sup>26</sup> Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” (John 13:21–26)

We’re told that “the disciple whom Jesus loved” was reclining next to Jesus at the table.

Although we first hear that phrase in John 13, it is used four more times in the remaining eight chapters of the Gospel. First, we hear this account during Jesus’ crucifixion:

<sup>25</sup> Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. <sup>26</sup> When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman, here is your son,” <sup>27</sup> and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:25–27)

Jesus’ relationship with this “disciple whom he loved” was so personal that he trusted this disciple to take care of his mother after his death.

That disciple is mentioned again on Resurrection Sunday:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.<sup>2</sup> So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” (John 20:1–2)

Just like at the Last Supper, this “disciple whom Jesus loved” was closely connected to Peter.

The rest of the account relates how the disciple whom Jesus loved outran Peter to Jesus’ tomb, but Peter was the first to go inside and see Jesus’ grave clothes neatly folded there.

Finally, the phrase “the disciple whom Jesus loved” is used two more times in John 21.

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to some of his disciples as they fished on the Sea of Galilee. From the shore, Jesus called out:

“Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

<sup>7</sup> Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. (John 21:6–7)

Later that same day, as Jesus talked with Peter, we’re told:

<sup>20</sup> Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”) <sup>21</sup> When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” <sup>23</sup> Because of this, the rumor spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”

<sup>24</sup> This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. (John 21:20–24)

This unnamed disciple whom Jesus loved is the author of the Gospel of John. The way that John’s name is purposefully omitted throughout the Gospel leaves no doubt as to its author. In humility and faith, John wanted to be known simply as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

While none of the four Gospels explicitly states the name of its author, the New Testament has a lot to say about each of the four Gospel writers. What a diverse group they are!

God chose a former tax collector, a missionary deserter, a Gentile doctor, and a humble fishermen to write down his story for all generations to come. The four Gospel writers were living, walking testimonies to Jesus' grace for sinners. Jesus' words at Matthew' house ring so true, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt 9:13).

### **A New Scripture?**

Now that we know a little about the writers of the Gospels, the big question is this: Did God really want a "New" Testament added to the "Old" Testament? Were the Gospels—and the rest of the books of the New Testament—really meant to be added to the Holy Scriptures?

Thankfully, the New Testament does not leave that question unanswered.

In his long discourse with his disciples on Maundy Thursday, Jesus said to them:

"Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.<sup>24</sup> Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

<sup>25</sup>"All this I have spoken while still with you. <sup>26</sup>But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:23–25)

Jesus wanted everyone to know and obey his teaching. While there is no doubt that the Old Testament is the Word of God, it would be incorrect to say that the Old Testament contains the teaching of Jesus from his ministry here on earth. If others were to know, believe, and obey Jesus' teaching, it was vital for someone to write down Jesus' teaching for future generations.

Naturally, Jesus had a plan for that. His disciples didn't presumptuously take on themselves the task of writing Jesus' teaching. Instead, Jesus promised that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, would come upon them. The Holy Spirit would do two things for them: 1) "Teach

you all things.” 2) “Remind you of everything I have said to you.” Could there be a clearer proof for the divine inspiration of the New Testament? Even before his ascent into heaven, Jesus himself described exactly how the writing of the New Testament would take place. The Holy Spirit would teach his disciples all things and remind them of everything Jesus had said to them. It would be those Spirit-given words that would become the New Testament.

Before he finished his Maundy Thursday discourse, Jesus said a prayer to his Father both for his disciples and for future believers in him. Note what Jesus prays about God’s Word:

<sup>13</sup>“I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. <sup>14</sup>I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. <sup>15</sup>My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup>They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. <sup>17</sup>Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup>As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup>For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

<sup>20</sup>“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message....” (John 17:13–20)

In his prayer, Jesus tells his Father, “I have given them your word.” The message that the disciples of Jesus would share was the message that Jesus himself had given to them. Jesus adds, “Your word is truth,” and “I have sent them into the world.” The disciples were to take Jesus’ Word into the world, and they were to proclaim it confidently as the truth from God. What’s more, Jesus prays, “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.” This Word of God preached by Jesus’ disciples would lead to many more people believing in Jesus.

Did God really want a “New” Testament added to the “Old” Testament? Jesus’ answer is, “Absolutely!” Even before his suffering and death, Jesus explained how the Holy Spirit would lead his disciples to learn, remember, and share his word. To have new books of God’s Word written by disciples of Jesus is exactly what Jesus tells us to expect. Those new writings didn’t

need the approval of some council to be true and accepted. They were to be accepted as truth because of their divine origin through Jesus and his Holy Spirit.

In fact, the Gospel of John even emphasized how its own words were already being fulfilled, just as the prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled. On Maundy Thursday evening, Jesus said this to those who came to arrest him: “If you are looking for me, then let these men go” (John 18:8b). John then adds this remark, “This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: ‘I have not lost one of those you gave me’” (John 18:9). That statement—that Scripture—that needed to be fulfilled were some of Jesus’ own words from earlier in John: “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day” (John 6:39). Already in his Gospel, John refers to the words of Jesus as inspired words of Scripture that must be fulfilled. Hendriksen comments:

Note also that here the same formula “that the word ... might be fulfilled” is employed with respect to a saying of Jesus which elsewhere is used with reference to the inspired authors of the Old Testament. The legitimate inference is certainly this, that John regarded the sayings of Jesus as being, in their infallible character, on a par with those of the prophets of old.<sup>77</sup>

In the same way, the early Christians immediately recognized the writings of Jesus’ disciples—and their close associates—as God’s Word and as equal to the writings of the Old Testament prophets. This is clearly stated in the New Testament. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:19–20). This is a powerful statement: What was to be the foundation of the Christian Church? Well, Christ Jesus himself is the chief cornerstone, but the foundation of the Christian Church is “the apostles and prophets.”

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<sup>77</sup> William Hendriksen, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 381.

This essay has already demonstrated that the writings of the Old Testament prophets were clearly the Word of God. Notice that Paul has no qualms about equating the writings of the New Testament apostles with the writings of those Old Testament prophets. If I were to claim that the foundation of the Christian Church is “the Old Testament prophets and Nathan Nass,” that would be blasphemy! No writing of mine should ever be considered equal to inspired Scripture. Yet, Paul said that his writing was. The apostles’ writings were. Already in the first century A.D., as the New Testament books were being written, Christians were commanded to view the writings of the New Testament apostles as God’s Word and a continuation of the writings of the prophets.

Later in Ephesians, Paul adds, “In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” (Eph 3:4–5). Notice again how apostles and prophets are listed as equals. While some may claim that “prophets” here refers to New Testament prophets and not to Old Testament prophets, Paul is clearly claiming inspiration for the writings of the New Testament apostles.

Peter makes the same connection in his second epistle, where he writes, “I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles” (2 Pet 3:2). It did not take centuries for Christians to decide whether apostolic writings were the Word of God. It did not take councils of the Christian Church for apostolic writings to be given authority over the Church. Far from it! From the very moment they were written down, Jesus’ words as recorded by his apostles were to be considered the Word of God and equal to the prophecies of the Old Testament.

One unique passage in the New Testament proves that early Christians viewed the Gospels as the Word of God. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:17–18: “The elders who direct the

affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially whose work is preaching and teaching. For Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages.’” As is common throughout the New Testament, Paul uses Scripture passages as proof for the divine authority of his teaching. In these verses, he quotes two verses as Scripture and even uses the word “Scripture” to describe them.

The surprise comes when we look up where those Scripture verses are cited from. The first quotation—“Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain”—is a quotation from Deuteronomy 25:4. That’s not surprising. Depending on how references to the Old Testament are counted, Deuteronomy is in the top five of Old Testament books quoted in the New Testament. The second quotation, however, isn’t found in the Old Testament. On the contrary, “The worker deserves his wages” is actually a direct quotation of the Gospel of Luke. Here we have a clear example of the New Testament quoting the New Testament as Scripture and the Word of God!

In Luke 10, Jesus sent out seventy-two of his followers to share the gospel. Among his many directives to them was the command to stay in one place for as long as they were welcomed. He said, “Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house” (Luke 10:7). In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul quotes that very verse as authoritative Scripture. In fact, the Greek used in each verse is virtually identical, except for a γὰρ that’s found in Luke:

Luke 10:7 – ἄξιός γὰρ ὁ ἐργάτης τοῦ μισθοῦ αὐτοῦ

1 Tim 5:18 – Ἄξιός ὁ ἐργάτης τοῦ μισθοῦ αὐτοῦ

This verse shows us two amazing things. First, Paul considered Jesus’ words in Luke to be inspired Scripture in the very same way that he considered Moses’ words in Deuteronomy to be inspired Scripture. Remember what Jesus thought of Deuteronomy? He quoted from

Deuteronomy three times when tempted by Satan in the wilderness. As certain as Deuteronomy is Scripture, it is equally certain that the Gospel of Luke is Scripture. Second, Paul was executed in the mid-60s A.D. Paul's quotation of Luke certainly suggests that the Gospel of Luke was written and accepted as the Word of God before the mid-60s A.D. Far from needing the approval of a later church council to be accepted as the Word of God, books of the New Testament were already accepted as authoritative Scripture in the days of the apostles themselves.<sup>78</sup>

Valleskey comments on the importance of this verse for the dating of Luke:

Significantly, Paul also calls these words of Jesus "Scripture", a term that was used of the inspired Word. There are some who place the writing of the gospel of Luke as late as A.D. 80s, 15 to 20 years after Paul's first letter to Timothy. If so, how could Paul have called these words "Scripture"? But there is good reason to place the writing of the gospel of Luke much earlier, as early as the late A.D. 50s, in fact. Paul was in prison in Caesarea from A.D. 58 to A.D. 60. It is entirely possible that Luke, who had been traveling with Paul, was with him during that time. That would have given Luke the opportunity to do the research he refers to at the beginning of his gospel (cf. Lk 1:1–4). Luke's gospel thus could have been completed about five years before Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy. That would have given ample time for the gospel of Luke to be widely circulated and to be accepted as Scripture.<sup>79</sup>

Did God really want a "New" Testament added to the "Old" Testament? Yes! Were the Gospels—and the rest of the books of the New Testament—really meant to be added to the Holy Scriptures? Yes! In fact, we see that happening already in the first century A.D.

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78. Kruger includes this comment: "Eusebius even mentions an early tradition that 'Paul was actually accustomed to quote from Luke's gospel.'" (Kruger, *Canon*, 206)

79. David J. Valleskey, *The Splendid Task of Ministry: A Pastoral Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2023), 106.

## Paul

Two men who were especially used by God to write and collect the books of the New Testament were Paul and John. Like Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Paul was an unlikely candidate to write down God's Word. He was a zealous Pharisee who "breathed out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1). Yet, he was exactly the person God wanted to use to teach the world about the grace of God. After his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus, God sent Paul around the world to turn people from darkness to light (Acts 26:18).

Paul's extensive travels resulted in long-term relationships with many different groups of Christians in many different places. Even after leaving a location, it was natural for Paul to continue teaching God's Word to the people there. This is what he did through his epistles—or letters. Thirteen of Paul's letters are included in the New Testament: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. All thirteen letters begin with the very same Greek word: Παῦλος. Paul identified himself from the very start as the writer of each epistle.

As for the actual writing of the epistles, it seems like Paul's normal practice was to dictate his letters to a trained scribe, similar to how the prophet Jeremiah dictated his prophecies to his scribe Baruch. At the end of Romans, we find this verse: "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord" (Rom 16:22). Middendorf comments,

The use of a scribe or amanuensis was common in the OT era and in Paul's day, and Tertius here indicates that he actually penned the vast majority of the letter as Paul dictated it to him. Whatever influence Tertius might have exerted on the grammar, vocabulary, or perhaps even the content of the composition remains unknowable, but such factors in no way diminish the verbal inspiration of the letter or its apostolic authority.<sup>80</sup>

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80. Middendorf, *Romans*, 1951.

At times, however, Paul wrote at least part of his letters in his own handwriting to further prove his authorship of the letter. These statements served as an authoritative signature to indicate that Paul had approved of the letter as an accurate representation of exactly what he wanted it to say. Here are five examples:

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write. (2 Thess 3:17)

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. (1 Cor 16:21)

See what large letter I use as I write to you with my own hand! (Gal 6:11)

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. (Col 4:18)

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. (Phlm 19)

In his commentary on Galatians, Das offers this commentary on Paul's autograph:

Ancient records and letters often exhibit a different handwriting style in the conclusion or subscription from the rest of the document. Since no one would employ a secretary for just the conclusion of a document, the different handwriting at the end would be the author's own. Ancient authors would frequently grab a pen at the end of a dictated letter and add a signature, additional exhortation, a final farewell, and/or a closing personal note. Paul's signature at this point would make perfect sense had he employed a scribe as he does for other letters.<sup>81</sup>

He adds this pertinent remark, "The letter's carrier would take the same handwritten copy to the various Galatian congregations."<sup>82</sup> What a helpful window into the world of ancient writing! As the Holy Spirit inspired Paul, he dictated the Spirit's words to a trained scribe. At the end of many epistles, however, Paul added a personal greeting in his own handwriting, and that same handwritten copy of God's Word was shared from congregation to congregation. While copies were certainly made, the original handwritten copy was available to prove the authenticity of Paul's writing through his own personal autograph at the end of the document.

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81. A. Andrew Das, *Galatians*, ConC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014), 632.

82. Das, *Galatians*, 632.

An intriguing possibility is that Paul himself kept a copy of each of his letters and perhaps started the collection of epistles for the New Testament. Near the end of his final epistle, Paul wrote to Timothy, “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments” (2 Tim 4:13). Timothy certainly couldn’t carry much with him as he made the long journey to Rome, but Paul wanted him to make sure he had what was most vital: His cloak, his scrolls, and his parchments.

Notice that Paul used two different words for the documents he mentions. “Scrolls” is a translation of τὰ βιβλία, while “parchments” is a translation of τὰς μεμβράνας. What was on these scrolls and parchments, and was there a difference between the two? Valleskey comments,

Both were written documents, the scrolls probably on papyrus rolls and the parchments on more costly skins and perhaps assembled in codex (book) form. We aren’t told about the contents of either, though with the definite article, the scrolls/the parchments, Timothy knew what Paul was referring to. Likely they were manuscripts of portions of the Old Testament Scriptures, possibly the Septuagint, since Paul’s ministry was directed primarily to the Greek-speaking world.<sup>83</sup>

These are pertinent thoughts related to the formation of the Bible as we know it today. Did Paul actually carry with him copies of Old Testament books? Does that help explain how he could so frequently quote Old Testament passages to support his New Testament writings? Or, is it possible that either the “scrolls” or the “parchments” contained copies of his own epistles? Did Paul’s collection include at least some of the Old Testament and some of the New Testament together at the same time? Kruger goes further than Valleskey in describing—or perhaps imagining—what these dear documents of Paul might have contained. He writes,

Paul makes a curious distinction here between “the books” (τὰ βιβλία) and “the parchments” (τὰς μεμβράνας), suggesting that they are two different kinds of writings. Scholars widely regard τὰ βιβλία as a reference to books of the Old Testament, most likely on scrolls....

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83. Valleskey, *The Splendid Task of Ministry*, 227.

But what is Paul referring to when he mentions “the parchments”?... There is little doubt, then, that Paul uses the term τὰς μεμβράνας to refer to parchment codices.... Given that Paul distinguishes these codices from the Old Testament writings, many scholars have argued that they likely contained some sort of Christian writings....

One of the most compelling possibilities is that these notebooks contained (among other things) copies of Paul’s own letters....

If these “parchments” in 2 Timothy 4:13 contained copies of Paul’s letters in a codex, then this opens up fresh insights into the development of the NT canon. Such a scenario lends substantial support to Gamble’s thesis that the codex was widely adopted because it could hold all of Paul’s epistles (something a single roll could not do). Since Paul had already begun to use the codex to contain his letters, it is not difficult to imagine that early Christians would have retained that format when it became desirable to circulate a defined Pauline letter collection more broadly to the churches.<sup>84</sup>

Valleskey remarks on the importance of this verse for the authenticity of Paul’s writings:

This is a difficult verse for those who assume that an anonymous second century A.D. author wrote the pastoral epistles and signed Paul’s name to them. A forger would not likely write about such mundane matters. Verses such as this one (verses that bear an unmistakable mark of authenticity) have led those who deny Pauline authorship to resort to the so-called fragmentary theory, which postulates that someone in the second century came across genuine fragments of Paul’s writings and built his own letters to Timothy and Titus around them. The simple truth is that this is the real Paul talking about some real events that had occurred in his life.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to these clues about the writing and preservation of his epistles, Paul also made powerful statements about what his epistles were: The Word of God! In his first letter to the Corinthians, he challenged them by saying, “If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command” (1 Cor 14:37). In other words, the words that Paul had written were written by direct command from the Lord. Any true prophet would have been able to recognize that.

Since it was the Lord who commanded Paul to write, Paul emphasized that his words were to be received by all as the Word of God. He wrote to the Thessalonians, “We also thank

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84. Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 251–253.

85. Valleskey, *The Splendid Task of Ministry*, 228.

God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thess 2:13). Paul didn’t write, “One day, after a lot of thought and study you might decide to call these writings the word of God.” He didn’t write, “We’ll see if people decide to consider this epistle as Scripture or not.” It wasn’t up to people. No period of evaluation was needed. The Thessalonians were right to receive Paul’s words as God’s Word.

In fact, Paul encouraged them never to turn from the teachings he had passed on to them: “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess 2:15). Don’t those words sound like the words of Moses in Deuteronomy? He told the Israelites, “Be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in obedience to all that the LORD your God has commanded you” (Deut 5:32–33). Paul considered his divinely inspired words to be just as authoritative as the words of Moses.

Of course, this didn’t just apply to Paul’s epistles. This was true for all of God’s Word. Paul encouraged Timothy by writing,

<sup>14</sup> As for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup> and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. (2 Tim 3:14–16)

This is what Christians mean when they say the Bible is divinely inspired: “All Scripture is God-breathed.” It is God himself who spoke into being every word written in the Bible.

The inspiration of Paul’s letters was recognized by other apostles already during Paul’s own lifetime. Just like the Gospel of Luke was known to Paul and quoted by him, the writings of Paul were known by Peter. He wrote,

<sup>15</sup> Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. <sup>16</sup> He 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. (2 Pet 3:15–16)

Notice three things that Peter wrote about Paul's letters. First, Paul wrote "with the wisdom that God gave him." Peter recognized that Paul's letters were inspired by God himself. Second, Peter referred to "all his letters." Peter was aware of multiple—perhaps even many—letters written by Paul. Third, Peter clearly considered Paul's letters to be part of the "Scriptures." Already, Paul's writings were considered by his contemporaries to be the inspired Word of God and equal to the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Kruger comments:

The scripture status of at least some of Paul's letters was reasonably widespread by this time. Moreover, if Paul's letters are regarded as Scripture, it is difficult to avoid the implication that other apostolic letters would be regarded as Scripture as well. Given that 2 Pet begins with a very clear claim to apostolic authority (1:1), there is little reason to think that its readers would have seen it as any less authoritative than Paul's letters....

On the basis of this text, Meade concludes that 2 Peter "clearly articulates a doctrine of ... Christian Scripture, which represents a significant milestone in Christian thought."<sup>86</sup>

One final proof of the canonical nature of Paul's letters was Paul's command to have his letters read publicly in Christian churches. He told the Colossians, "After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea" (Col 4:16). He commanded the Thessalonians, "I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters" (1 Thess 5:27). In our study of the Old Testament, we read God's commands for the public reading of the Book of the Law. The Gospels attest to how the Old Testament Scriptures were read in the synagogue on the Sabbath

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86. Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 205.

(see Luke 4:17–20). Paul commanded that his letters be read publicly to all, just as the rest of the Scriptures were to be read publicly on a regular basis to God’s people.

Kruger offers this summary of the biblical testimony about Paul’s epistles:

From the very earliest days, believers received Paul’s letters as Scripture (1 Thess. 2:13), Paul clearly intended them to be received as Scripture (Gal. 1:1–24), and even other writers thought they were Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16). Thus, the Scriptures themselves never give the impression that their authority was “derivative” from the church, or from some future ecclesiastical decision.<sup>87</sup>

### **The Elder**

Our study of what the Bible says about its own formation ends by returning to Jesus’ disciple John. Earlier in this essay, we referenced what we can learn from the Bible about the Gospel of John. That Gospel wasn’t the only book that John wrote. Both from biblical evidence and from church history, it seems as though Jesus’ disciple John lived longer than any of the other disciples. Four of the last five books of the Bible were written by John. By the time he wrote these books, he was the “elder” (see 2 John 1 and 3 John 1). The four books of John at the end of the New Testament give further powerful testimony to the Bible’s formation.

Consider these verses from 1 John 4:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.<sup>2</sup> This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,<sup>3</sup> but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

<sup>4</sup> You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.<sup>5</sup> They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.<sup>6</sup> We are from God,

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87. Kruger, *Canon*, 45.

and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. (1 John 4:1–6)

According to John, early Christians were not to believe everything they heard. Already in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., many false prophets had gone out into the world. Those Christians were to test each message they heard and to learn to recognize the Spirit of God. As John writes these words, he seems to be fulfilling the role Jesus had in mind for his disciples when he said, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:25). It was Jesus’ disciples—like John—who led Christians to recognize God’s truth and to reject evil. It was Jesus’ disciples—like John—who led Christians to recognize which messages came from God. Is it far-fetched to suggest that John—the longest living disciple—was instrumental in helping Christians recognize which writings were to be rejected and which were to be accepted as God’s truth?

This theme of faithfulness to the true Word of John continues in 2 John. John wrote,

<sup>9</sup> Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. <sup>10</sup> If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. <sup>11</sup> Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work. (2 John 9–11)

Can’t we again picture the guiding hand of John leading God’s people into the teaching of Christ and helping God’s people reject anyone who runs ahead into false doctrine and error? When Jesus ascended into heaven, the early Christians were not left to determine for themselves what God’s truth was. They had Christ’s Spirit-guided disciples to lead them into all truth.

It’s striking to see John write: “And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another” (2 John 5). Where had they heard Christ’s command to love one another? In the Gospel of John! There, Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must

love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35). It sounds like the Gospel of John and its teaching were so familiar by the end of John’s life that Jesus’ “new” command was no longer new. It was “one we have had from the beginning.” The New Testament testifies that it was accepted quickly—immediately—as the Word of God. Already in the lifetime of John, a “canon” was being formed and accepted.

It was by that same accepted truth from God that John judged the faithfulness of early Christians. In 3 John, he wrote these words of praise: “<sup>3</sup> It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. <sup>4</sup> I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 3–4). If there were no standard for Christian truth, if there were no “canon” of New Testament Scripture, how could John write that? Instead, the impression we get is of a New Testament Church that already in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was fully equipped with Christ’s teaching and truth.

That’s nowhere more evident than in John’s final words at the end of Revelation. With a sense of finality that seems to acknowledge he was finishing the Word of God, John wrote:

<sup>18</sup> I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. <sup>19</sup> And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll.

<sup>20</sup> He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

<sup>21</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen. (Rev 22:18–21)

John knew that the words of that scroll—Revelation—were the inspired Word of God. John knew that with the completion of that scroll, God’s people had all they needed to be ready for Jesus to come again. Just like Paul quoted Luke (1 Tim 5:18), and just like Peter praised Paul’s Scripture (2 Pet 3:15–16), the New Testament was not haphazardly established by

ignorant Christians a few hundred years after Christ. It was carefully written, shared, and accepted as the Word of God in the days of the apostles, who were miraculously equipped with the Holy Spirit to remember, record, and share the teaching of Christ with the world.

The previous four pages have done something that some might consider controversial: They have quoted from the *antilegomena*, including 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation. As the quoted verses show, these four books speak the same way about the Word of God as the rest of the Scriptures do. They exhort God's people to continue in the teaching of Christ. What's more, our God who so carefully and faithfully has preserved his Word through millennia has allowed these books to be preserved in the Christian Church throughout the world. There is no reason for Christians not to use them in conjunction with the rest of the New Testament.

When John set his pen down on the island of Patmos, it was done. There was enough. The story of God's salvation through Jesus Christ had been completed, written down for all generations to read and know and believe. Believe what? "That Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

## PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS

### **As an Individual Christian**

There is nothing better than the Word of God. The study involved with this essay has preached that again and again to my own soul. There is nothing better than the Word of God. That's not to say that Christians can't learn from the thoughtful writings of Christian authors. That's not to say that there isn't useful worldly wisdom found in secular books. But there is nothing better than the Word of God. It truly is "alive and active" (Heb 4:12). Whenever I have doubts about the Word, the best remedy is the Word. Whenever I have questions about the Word, the best answers are found in the Word. There is nothing better than the Word of God.

As I mentioned in the introduction, one of the questions that has been on my mind is, "How can I know that the way I see the Bible is really the way the Bible wants itself to be seen?" Phrased another way, "Does the Bible say about itself what I have been taught to believe about it?" The answer is a resounding, "Yes!" Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with evidence that the Scriptures are the Word of God, from the moment God inspired men to speak his words or to write his words. The books of both the Old and New Testaments were to be immediately accepted by God's people as truth, not because they met some standard of human criteria, but because they were God's words spoken and written by God's prophets and apostles. The foundational concept of *autopistia* is proved from the Bible itself.

I and my faith in Jesus have been blessed to study what the Bible says about itself.

### **As a Pastor of Souls**

My ministry as a pastor has been blessed too. As a pastor, it's often amazing to hear what people will believe as long as it's not in the Bible. Just about every week brings conversations with Christians who are troubled by teachings they hear other Christians preaching or teaching: Lost books, other gospels, corrupted manuscripts, church conspiracies... Over the year in which this essay was written, I've had church members describe how they've heard Christian sermons about the Gospel of Judas, the letters of Pontius Pilate, nuking the Palestinians, voting for Donald Trump, making a personal decision for Christ, and how good pastors will always grow big churches. Hearing these things can really trouble God's people. How can they know the truth? How can I convince them that the Word of God is the Word of God?

It's tempting to think of all sorts of rational explanations and proofs for the Bible's authenticity. "Think about this..." "Look at this..." "Try to wrap your mind around this..." In my experience, that usually doesn't work. In fact, it's often counter-productive.

The best defense is a good offense. Of course, there is a place in Christianity for apologetics and defending the truth of the Bible through thoughtful, rational arguments. But that's just playing defense. What's needed more than ever is offense. What's our offense? "The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph 6:17).

Rational explanations don't set anyone's heart on fire. But, miraculously, the Word of God does. Logical proofs don't wash away doubts. But, miraculously, the Word of God does. There is nothing more important and more valuable for God's people than to be led again and again into the Word of God. All of it. Old Testament. New Testament. The Pentateuch. The prophets. The Gospels. The epistles. "Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb

4:12). There in the Word is where people find Christ, and, ultimately, he is whom all of us are looking for. Yes, “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

My prayer is that in some small way, this essay has led you into God’s Word, quieted some of your doubts with God’s truth, and fed your faith in Jesus your Savior. To him be glory.

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