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**The Making of the New Testament**

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away”

– Matthew 24:35

1. **The New Testament Canon**

**The journey of Jesus’ teaching:**

The mouth of Jesus

The mouths of his followers (oral tradition)

The writings of others The writings of his followers

Early Christians needed to be able to distinguish between the real teachings of Jesus and those that were not the real teachings of Jesus. Therefore, in the 300s A.D., Christians developed the “Canon” to decided which teachings came from Jesus and which came from man.

**The “Canon”**

-The English word “canon” comes from the Greek word “kanon”, which meant “reed” or “straight rod.” This word came to mean “rule” or “norm” and was eventually was used by Christians to refer to the “criteria used to judge the authenticity of the books in the New Testament.” Therefore, if a writing was considered inspired from God, it was called “canonical.”

**The Criteria of the “Canon”**

In order for an early Christian writing to be considered to be from Jesus, there were certain criteria that these writings must pass:

1. Was it **used** by the Christians?

In reality, the majority of the Christians had already decided what was from God and what was not simply through their use. The Christians at that time (like any other time) were bombarded by all types of false teaching; therefore they studied very carefully what writings they used. Generally speaking, the early church used the books of the New Testament and neglected those that are not included in our Bibles.

1. Was the writing **authoritative**?

Since oral tradition was such an important part of the near-eastern culture in the first centuries after Jesus, the very words that Jesus said were considered to be very important. Because Jesus did not write down his own teachings, the letters that did contain his words were considered very important.

1. Was the writing **apostolic**?

These criteria questioned whether the writing came from a person who was enough of an authority to speak the words of Jesus. This responsibility fell to those who knew Jesus more than anyone else: his apostles. Their writings make up the vast majority of the New Testament. However, there are a few books included that were written by people who were close to apostles or close to Jesus himself:

Mark -- He had much early contact with Jesus

Luke -- He was an educated man who was a frequent traveling companion of the apostle Paul

James and Jude – Natural brothers of Jesus and leaders in the early church

1. Was the writing **authentic**?

In the early centuries after Jesus life, there were many who wrote about him and Christianity in general. For some reason, some authors thought that they needed to use the name of one of Jesus’ apostles instead of their own when they penned their letters. As far as the “Canon” was concerned, if there was any doubt about the real authorship, it was quickly thrown out.

1. Was the writing **inspired**?

The word “inspiration” refers to a writing that was done by a person who was in essence writing the very words of God (2 Peter 1:19-21).

It was important to the early Christians that their texts fall in this category. If a writing did not have the “life-transforming” power of the words of God or contained any errors of any sort (doctrinal, historical, etc.) it was disregarded.

**The Biblical president for a “Canon”**

The Old Testament president:

Jesus himself recognized the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible – Luke 24:44. In addition, he indicates (with some speculation) the beginning and ending of the time period of the Old Testament – Luke 11:50-51 (the first martyr in Gensis 4 to the last martyr in 2 Chronicles 24).

The New Testament’s claims of authority:

1. Public dispersion of writings. Apparently, the New Testament writers intended for their letters to be circulated among the churches. See Colossians 4:16 and Revelation 1:4 (the seven churches of Asia).
2. New Testament claims of inspiration.
3. Paul claims that the book of Luke is scripture – 1 Timothy 5:18 (see footnote).
4. Peter claims that Paul’s writings are scripture – 2 Peter 3:15-16; and Paul claims that all scripture is “God-breathed” – 2 Timothy 3:16.
5. John claims inspiration for his writing of Revelation -- Revelation1:1; 3:22; 22:18-19.
6. Jesus promises special guidance to his Apostles
7. He opened their minds to the scripture -- Luke 24:45
8. He promised them guidance from the Holy Spirit -- John 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:12-14

**The Point**: The New Testament that we have today was very closely scrutinized by the early Christians. If there was a writing that showed any doubt of being inspired by God, it was quickly disregarded as imperfect.

1. **The Text of the New Testament**

**The journey of Jesus’ teachings**

Jesus’ words

Follower’s words

New Testament writings

Western Texts Byzantine Text Alexandrian Text

**The making of ancient books**

Materials used in making books…

1. Papyrus was made from a plant along the Nile river that was dried and pressed together. This type of paper was the most widely used during Jesus’ time and the few centuries following. It was used up until the 8th century (when wood-paper was invented), but was generally replaced by Parchment after the 4th century.
2. Parchment (also called vellum) was a “paper” made from animal skins. It was widely used from the 4th century through the 13th century.

Forms of the books…

1. Scrolls were commonly made of papyrus and could be as long as 35 feet. Luke or Acts would be about 32 feet long.
2. The ancestor to the modern book was called the codex. It was made up of separate pieces of papyrus or parchment that had writing on both sides of the page. There were then bound together on one edge-exactly like our books today. Codex were used frequently used by the early Christians to copy the New Testament books in the early 2nd century. However, this book form was rarely used in pagan literature until the 3rd century.

The types of writing…

1. Uncial script was used from the 1st century through the 8th century. It is made up of all capital letters without punctuation. Here’s an example:
2. Minuscule script became more popular during the 9th century. It resembles what we would call cursive. Punctuation was used somewhat in this form. Here’s an example:

The ways scriptures were copied:

1. In the first centuries after Christ, any Christian who had the means to do so could write copies of the scriptures.
2. By the 4th century, most copying was done in commercial copy houses (called “scriptoria”) with state recognition. Generally, one would read the manuscript and several others would copy what the reader said. These copies were often checked by a “corrector”.
3. After the 6th century, much of the copying was done by monks in monasteries.
4. In 1453, Gutenburg printed the first Bible (also the first book) on a printing press (in German).
5. In 1516, Erasmus printed the first published Greek New Testament (*Textus Receptus*-made from about 13 late Byzantine manuscripts).

The scribal error:

Many people try to make a big deal about “errors” throughout the copies of the New Testament. Here’s the truth: Through the centuries before the printing press, duplicate copies were made in this fashion: original manuscript 🡪 copy 🡪 copy 🡪 copy 🡪 copy 🡪 etc. Through this process, sometimes unintentional errors were made. For example, occasionally a scribe would not hear the word correctly and it would be written down wrong. Other times a scribe would skip a line with his eyes and the copy would not contain that line. Sometimes the scribes made errors intentionally. For example, occasionally a scribe would try to “fix” something in the text, resulting in an error. However, the important thing to remember is that in all the Greek New Testament texts that we have today, **THERE ARE NO DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES WHATSOEVER**.

**The witnesses to the New Testament text:**

There is a huge number of New Testament texts in existence today. These ancient documents are powerful witnesses to the New Testament. Consider the following wealth of evidence:

Greek Manuscripts:

1. Papri – Nearly 100 exist. The earliest contains a few verses from John 18 and it dated in the early 2nd century.
2. Uncials – Roughly 300 exist including some from the early 4th century in very good condition.
3. Minuscules – Almost 3000 exist, starting in the 9th century.
4. Lectionaries – “Devotional books” from the 10th century on that contain the Greek scriptures. Over 2000 exist.

In addition to Greek manuscripts, there are about 19,300 other early manuscripts in other languages including Latin, Syrac, Coptic and Armenian.

Ancient New Testament manuscripts compared to other ancient writings:

The New Testament stands alone in its historical accuracy. Consider the diagram below:

Author / Work When written Earliest copy Time span No. of copies

Plato (Tetralogies) 427-347 B.C. A.D. 900 1,200 years 7

Caesar 100-44 B.C. A.D. 900 1,000 years 10

Homer (Iliad) 900 B.C. 400 B.C. 500 years 643

New Testament A.D. 40-100 A.D. 125 25 years over 24,000

As you can see, the New Testament manuscripts that we have are “miles ahead” of any other ancient manuscript in regards to historical presence. We can be confident that we have the words of the original writers. This is consistent with what Jesus promised us: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Matthew 24:35)

**The Point:** Even though the New Testament was written almost 2000 years ago, we can be sure that we have the Bible exactly how God wants us to.

\*Material taken from the following sources:

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