

Why Trust the Bible - Week 5

Chapter 4: Are These Really the Books You're Looking For?

Week 4 Highlights

- We discussed how *scribes*, professional copyists, were tasked with transmitting the writings of the New Testament and typically created *codices*, or bound copies, of the manuscripts.
- We reviewed that more than 5,400 complete New Testament manuscripts exist, dating from the 2nd to the 15th century and that nearly 99.86% of the New Testament could be re-created through the writings of 2nd-4th century church fathers, thus verifying the content.
- We established that the variations found in ancient manuscripts actually lend to the credibility of the message of the New Testament.
- We showed that the gap between the actual events and dates of the earliest manuscripts is actually extremely small when it comes to the New Testament versus other widely accepted historical accounts, such as the works of Plato and Julius Caesar.
- We had lively discussion around the apologetics bonus question, "Did God create sin?", particularly focused on the attributes of God as all-knowing, all-powerful, and always good.

Chapter Question

What is canon?

Canon = a collection or list of sacred books accepted as genuine. It comes from the Greek language, meaning rule or standard.

The Development of Canon

Let's keep in mind that the gospel accounts and letters that make up the New Testament were not written with any intention of being included in a book for believers to read 2000 years later. These were documents created for the early church.

Why was it necessary to establish canon?

1. To combat the rise of heresies, early believers had to refute false teaching by defining canon.
2. Due to Roman persecution, early Christians found it imperative that any scripture they were in possession of was worthy of imprisonment or death.
3. As apostles aged and began to die, less importance was placed on oral teaching and more on their writings as well as the writings of those under their supervision.

The first mention of a collection of Paul's letters was found in a Latin document (165-185 A.D.) known as the *Muratorian Canon*, an annotated list of sacred Christian writings. Thirteen of Paul's letters appeared in the list. Several theories have been proposed by scholars regarding the formation of the Pauline Corpus:

1. Long process - Since Paul's writing tended to address pastoral problems peculiar to the community, the letter was not deemed to be of interest to the other Pauline communities. Therefore, for many years, the individual letters were kept in the archives of each community. It was only toward the end of the first century that the different Pauline communities began to exchange copies of one another's letters.
2. Big Bang - The publication of the Acts of the Apostles, in which Paul plays a prominent role, awakened in the Pauline communities a renewed interest in the letters once written to them by Paul. They began to collect these letters, thus the Pauline Corpus was born. The initial collection of Paul's letters could have been undertaken in Corinth and Ephesus, the two centers of the most intense and prolonged missionary activities of the Apostle.
 - There is speculation that Onesimus (noted in Philemon) was the same Onesimus who became the 2nd bishop in Ephesus and can be credited with collecting Paul's letters due to his respect and love for Paul.

By the 2nd century, the four gospels had begun circulating together.

AD 170 - The *Muratorian Canon* included all of the New Testament books except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and possibly 2 and 3 John.

AD 363 - the *Council of Laodicea Canon* included 26 books of the New Testament except Revelation.

AD 393 - The *Council of Hippo Canon* added the book of Revelation.

AD 397 - The *Council of Carthage Canon* affirmed the Council of Hippo Canon.

Chapter Question

The author says that the idea that there was a conspiracy to arrive at this particular canon is “arrant nonsense” (pg 64). How does he defend himself?

Books that contradicted the New Testament canon did not begin to appear until later in the 2nd century, well after the deaths of the apostles and original canonical authors.

Why is the distinction between “choosing” and “receiving” the books so vital?

Choosing - Taking for oneself with a closed fist

Receiving - Open hand, ready to receive

“This is why we constantly thank God, because when you *received* the word of God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the word of God, which also works effectively in you who believe.” 1 Thessalonians 2:13 (CSB)

“Neither individuals nor councils created the canon; instead they came to recognize and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church.”

-Bruce Metzger, *The New Testament, Its Background, Growth and Content*

Chapter Question

What plausible, historically valid reasons did the authors have for accepting the New Testament canon? List and briefly explain the four main reasons below (see pg 69-72).

- **Apostolicity** - Written by an apostle of Jesus Christ or a close companion
- **Antiquity** - Written in the 1st century, contemporary to apostles and witnesses
- **Orthodoxy** - Agrees with the standard of truth reelected in the doctrinal tradition handed down from Jesus Christ himself.
- **Universality** - Used and valued by Christians in every part of the known world

Chapter Question

Are you persuaded that the New Testament canon is made up of “the right books” (pg 72)? Why or why not? What additional evidence would help you determine if the New Testament has the right books?

Old Testament Apocrypha

The books that constitute the OT Apocrypha are well known mainly because they are a point of division between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Written approximately between the third century BC and the first century AD, these books include 1 & 2 Maccabees, 1 Esdras, Judith, Tobit, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, as well as some smaller works and even some additions to existing canonical books. All of these books are preserved in Greek, though some may have been originally written in Hebrew/Aramaic.

Although these books were known and used among the Jews of this time period, there is little evidence to suggest they were regarded as Scripture. Neither Josephus nor Philo—key sources for our understanding of the scope of the OT canon—used them as Scripture. In addition, no NT author (most of whom were Jews) cites even a single book from the Apocrypha as Scripture. And later rabbinic writers do not receive the Apocrypha, affirming only the Hebrew Scriptures as part of the Jewish canon.

The fact that the Jews limited their Scriptures to the Hebrew canon should not come as a surprise given that there was an established belief that inspired prophecy had ceased by the time of the fourth century BC.

New Testament Apocrypha

While the amount of Christian apocryphal material can be overwhelming, there are a few of considerations to keep in mind:

- All of these apocryphal writings are dated to the second or third century, or even later. Although attempts have been made to trace some of these writings to the first century, such efforts have not won wide support. Thus, there are no reasons to think that these writings have any genuine claim to apostolic authorship.
- Many (though not all) of these apocryphal writings contain systems of doctrine that were out of accord with the rule of faith that had been passed down to the early church. The Gospel of Philip, for example, contains a version of Valentinian Gnosticism which is essentially polytheistic, affirming a multiplicity of divine beings in the heavenly realms.
- None of the apocryphal NT writings, with only a rare exception, were ever serious contenders for a spot in the canon. Despite the claims of some that apocryphal works were as popular as canonical works, the historical evidence tells a very different story. Indeed, most apocryphal works were either ignored, or condemned outright by the church fathers.

Apologetics Bonus

DISCLAIMER: When we're discussing apologetics, it's important to understand that responses to these questions can never be deemed "The Answer." We are all human. We have wildly differing worldviews and opinions. In many of these cases, the answers and logic chains we present are simply potential answers to a question, and not reflective even of our own opinions.

The goal here is to make you think; to engage you with the concepts and issues.

And remember, we are human, and God is not. Arminians argue with Calvinists, atheists with theists, and on and on. Our tendency will always be to anthropomorphize God. This is an error, and leads to hubris, rather than humility. To remain humble, we must always realize that God is above time, space, matter and energy.

Trying to understand God's ways are akin to an ant trying to build a Tesla.

Topic: Evil and Suffering Exist, therefore a Loving God Cannot

To start the conversation off, we need to set a couple of parameters by answering some questions...

Question 1: We (and the Bible) say God is good, but what IS good?

Is good always being nice? Is it doing the "right" thing? What happens when those are in opposition? What is good then?

Question 2: Is it possible that sometimes **good** does not necessarily mean **kind**?

Sure. As parents, we are all too familiar with the concept of allowing some pain and suffering to help build our children's character.

Other examples of this are Dentists, Athletic Trainers, Doctors, Teachers... the list goes on. Medicinal pain and suffering are nearly always endured for a concept of good that does not directly relate to kindness, rather something more important... which leads us to our first key points:

Key Point(s)

1. **MORAL** and **SPIRITUAL EDUCATION** are more "good" than **PLEASURE** or **COMFORT**.
2. Moral character is **formed through hardship**, and NOT through pleasure or comfort. A good example here is: Learning courage is impossible without the fear or experience of pain.

Romans 5:3-4

"3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope."

If we can infer that Moral and Spiritual Education are more important than our own comfort, and that suffering produces these, along with hope, we can get to our next key point, which is:

Key Point

The objective of our lives is not comfort, it is preparing for eternity.

Here's some ammunition for this argument:

- If there is no eternity (or Moral Lawgiver), morality would be superfluous or arbitrary. This is part of the Moral Argument for the existence of God, which we can discuss later.
- If there is no eternity, or no God, what is the purpose of spiritual education?

NOW, BACK TO CHOICE (in relation to suffering)...

Pretend for a moment that you are God, and you're aiming to eliminate evil...

- Every time you prevent evil, you're taking away choice
- To prevent all evil, you have to eliminate all choice (all people sin)
- When you remove all choice, you also eliminate the capacity for genuine love

The Big Objections

Objection #1

"Evil people get away with stuff all the time. Why doesn't God intervene with them; it just doesn't seem fair!"

This one is pretty straightforward if you believe the Bible...

Key Point

If you believe in the Bible, and in a good God, the evil people aren't getting away with it. Justice delayed is NOT justice denied.

Objection #2

"Good people suffer as much or more than bad people. How is that fair?"

This one is a little tougher to swallow, but no less true...

Key Point

There are no good people.

Objection #2-b

"But God don't make no junk."

This is true, and where the difference between ONTOLOGICALLY good and MORALLY good become important distinctions.

<p>ONTOLOGICALLY GOOD</p> <p>What we were made to be</p> <p>"Bearing God's Image"</p>	<p>MORALLY GOOD</p> <p>The decisions we make</p> <p>"Adam & Eve"</p>
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Jeremiah 6:13

"From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit."

Isaiah 64:6

"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away."

Romans 3:23

"23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"

Objection #2-c

"But there are people genuinely trying to do and be good, and suffering. Why would this happen?"

Can you think of a time when suffering or pain, while difficult in the moment, brought you to something good? Closeness with God, or another person?

Key Point

Suffering frequently leads to "lay down our arms," surrender to God, and seek the cure of Christ. Suffering often leads to repentance.

Think about this both with respect to the Israelites, and in your own life.

“God whispers in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.”

- C.S. Lewis

Objection #3

“If God grieves over the death of one sparrow, how could He bear the sickness, suffering, and death of the multiplied millions of men, women, children, animals and all other sensate creatures, in every part of the world, in every century since the beginning of time?”

To answer this well, it’s important to apply some thought, and imagery to the issue:

- Imagine God speaking creation into existence, and knowing at that time that He was creating cute little puppies, but because of choice, blood, guts, pain, and suffering would also be.
- Now remember that He, once we introduced sin, He could have said, “Hey, all this junk is your fault... live with it.” But He didn’t...
- Now, imagine that same God, at that same time, knowing what He was creating, deciding that He would roll all of that pain & suffering in history into a ball, eat it, tasting and digesting it fully, for eternity.

Key Point

How could an intelligent, good God bear all of this pain and suffering? **He did!**

IMPORTANT NOTE: Objections in Real Life

People often have these types of objections during times of significant pain and suffering personally. It’s no wonder that God tells us over and over again to take joy when we face trials. When people approach us with these, should we lay out the logical arguments for belief, chide them in their lack of joy, or argue with them when they are grieving?

Of course not. How, then, should we respond as Christians?

Key Point

Feel their pain. Grieve with them. Pray over them (if you can) or for them. Pray that God will use this to bring them closer to Him, whether they are a believer or not.

Remember that God is a God of love, and remind yourself what love looks like in that moment.