

The Apocrypha: Is it scripture?

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12/03/08

The Apocrypha consists of a set of books written between approximately 400 B.C. and the time of Christ. The word "apocrypha" (ἀπόκρυφα) means "Hidden." These books consist of 1 and 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, the Rest of Esther, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, (also titled Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, The Letter of Jeremiah, Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, The Additions to Daniel, The Prayer of Manasseh, and 1 and 2 Maccabees.

The Protestant Church rejects the apocrypha as being inspired, as do the Jews; but in 1546 the Roman Catholic Church officially declared some of the apocryphal books to belong to the canon of scripture. These are Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus), and Baruch. The apocryphal books are written in Greek--not Hebrew (except for Ecclesiasticus, 1 Maccabees, a part of Judith, and Tobit) and contain some useful historical information.

Is the Apocrypha Scripture? Protestants deny its inspiration, but the Roman Catholic Church affirms it. In order to ascertain whether it is or isn't, we need to look within its pages.

Not quoted in the New Testament

First of all, neither Jesus nor the apostles ever quoted from the Apocrypha. There are over 260 quotations of the Old Testament in the New Testament and not one of them is from these books. Nevertheless, a Roman Catholic might respond by saying that there are several Old Testament books that are not quoted in the New Testament, i.e., Joshua, Judges, Esther, etc. Does this mean that they aren't inspired either? But, these books had already been accepted into the canon by the Jews--where the Apocrypha had not. The Jews recognized the Old Testament canon, and they did not include the Apocrypha in it. This is significant because of what Paul says:

"Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? 2 Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God."
([Rom. 3:1-2 \(http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Rom.%203.1-2\)](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Rom.%203.1-2)).

Paul tells us that the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. This means that they are the ones who understood what inspired Scriptures were, and they never accepted the Apocrypha.

Jesus' references the Old Testament: from Abel to Zechariah

Jesus referenced the Jewish Old Testament canon from the beginning to the end and did not include the Apocrypha in his reference. "From the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation." ([Luke 11:51](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Luke%2011.51) (<http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Luke%2011.51>)).

"The traditional Jewish canon was divided into three sections (Law, Prophets, Writings), and an unusual feature of the last section was the listing of Chronicles out of historical order--placing it after Ezra-Nehemiah and making it the last book of the canon. In light of this, the words of Jesus in [Luke 11:50-51](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Luke%2011.50-51) (<http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Luke%2011.50-51>) reflect the settled character of the Jewish canon (with its peculiar order) already in his day. Christ uses the expression "from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah," which appears troublesome since Zechariah was not chronologically the last martyr mentioned in the Bible (cf. [Jer. 26:20-23](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Jer.%2026.20-23) (<http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Jer.%2026.20-23>)). However, Zechariah is the last martyr of which we read in the Old Testament according to Jewish canonical order (cf. [II Chron. 24:20-22](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/2%20Chron.%2024.20-22) (<http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/2%20Chron.%2024.20-22>)), which was apparently recognized by Jesus and his hearers."¹

This means that the same Old Testament canon, according to the Jewish tradition, is arranged differently than how we have it in the Protestant Bible today. This was the arrangement to which Jesus was referring when he referenced Abel and Zechariah, the first and last people to have their blood shed--as listed in the Old Testament Jewish canon. Obviously, Jesus knew of the Apocrypha and was not including it in his reference.

Jesus references the Old Testament: The Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms

Catholics sometimes respond by saying that the Old Testament is referred to in three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. It is these writings that are sometimes said to include the Apocrypha. But this designation is not found in the Bible. On the contrary, Jesus referenced the Old Testament and designated its three parts as the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms--not as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

"Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ([Luke 24:44](http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Luke%2024.44)

(<http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Luke%2024.44>)).

So we see that the designation offered by the Roman Catholics is not the same designation found in the Bible, and their argument is invalid--as their argument is incorrect. Nevertheless, even if it did say "writings," it would not include the Apocrypha for the above-mentioned reasons.

Church Fathers

Did the Church fathers recognized the Apocrypha as being Scripture? Roman Catholics strongly appeal to Church history, but we don't find a unanimous consensus on the Apocrypha. Jerome (340-420), who translated the Latin Vulgate which is used by the RC church, rejected the Apocrypha since he believed that the Jews recognized and established the proper canon of the Old Testament. Remember, the Christian Church built upon that recognition. Also, Josephus the famous Jewish historian of the First Century never mentioned the Apocrypha as being part of the canon either. In addition, "Early church fathers like Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, and the great Roman Catholic translator Jerome spoke out against the Apocrypha."² So, we should not conclude that the Church fathers unanimously affirmed the Apocrypha. They didn't.

- [1.](http://www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/bible/bahnsen_canon.html) http://www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/bible/bahnsen_canon.html.
- [2.](http://www.inplainsite.org/html/apocrypha.html) <http://www.inplainsite.org/html/apocrypha.html>.

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**A COMPARISON OF ANCIENT WORKS WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT
(BOTH OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS) ***

Numbers in () are the previously reported dates.²⁸

Author	Work	Date Written	Earliest MSS	Time Gap	Old #	New
Homer	<i>Iliad</i>	800 BC	c. 400 BC	400	643	1,800+
Herodotus	<i>History</i>	480-425 BC	1 st C AD	1,350	8	109
Sophocles ²⁹	Plays	496-406 BC	3 rd C BC	100-200	100	193
Plato	Tetralogies	400 BC	895	1,300	7	210
Caesar	<i>Gallic Wars</i>	100-44 BC	9 th C	950	10	251
Livy	<i>History of Rome</i>	59 BC–17 AD	Early 5 th C	400	1 Partial, 19 copies	90 & 60 copies
Tacitus	<i>Annals</i>	100 AD	1 st half: 850, 2 nd : 1050 (1100 AD)	750-950	20	2 + 31 15 C copies
Pliny, the Elder	<i>Natural History</i>	49-79 AD	5 th C frag: 1; Rem. 14-15 th C	400 (750)	7	200
Thucydides	<i>History</i>	460-400 BC	3 rd C BC (AD 900)	200 (1,350)	8	96
Demosthenes	Speeches	300 BC	Some frags from 1 C. BC. (AD 1100)	1,100+ (1,400)	200	340
Greek N.T. Manuscripts		50-100 AD	AD 130 (or less) ³⁰	50	5366	5,838
Greek New Testament Early Translations						18,524
Old Testament						42,000+ **
Biblical Manuscripts, Scrolls and Translations:						
New Testament Greek Manuscripts						5,838
New Testament Early Translations						18,524
Old Testament Scrolls, Codices						42,000
TOTAL BIBLICAL MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCES						66,362

*All these numbers can be obsolete by publication date

** The traditional listings of Old Testament manuscripts normally leave out all the abundant scroll evidence. It is not easy to determine the exact number of extant scrolls. The following are intelligent estimates:

²⁸ McDowell, 38.

²⁹ McDowell only listed Sophocles in the original *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1973), 48.

³⁰ Daniel Wallace reports that a new fragment from the Gospel of Mark will probably date to the first century AD. Daniel B. Wallace, "Earliest Manuscript of the New Testament Discovered?" <http://www.csntm.org/> Accessed 3/26/2012. (It will probably take a year for documentation of this discovery to be made public – JDM)

Canon, Textual Criticism and More with Bruce Metzger

Although I have seen the film, I read [Lee Strobel's](#) *The Case for Christ* the first time last night. After having long discussions in regard to New Testament canon and textual critical issues where I based my opinion on the scholarly works of the late [Bruce Metzger](#). However, repeating Metzger's work in an easy to understand format online is a difficult task - and what he has to say is something all Christians who have contact with atheists and Muslims should know.

Lee Strobel's interview with Bruce Metzger is probably the easiest way to communicate these ideas. So, at the risk of copyright infringement, I will provide an extract of the discussion.

Introduction:

I found eighty-four-year-old Bruce Metzger on a Saturday afternoon at his usual hangout, the library at Princeton Theological Seminary, where, he says with a smile, "I like to dust off the books." Actually, he has written some of the best of them, especially when the topic is the text of the New Testament. In all, he has authored or edited fifty books, including *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*; *The Text of the New Testament*; *The Canon of the New Testament*, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible*; *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*; *Introduction to the Apocrypha*; and *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. Several have been translated into German, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Malagasy, and other languages. He also is coeditor of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* and general editor of more than twenty-five volumes in the series *New Testament Tools and Studies*.

Metzger's education includes a master's degree from Princeton Theological Seminary and both a master's degree and a doctorate from Princeton University. He has been awarded honorary doctorates by five colleges and universities, including St. Andrews University in Scotland, the University of Munster in Germany, and Potchefstroom University in South Africa. In 1969 he served as resident scholar at Tyndale House, Cambridge, England. He was a visiting fellow at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, in 1974 and at Wolfson College, Oxford, in 1979. He is currently professor emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary after a forty-six-year career teaching the New Testament.

Metzger is chairman of the New Revised Standard Version Bible Committee, a corresponding fellow of the British Academy, and serves on the Kuratorium of the Vetus Latina Institute at the Monastery of Beuron, Germany. He is past president of the Society of Biblical Literature, the International Society for New Testament Studies, and the North American Patristic Society. If you scan the footnotes of any authoritative book on the text of the New Testament, the odds are you're going to see Metzger cited time after time. His books are mandatory reading in universities and seminaries around the world. He is held in the highest regard by scholars from across a wide range of theological beliefs.

In many ways Metzger, born in 1914, is a throwback to an earlier generation. Alighting

from a gray Buick he calls "my gas buggy," he is wearing a dark gray suit and blue paisley tie, which is about as casual as he gets during his visits to the library, even on a weekend. His white hair is neatly combed; his eyes, bright and alert, are framed by rimless glasses. He walks slower than he used to, but he has no difficulty methodically climbing the stairway to the second floor, where he conducts his research in an obscure and austere office.

And he hasn't lost his sense of humor. He showed me a tin canister he inherited as chairman of the Revised Standard Version Bible Committee. He opened the lid to reveal the ashes of an RSV Bible that had been torched in a 1952 bonfire during a protest by a fundamentalist preacher. "It seems he didn't like it when the committee changed 'fellows' of the King James Version to 'comrades' in Hebrews 1:9," Metzger explained with a chuckle. "He accused them of being communists!"

Though Metzger's speech is hesitant at times and he's prone to replying in quaint phrases like "Quite so," he continues to remain on the cutting edge of New Testament scholarship. When I asked for some statistics, he didn't rely on the numbers in his 1992 book on the New Testament; he had conducted fresh research to get up-to-date figures. His quick mind has no problem recalling details of people and places, and he's fully conversant with all the current debates among New Testament experts. In fact, they continue to look to him for insight and wisdom. His office, about the size of a jail cell, is windowless and painted institutional gray. It has two wooden chairs; he insisted I take the more comfortable one. That was part of his charm. He was thoroughly kind, surprisingly modest and self-effacing, with a gentle spirit that made me want to someday grow old with the same mellow kind of grace. We got acquainted with each other for a while, and then I turned to the first issue I wanted to address: *how can we be sure the biographies of Jesus were handed down to us in a reliable way?*

Copies of Copies of Copies

"I'll be honest with you," I said to Metzger. "When I first found out that there are no surviving originals of the New Testament, I was really skeptical. I thought, If all we have are copies of copies of copies, how can I have any confidence that the New Testament we have today bears any resemblance whatsoever to what was originally written? How do you respond to that?"

"This isn't an issue that's unique to the Bible; it's a question we can ask of other documents that have come down to us from antiquity," he replied. "But what the New Testament has in its favor, especially when compared with other ancient writings, is the unprecedented multiplicity of copies that have survived."

"Why is that important?" I asked.

"Well, the more often you have copies that agree with each other, especially if they emerge from different geographical areas, the more you can cross-check them to figure out what the original document was like. The only way they'd agree would be where they went back genealogically in a family tree that represents the descent of the manuscripts."

"OK," I said, "I can see that having a lot of copies from various places can help. But what about the age of the documents? Certainly that's important as well, isn't it?"

"Quite so," he replied. "And this is something else that favors the New Testament. We have copies commencing within a couple of generations from the writing of the originals, whereas in the case of other ancient texts, maybe five, eight, or ten centuries elapsed between the original and the earliest surviving copy. In addition to Greek manuscripts, we also have translations of the gospels into other languages at a relatively early time-into Latin, Syriac, and Coptic. And beyond that, we have what may be called secondary translations made a little later, like Armenian and Gothic. And a lot of others-Georgian, Ethiopic, a great variety."

"How does that help?"

"Because even if we had no Greek manuscripts today, by piecing together the information from these translations from a relatively early date, we could actually reproduce the contents of the New Testament. In addition to that, even if we lost all the Greek manuscripts and the early translations, we could still reproduce the contents of the New Testament from the multiplicity of quotations in commentaries, sermons, letters, and so forth of the early church fathers."

While that seemed impressive, it was difficult to judge this evidence in isolation. I needed some context to better appreciate the uniqueness of the New Testament. How, I wondered, did it compare with other well-known works of antiquity?

A Mountain of Manuscripts

"When you talk about a great multiplicity of manuscripts," I said, "how does that contrast with other ancient books that are routinely accepted by scholars as being reliable? For instance, tell me about the writing of authors from about the time of Jesus."

Having anticipated the question, Metzger referred to some handwritten notes he had brought along.

"Consider Tacitus, the Roman historian who wrote his Annals of Imperial Rome in about A.D. 116," he began. "His first six books exist today in only one manuscript, and it was copied about A.D. 850. Books eleven through sixteen are in another manuscript dating from the eleventh century. Books seven through ten are lost. So there is a long gap between the time that Tacitus sought his information and wrote it down and the only existing copies. "With regard to the first-century historian Josephus, we have nine Greek manuscripts of his work The Jewish War, and these copies were written in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. There is a Latin translation from the fourth century and medieval Russian materials from the eleventh or twelfth century."

Those numbers were surprising. There is but the thinnest thread of manuscripts

connecting these ancient works to the modern world. "By comparison," I asked, "how many New Testament Greek manuscripts are in existence today?"

Metzger's eyes got wide. "More than five thousand have been cataloged, he said with enthusiasm, his voice going up an octave.

That was a mountain of manuscripts compared to the anthills of Tacitus and Josephus! "Is that unusual in the ancient world? What would the runner-up be?" I asked.

"The quantity of New Testament material is almost embarrassing in comparison with other works of antiquity," he said. "Next to the New Testament, the greatest amount of manuscript testimony is of Homer's Iliad, which was the bible of the ancient Greeks. There are fewer than 650 Greek manuscripts of it today. Some are quite fragmentary. They come down to us from the second and third century A.D. and following. When you consider that Homer composed his epic about 800 B.C., you can see there's a very lengthy gap."

"Very lengthy" was an understatement; it was a thousand years!

There was in fact no comparison: the manuscript evidence for the New Testament was overwhelming when juxtaposed against other revered writings of antiquity-works that modern scholars have absolutely no reluctance treating as authentic. My curiosity about the New Testament manuscripts having been piqued, I asked Metzger to describe some of them for me.

"The earliest are fragments of papyrus, which was a writing material made from the papyrus plant that grew in the marshes of the Nile Delta in Egypt," he said. "There are now ninety-nine fragmentary pieces of papyrus that contain one or more passages or books of the New Testament. The most significant to come to light are the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, discovered about 1930. Of these, Beatty Biblical Papyrus number one contains portions of the four gospels and the book of Acts, and it dates from the third century. Papyrus number two contains large portions of eight letters of Paul, plus portions of Hebrews, dating to about the year 200. Papyrus number three has a sizable section of the book of Revelation, dating from the third century. "Another group of important papyrus manuscripts was purchased by a Swiss bibliophile, M. Martin Bodmer. The earliest of these, dating from about 200, contains about two-thirds of the gospel of John. Another papyrus, containing portions of the gospels of Luke and John, dates from the third century."

At this point the gap between the writing of the biographies of Jesus and the earliest manuscripts was extremely small. But what is the oldest manuscript we possess? How close in time, I wondered, can we get to the original writings, which experts call "autographs"?

The Scrap that Changed History

"Of the entire New Testament," I said, "what is the earliest portion that we possess today?"

Metzger didn't have to ponder the answer. "That would be a fragment of the gospel of John,

containing material from chapter eighteen. It has five verses—three on one side, two on the other—and it measures about two and a half by three and a half inches," he said.

"How was it discovered?"

"It was purchased in Egypt as early as 1920, but it sat unnoticed for years among similar fragments of papyrus. Then in 1934 C. H. Roberts of Saint John's College, Oxford, was sorting through the papyrus at the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England. He immediately recognized this as preserving a portion of John's gospel. He was able to date it from the style of the script."

"And what was his conclusion?" I asked. "How far back does it go?"

"He concluded it originated between A.D. 100 to 150. Lots of other prominent paleographers, like Sir Frederic Kenyon, Sir Harold Bell, Adolf Deissmann, W. H. P. Hatch, Ulrich Wilcken, and others, have agreed with his assessment. Deissmann was convinced that it goes back at least to the reign of Emperor Hadrian, which was A.D. 117-138, or even Emperor Trajan, which was A.D. 98-117."

That was a stunning discovery. The reason: skeptical German theologians in the last century argued strenuously that the fourth gospel was not even composed until at least the year 160—too distant from the events of Jesus' life to be of much historical use. They were able to influence generations of scholars, who scoffed at this gospel's reliability.

"This certainly blows that opinion out of the water," I commented.

"Yes, it does," he said. "Here we have, at a very early date, a fragment of a copy of John all the way over in a community along the Nile River in Egypt, far from Ephesus in Asia Minor, where the gospel was probably originally composed."

This finding has literally rewritten popular views of history, pushing the composition of John's gospel much closer to the days when Jesus walked the earth. I made a mental note to check with an archaeologist about whether any other findings have bolstered the confidence we can have in the fourth gospel.

A Wealth of Evidence

While papyrus manuscripts represent the earliest copies of the New Testament, there are also ancient copies written on parchment, which was made from the skins of cattle, sheep, goats, and antelope.

"We have what are called uncial manuscripts, which are written in all-capital Greek letters," Metzger explained. "Today we have 306 of these, several dating back as early as the third century. The most important are Codex Sinaiticus, which is the only complete New Testament in uncial letters, and Codex Vaticanus, which is not quite complete. Both date to

about A.D. 350.

"A new style of writing, more cursive in nature, emerged in roughly A.D. 800. It's called minuscule, and we have 2,856 of these manuscripts. Then there are also lectionaries, which contain New Testament Scripture in the sequence it was to be read in the early churches at appropriate times during the year. A total of 2,403 of these have been cataloged. That puts the grand total of Greek manuscripts at 5,664."

In addition to the Greek documents, he said, there are thousands of other ancient New Testament manuscripts in other languages. There are 8,000 to 10,000 Latin Vulgate manuscripts, plus a total of 8,000 in Ethiopic, Slavic, and Armenian. In all, there are about 24,000 manuscripts in existence.

"What's your opinion, then?" I asked, wanting to confirm clearly what I thought I was hearing him say. "In terms of the multiplicity of manuscripts and the time gap between the originals and our first copies, how does the New Testament stack up against other well known works of antiquity?"

"Extremely well," he replied. "We can have great confidence in the fidelity with which this material has come down to us, especially compared with any other ancient literary work." That conclusion is shared by distinguished scholars throughout the world. Said the late F. F. Bruce, eminent professor at the University of Manchester, England, and author of *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*: "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament."

Metzger had already mentioned the name of Sir Frederic Kenyon, former director of the British Museum and author of *The Palaeography of Greek Papyri*. Kenyon has said that "in no other case is the interval of time between the composition of the book and the date of the earliest manuscripts so short as in that of the New Testament."

His conclusion: "The last foundation for any doubt that the scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed."

However, what about discrepancies among the various manuscripts?

In the days before lightning-fast photocopying machines, manuscripts were laboriously hand-copied by scribes, letter by letter, word by word, line by line, in a process that was ripe for errors. Now I wanted to zero in on whether these copying mistakes have rendered our modern Bibles hopelessly riddled with inaccuracies.

Examining the Errors

"With the similarities in the way Greek letters are written and with the primitive conditions under which the scribes worked, it would seem inevitable that copying errors would creep into the text," I said.

"Quite so," Metzger conceded.

"And in fact, aren't there literally tens of thousands of variations among the ancient manuscripts that we have?"

"Quite so."

"Doesn't that therefore mean we can't trust them?" I asked, sounding more accusatory than inquisitive.

"No sir, it does not," Metzger replied firmly. "First let me say this: Eyeglasses weren't invented until 1373 in Venice, and I'm sure that astigmatism existed among the ancient scribes. That was compounded by the fact that it was difficult under any circumstances to read faded manuscripts on which some of the ink had flaked away. And there were other hazards-inattentiveness on the part of scribes, for example. So yes, although for the most part scribes were scrupulously careful, errors did creep in.

"But," he was quick to add, "there are factors counteracting that. For example, sometimes the scribe's memory would play tricks on him. Between the time it took for him to look at the text and then to write down the words, the order of words might get shifted. He may write down the right words but in the wrong sequence. This is nothing to be alarmed at, because Greek, unlike English, is an inflected language."

"Meaning . . ." I prompted him.

"Meaning it makes a whale of a difference in English if you say, 'Dog bites man' or 'Man bites dog'-sequence matters in English. But in Greek it doesn't. One word functions as the subject of the sentence regardless of where it stands in the sequence; consequently, the meaning of the sentence isn't distorted if the words are out of what we consider to be the right order. So yes, some variations among manuscripts exist, but generally they're inconsequential variations like that. Differences in spelling would be another example."

Still, the high number of "variants," or differences among manuscripts, was troubling. I had seen estimates as high as two hundred thousand of them.' However, Metzger downplayed the significance of that figure.

"The number sounds big, but it's a bit misleading because of the way variants are counted," he said. He explained that if a single word is misspelled in two thousand manuscripts, that's counted as two thousand variants.

I keyed in on the most important issue. "How many doctrines of the church are in jeopardy because of variants?"

"I don't know of any doctrine that is in jeopardy," he responded confidently.

"None?"

"None," he repeated. "Now, the Jehovah's Witnesses come to our door and say, 'Your Bible is wrong in the King James Version of 1 John 5:7-8, where it talks about 'the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.' They'll say, 'That's not in the earliest manuscripts.'

"And that's true enough. I think that these words are found in only about seven or eight copies, all from the fifteenth or sixteenth century. I acknowledge that is not part of what the author of I John was inspired to write.

"But that does not dislodge the firmly witnessed testimony of the Bible to the doctrine of the Trinity. At the baptism of Jesus, the Father speaks, his beloved Son is baptized, and the Holy Spirit descends on him. At the ending of 2 Corinthians Paul says, 'May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.' There are many places where the Trinity is represented."

"So the variations, when they occur, tend to be minor rather than substantive?"

"Yes, yes, that's correct, and scholars work very carefully to try to resolve them by getting back to the original meaning. The more significant variations do not overthrow any doctrine of the church. Any good Bible will have notes that will alert the reader to variant readings of any consequence. But again, these are rare."

So rare that scholars Norman Geisler and William Nix conclude, "The New Testament, then, has not only survived in more manuscripts than any other book from antiquity, but it has survived in a purer form than any other great book-a form that is 99.5 percent pure." However, even if it's true that the transmission of the New Testament through history has been unprecedented in its reliability, how do we know that we have the whole picture?

What about allegations that church councils squelched equally legitimate documents because they didn't like the picture of Jesus they portrayed? How do we know that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament represent the best and most reliable information? Why is it that our Bibles contain Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but many other ancient gospels-the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Nativity of Mary-were excluded? It was time to turn to the question of the "canon," a term that comes from a Greek word meaning "rule," "norm," or "standard" and that describes the books that have become accepted as official in the church and included in the New Testament.' Metzger is considered a leading authority in that field.

"A High Degree of Unanimity"

"How did the early church leaders determine which books would be considered authoritative and which would be discarded?" I asked.

"What criteria did they use in determining which documents would be included in the New Testament?"

"Basically, the early church had three criteria," he said. "First, the books must have apostolic authority-that is, they must have been written either by apostles themselves, who were eyewitnesses to what they wrote about, or by followers of apostles. So in the case of Mark and Luke, while they weren't among the twelve disciples, early tradition has it that Mark was a helper of Peter, and Luke was an associate of Paul."

"Second, there was the criterion of conformity to what was called the rule of faith. That is, was the document congruent with the basic Christian tradition that the church recognized as normative? And third, there was the criterion of whether a document had had continuous acceptance and usage by the church at large."

"They merely applied those criteria and let the chips fall where they may?" I asked.

"Well, it wouldn't be accurate to say that these criteria were simply applied in a mechanical fashion," he replied. "There were certainly different opinions about which criterion should be given the most weight. But what's remarkable is that even though the fringes of the canon remained unsettled for a while, there was actually a high degree of unanimity concerning the greater part of the New Testament within the first two centuries. And this was true among very diverse congregations scattered over a wide area."

"So," I said, "the four gospels we have in the New Testament today met those criteria, while others didn't?"

"Yes," he said. "It was, if I may put it this way, an example of survival of the fittest! In talking about the canon, Arthur Darby Nock used to tell his students at Harvard, 'The most traveled roads in Europe are the best roads; that's why they're so heavily traveled.' That's a good analogy. British commentator William Barclay said it this way: 'It is the simple truth to say that the New Testament books became canonical because no one could stop them doing so.' We can be confident that no other ancient books can compare with the New Testament in terms of importance for Christian history or doctrine. When one studies the early history of the canon, one walks away convinced that the New Testament contains the best sources for the history of Jesus. Those who discerned the limits of the canon had a clear and balanced perspective of the gospel of Christ. Just read these other documents for yourself. They're written later than the four gospels, in the second, third, fourth, fifth, even sixth century, long after Jesus, and they're generally quite banal. They carry names-like the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Mary-that are unrelated to their real authorship. On the other hand, the four gospels in the New Testament were readily accepted with remarkable unanimity as being authentic in the story they told."

Yet I knew that some liberal scholars, most notably members of the well-publicized Jesus Seminar, believe the Gospel of Thomas ought to be elevated to equal status with the four traditional gospels. Did this mysterious gospel fall victim to political wars within the church, eventually being excluded because of its unpopular doctrines? I decided I'd better probe Metzger on this point.

The "Secret Words" of Jesus

"Dr. Metzger, the Gospel of Thomas, which was among the Nag Hamrnadi documents found in Egypt in 1945, claims it contains 'the secret words which the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down., Why was it excluded by the church?"

Metzger was thoroughly acquainted with the work. 'The Gospel of Thomas came to light in a fifth-century copy in Coptic, which I've translated into English," he said. "It contains 114 sayings attributed to Jesus but no narrative of what he did, and seems to have been written in Greek in Syria about A.D. 140. In some cases I think this gospel correctly reports what Jesus said, with slight modifications."

This was certainly an intriguing statement. "Please elaborate," I said.

"For instance, in the Gospel of Thomas Jesus says, 'A city built on a high hill cannot be hidden.' Here the adjective high is added, but the rest reads like Matthew's gospel. Or Jesus says, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, render to God the things that are God's, render to me the things that are mine.' In this case the later phrase has been added. "However, there are some things in Thomas that are totally alien to the canonical gospels. Jesus says, 'Split wood; I am there. Lift up a stone, and you will find me there.'

That's pantheism, the idea that Jesus is coterminous with the substance of this world. That's contrary to anything in the canonical gospels.

"The Gospel of Thomas ends with a note saying, 'Let Mary go away from us, because women are not worthy of life.' Jesus is quoted as saying, 'Lo, I shall lead her in order to make her a male, so that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter into the kingdom of heaven.'" Metzger's eyebrows shot up as if he were surprised at what he had just uttered. "Now, this is not the Jesus we know from the four canonical gospels!" he said emphatically.

I asked, "What about the charge that Thomas was purposefully excluded by church councils in some sort of conspiracy to silence it?"

"That's just not historically accurate," came Metzger's response. "What the synods and councils did in the fifth century and following was to ratify what already had been accepted by high and low Christians alike. It is not right to say that the Gospel of Thomas was excluded by some fiat on the part of a council; the right way to put it is, the Gospel of Thomas excluded itself! It did not harmonize with other testimony about Jesus that early Christians accepted as trustworthy."

"So you would disagree with anyone who would try to elevate Thomas to the same status as that of the four gospels?" I asked. "Yes, I would very much disagree. I think the early church exercised a judicious act in discarding it. To take it up now, it seems to me, would be to accept something that's less valid than the other gospels," he replied. "Now, don't get me wrong. I think the Gospel of Thomas is an interesting document, but it's mixed up with

pantheistic and antifeminist statements that certainly deserve to be given the left foot of fellowship, if you know what I mean.

"You have to understand that the canon was not the result of a series of contests involving church politics. The canon is rather the separation that came about because of the intuitive insight of Christian believers. They could hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in the gospel of John; they could hear it only in a muffled and distorted way in the Gospel of Thomas, mixed in with a lot of other things. "When the pronouncement was made about the canon, it merely ratified what the general sensitivity of the church had already determined. You see, the canon is a list of authoritative books more than it is an authoritative list of books. These documents didn't derive their authority from being selected; each one was authoritative before anyone gathered them together. The early church merely listened and sensed that these were authoritative accounts.

"For somebody now to say that the canon emerged only after councils and synods made these pronouncements would be like saying, 'Let's get several academies of musicians to make a pronouncement that the music of Bach and Beethoven is wonderful.' I would say, 'Thank you for nothing! We knew that before the pronouncement was made.' We know it because of sensitivity to what is good music and what is not. The same with the canon."

Even so, I pointed out that some New Testament books, notably James, Hebrews, and Revelation, were more slowly accepted into the canon than others. "Should we therefore be suspicious of them?" I asked.

"To my mind, that just shows how careful the early church was," he replied. "They weren't 'gung ho,' sweeping in every last document that happened to have anything about Jesus in it. This shows deliberation and careful analysis.

"Of course, even today parts of the Syrian church refuse to accept the book of Revelation, yet the people belonging to that church are Christian believers. From my point of view, I accept the book of Revelation as a wonderful part of the Scriptures." He shook his head. "I think they impoverish themselves by not accepting it."

The "Unrivaled" New Testament

Metzger had been persuasive. No serious doubts lingered concerning whether the New Testament's text had been reliably preserved for us through the centuries. One of Metzger's distinguished predecessors at Princeton Theological Seminary, Benjamin Warfield, who held four doctorates and taught systematic theology until his death in 1921, put it this way:

"If we compare the present state of the New Testament text with that of any other ancient writing, we must ... declare it to be marvelously correct. Such has been the care with which the New Testament has been copied—a care which has doubtless grown out of true reverence for its holy words.... The New Testament [is] unrivaled among ancient writings in the purity of its text as actually transmitted and kept in use."

In terms of which documents were accepted into the New Testament, generally there has never been any serious dispute about the authoritative nature of twenty of the New Testament's twenty seven books—from Matthew through Philemon, plus I Peter and I John. This of course includes the four gospels that represent Jesus' biographies. The remaining seven books, though questioned for a time by some early church leaders, "were finally and fully recognized by the church generally," according to Geisler and Nix. As for the "pseudepigraphia," the proliferation of gospels, epistles, and apocalypses in the first few centuries after Jesus—including the Gospels of Nicodemus, Barnabas, Bartholomew, Andrew, the Epistle of Paul to the Laodiceans, the Apocalypse of Stephen, and others—they are "fanciful and heretical ... neither genuine nor valuable as a whole," and "virtually no orthodox Father, canon or council" considered them to be authoritative or deserving of inclusion in the New Testament."

In fact, I accepted Metzger's challenge by reading many of them myself. Compared with the careful, sober, precise, eyewitness quality of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, these works truly deserve the description they received from Eusebius, the early church historian: "Totally absurd and impious." They were too far removed from Jesus' ministry to contribute anything meaningful to my investigation, having been written as late as the fifth and sixth centuries, and their often mythical qualities disqualify them from being historically credible. With all that established, the time had arrived for my investigation to advance to its next phase. I was curious: how much evidence is there for this miracle-working first-century carpenter outside the gospels? Do ancient historians confirm or contradict the New Testament's claims about his life, teachings, and miracles? I knew this required a trip to Ohio to visit one of the country's leading scholars in that field.

As we stood, I thanked Dr. Metzger for his time and expertise. He smiled warmly and offered to walk me downstairs. I didn't want to consume any more of his Saturday afternoon, but my curiosity wouldn't let me leave Princeton without satisfying myself about one remaining issue.

"All these decades of scholarship, of study, of writing textbooks, of delving into the minutiae of the New Testament text—what has all this done to your personal faith?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, sounding happy to discuss the topic, "it has increased the basis of my personal faith to see the firmness with which these materials have come down to us, with a multiplicity of copies, some of which are very, very ancient."

"So," I started to say, "scholarship has not diluted your faith—"

He jumped in before I could finish my sentence. "On the contrary," he stressed, "it has built it. I've asked questions all my life, I've dug into the text, I've studied this thoroughly, and today I know with confidence that my trust in Jesus has been well placed."

He paused while his eyes surveyed my face. Then he added, for emphasis, "Very well placed."

<http://ho-logos.blogspot.com/2009/02/canon-textual-criticism-and-more-with.html>