

# I Can Believe My Bible Because It Is Complete

**Introduction.** Christians have seen an explosion of theories alleging that books were “banned” or “taken out” of the Bible in recent years. These allegations have received renewed interest because of the popularity of Dan Brown’s book, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), the movie based on the book (2006), and the publication of the “lost” Gospel of Judas (2006).

Taking advantage of this subject’s popularity, news stories and books have discussed the discovery of lost books in the Bible. People talk about lost books, but that is really an impossible position! If somebody finds it after 2,000 years and says it is a lost book, we ask, “What makes it a lost book?” It may be old, and a great archeological find, but it is not a lost book. If it was never in Bible, it could not be lost! A book may claim to be written by God’s authority, but that does not make it so. Charles Hodge wrote, “The best evidence of the Bible’s being the Word of God is found between its covers.” How can we know what is scripture and what is not?

## ***I. What Is The “Canon”?***

- A. “Canon” referred to a reed or a tool used for measurement, much like our rulers (Ezekiel 40:3; Galatians 6:16).
- B. The third-century “church father” Origen used the word “canon” to denote what we call the “rule of faith,” the standard by which we are to measure and evaluate. As applied to scripture, “canon” means an officially accepted list of books.
  1. Inspiration is what God did. He “breathed out” the scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This refers to the authority of scripture.
  2. Canonization is the determination of which books God inspired. This refers to the acceptance of scripture. Inspiration determines canonization.
- C. There is a difference between the canonicity of a book and the authority of that book.
  1. A book’s canonicity depends upon its authority. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, his letter possessed divine authority (1 Corinthians 14:37). This letter had authority from the moment he wrote it, yet it could not be referred to as canonical until it was received in a list of accepted writings.
  2. A book first has divine authority based on its inspiration, and then attains canonicity due to its acceptance as a divine product. No “church council” can make the books of the Bible authoritative by virtue of its decrees. The books of the Bible possess their own authority and had this authority long before there were “church councils.”

## ***II. The Old Testament Canon***

- A. The Old Testament Apocrypha.
  1. The word “apocrypha” has come into the English language from the Greek and means “hidden.” It was used very early in the sense of secretive or concealed, but it was also used in reference to a book whose origin was doubtful or unknown.
  2. The Old Testament Apocrypha were written from 200 B.C. to A.D. 100. They covered a broad variety of literary forms including historical, legendary,

prophetic, and ethical. The following are the major books in the Old Testament Apocrypha.

- a) 1 and 2 Esdras.
- b) Tobit.
- c) Judith.
- d) Additions to the Book of Esther.
- e) The Wisdom of Solomon.
- f) Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach.
- g) Baruch.
- h) The Letter of Jeremiah.
- i) The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men.
- j) Susanna.
- k) Bel and the Dragon.
- l) The Prayer of Manasseh.
- m) 1 and 2 Maccabees.
- n) Psalm 151.

B. For as long as we have recorded history, the books of the Old Testament have remained consistent.

1. For years, critics of the Bible said that the books in the Old Testament were revered because they were old. They claimed that the Israelites did not have much in the way of writings so what did exist was treasured.
2. We now know that there were many books written by the Israelites, but only a few were treasured as God's word. The status of the scriptures is what caused them to be carefully preserved and copied. Other books existed but they were allowed to decay or be lost in antiquity.

C. The testimony of historians.

1. A list was made in the late fourth century A.D. by a Jewish rabbi named Baba Bathra.
  - a) He used the threefold division of the Old Testament: The Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Twelve), and the Writings (Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles).
  - b) There are only 24 books listed. This is because we now divide the books differently, but it is still the same books as in our Old Testaments today.
2. Even earlier is a statement by the Jewish historian Josephus in A.D. 70.
  - a) He wrote, "For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us disagreeing from and contradicting one another (as the Greeks have), but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times, which are justly believed to be divine. And of these, five belong to Moses, which contain his laws, and the tradition of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years. But as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life."

- b) Josephus knew of other Jewish writings, but did not regard them as having equal authority with the canonical works. He never quoted the Apocrypha as scripture. He wrote, "It is true our history hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time."
- 3. Philo, an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher (20 B.C.-A.D. 40), quoted the Old Testament prolifically, and even recognized the threefold classification, but he never quoted from the Apocrypha as inspired.
- 4. The Jewish scholars at Jamnia (A.D. 90) did not recognize the Apocrypha.
  - a) Starting in 1871, liberal scholars concluded that there must have been a late first century Council of Jamnia which had decided the Jewish canon. This became the prevailing scholarly consensus for much of the 20th century, but from the 1960s onwards it came increasingly into question.
  - b) The discussion centered not on whether certain books should be included in the canon, but whether certain ones should be excluded. In any case, those present recognized what already had been accepted long before. They did not bring into being what had not previously existed.
- 5. Many of the "church fathers" of the early church spoke out against the Apocrypha (i.e., Origen, Melito, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Athanasius).
- 6. Jerome (A.D. 340-420), the translator of the Latin Vulgate, rejected the Apocrypha as part of the canon.
  - a) At first Jerome refused even to translate the Apocrypha into Latin, the common tongue of the day, but later he made a hurried translation of a few of them.
  - b) After his death and "over his dead body" the Apocryphal books were brought into his Latin Vulgate directly from the Old Latin Version.
- 7. Many Roman Catholic scholars through the Reformation period rejected the Apocrypha. Luther and the Reformers rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha.
- 8. The Apocrypha was not fully accepted by the Roman Catholic Church until A.D. 1546 at the counter-Reformation Council of Trent.
- D. Our only complete history of the Jews is the Old Testament, and it is from there we learn how a book was accepted as divine in origin. There were several standards for inclusion in the Old Testament canon.
  - 1. Was the book accepted in past Hebrew collections?
    - a) The Talmud (a collection of ancient rabbinical writings) accepts the same 39 books as are in our current Bibles. It stated that there was no prophet in Israel after Malachi.
    - b) The oldest copies of the Septuagint (dating to the fourth century) do not include the Apocrypha. We do not know if earlier copies (versions that Jesus and the apostles used) included them.
    - c) The community who copied the Dead Sea scrolls never gave the same authority to books of the Apocrypha as to the Old Testament books.
  - 2. Was the book referred to by Christ?

- a) In Luke 24:27, 44, He referred to the three sections: the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Nebhim), and the Writings (Kethubhim). He never considered the Apocrypha as part of the scriptures.
  - b) In John 10:31-36, the term "scripture" had come to mean a fixed body of divinely inspired writings that were fully recognized as authoritative.
3. Was the book referred to by the apostles and other New Testament writers?
- a) There are hundreds of quotes and references to almost all of the canonical books of the Old Testament. They never quoted from the Apocrypha.
  - b) Every book is quoted except Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Ezra, Nehemiah, Obadiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah. However, the minor prophets were always treated by the Jews as one canonical work; hence, if one of the twelve were quoted all were recognized.
4. Does the book claim to be the word of God or the work of the prophets?
- a) Unlike the Old Testament prophets, none of the books of the Apocrypha ever claimed divine authority (cf. Jeremiah 2:1; Hosea 1:1; Malachi 1:1).
  - b) The historical book of 1 Maccabees said there were no prophets at that time. Without a prophet, the book cannot be accepted as the word of God. It might be a useful history book, but it is not God's version of history (1 Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 14:41).
5. Does the book contain internal evidence of inspiration?
- a) The Apocryphal books lack the distinctive elements that give genuine scripture its divine character, such as prophetic power and religious feeling.
  - b) One book that the Catholic church wants in the canon, but has never been accepted by most religious groups are the books of Maccabees. However, the book of 2 Maccabees even admits that it is not a perfect history (15:37-39).
6. Is the book free from contradictions and absurdities?
- a) They abound in historical inaccuracies and anachronisms.
    - (1) Tobit claimed he was alive when the Assyrians conquered Israel in 722 B.C. and when Jeroboam revolted against Judah in 935 B.C. (14:11; 1:3-5).
    - (2) Judith has Nebuchadnezzar reigning in Nineveh (1:1).
    - (3) Judith 9:12-13 claimed that God assisted her in a falsehood.
  - b) They teach doctrines that are false and foster practices that are at variance with inspired scriptures (cf. prayer for the dead, 2 Maccabees 12:44-45).
  - c) They resort to literary types and display an artificiality of subject matter and styling out of keeping with inspired scripture.
7. Was the author a known prophet of God?
- a) Moses was recognized as the founder of the Jewish religion. Many miracles were witnessed by millions of people showing that God's power was with the prophet.
    - (1) Moses was commanded by God to make a record (Exodus 17:14; 24:4-8; 34:27-28; Numbers 33:2; Deuteronomy 31:9-12, 22-26).

- (2) The first five books were not canonized because of their antiquity, their linguistic style, or the beauty of their words. The books were accepted because they were written by God's spokesman, Moses.
- b) In the Old Testament, only verified prophets' words were accepted as God's. The priests were teachers of God's word, not the source of God's law.

### **III. The New Testament Canon**

#### **A. The New Testament Apocrypha.**

1. The Old Testament Apocrypha is usually thought of when one mentions Apocryphal books. However, there are others, many of which are known as the New Testament Apocrypha. These were referenced in The Da Vinci Code.
2. The New Testament Apocrypha includes several literary types: gospels, acts, and epistles. They were written under the assumed names of the apostles and others after the first century. They contain fanciful stories about Jesus and the apostles. The Apocryphal gospels often deal with the early years of Jesus and portray Him as a temperamental child. The Apocryphal acts and others indulge in similar nonsense. The following is a partial list (there are reportedly dozens of Apocryphal books).
  - a) The Epistle of Barnabas.
  - b) Didache or the Teaching of the Twelve.
  - c) Acts of Paul and Thecla.
  - d) Acts of Matthias.
  - e) The Epistle to the Laodiceans.
  - f) The Gospel According to the Hebrews.
  - g) The Gospel of Peter.
  - h) The Gospel of Thomas.
  - i) The Infancy Gospel of Thomas.
  - j) Protoevangelion of James.
  - k) The Gospel of Mary Magdalene.
  - l) The Dialogue of the Savior.
  - m) The Gospel of Judas.
  - n) The Gospel of Nicodemus.
  - o) The Seven Epistles of Ignatius.
  - p) History of Joseph the Carpenter.
  - q) The Gospel of Bartholomew.

#### **B. Churches collected the New Testament books, viewing them as much a part of God's word as the Old Testament.**

1. When the inspired men of the first century wrote, the product of their work was immediately acknowledged and accepted by those in the church.
2. They studied the apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42) and they received those teachings as God's word (1 Thessalonians 2:13). These writings were "scripture" before the ink had dried!
  - a) The word "scripture" is used 31 times in the New Testament and always refers to the written record of the will of God. Thus, "scripture" can be accurately applied to what is found in both the Old and New Testaments.

- b) Paul quotes Luke's gospel and calls it scripture (1 Timothy 5:18; cf. Luke 10:7). Peter mentions Paul's writings and calls them scripture (2 Peter 3:16).
3. Standards for inclusion in New Testament canon.
- a) Is it authoritative?
- (1) God gives a book its divine authority, not Christians (cf. Mark 1:22). The New Testament writers had to be apostles, followers of apostles, or eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-2). The writers of the New Testament wrote by inspiration (1 Corinthians 11:23; 14:37; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).
  - (2) The persons most qualified to write about a great teacher or leader, whether it be Jesus, Martin Luther King, or Gandhi, are: a) family (as with James and Jude, who by virtue of their association with Jesus and decision to follow Him became de facto apostles); b) immediate followers (the apostles); or, c) immediate followers of those followers (Mark and Peter, Luke and Paul).
- b) Is it prophetic?
- (1) "If it was written by a spokesman for God, then it was the Word of God" (Norman Geisler). Miracles separated the true prophets from the false ones in the Old and New Testaments (Exodus 4:1-9; 1 Kings 18:38; Acts 2:22; 2 Corinthians 12:12).
  - (2) From the early second century onward, Paul's letters were circulated as an inspired collection in descending order of length (Galatians 1:11-12; cf. 2 Peter 3:15-16).
- c) Is it authentic?
- (1) An epistle of Paul could be identified by the way in which it was written (Galatians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:17).
  - (2) Letters were sent by known associates of Paul or the church (2 Corinthians 7:5-10, 14 [Titus]; Ephesians 6:21-22 [Tychicus]; Colossians 4:7-9 [Tychicus, Onesimus]).
  - (3) A book cannot contradict truth and be God's; it must conform to the "rule of faith" (Galatians 6:16). Because of this, the "church fathers" maintained the policy, "If in doubt, throw it out."
- d) Does it come with the power of God?
- (1) Christians knew that the "living and active" word of God had the power to change lives (Hebrews 4:12). This power indicated that a book had God's "stamp of approval" (2 Timothy 3:16).
  - (2) "In opting for the canon, the church seemed to say that the criteria of truth lay outside herself in a text that stood over her and at times even against her. By accepting the norm of Scripture, the church declared that there was a standard outside herself to which she intended to be subject for all time ... The church can fall into error and needs the Bible to measure herself by. In turn, the church serves the canon by continuing in the truth and faithfully proclaiming the Word of God" (Clark Pinnock).
- e) Was it accepted by the people of God?

- (1) “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 (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). It was, if I may put it this way, an example of ‘survival of the fittest’” (Bruce Metzger).
  - (2) “For whatever subsequent debate there may have been about a books place in the canon, the people in the best position to know its prophetic credentials were those who knew the prophet who wrote it. Hence, despite all later debate about the canonicity of some books, the definitive evidence is that which attests to its original acceptance by the contemporary believers” (Norman Geisler).
  - (3) First century Christians knew that the Bible was the faith “once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). They were warned to look out for counterfeits (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).
- f) Does it have apostolic approval?
- (1) Some mistakenly think that the only books which deserve to be in the Bible are the ones authored by apostles. But people in the first few centuries understood that there were men other than the apostles who were inspired.
  - (2) Every book of the New Testament is either written by an apostle or by someone closely associated with an apostle. Even the books where we are not certain of the identity of the author can still be associated with an apostle.
- g) What is the testimony of early writers regarding the book?
- (1) Some argue that there was a gradual evolving of thought concerning the scripture -- that only after a long period did were writings considered authoritative. That is not true. There was a gradual process of distributing these writings around the world (Colossians 4:16).
  - (2) Ultimately these works were compiled into one book. There is some evidence that New Testament compilations began as early as A.D. 115 -- only a few years after the death of the last apostle. But the actual writings were regarded as scripture immediately.
  - (3) There were several appeals to the authority of New Testament books. The early writers’ views demonstrate the authenticity of the books.
    - (a) Clement of Rome, in his Epistles to the Corinthians (A.D. 95) makes reference to eight different New Testament books.
    - (b) Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165) made extensive appeals to the four gospels and mentions Acts and Revelation.
    - (c) The epistles of Ignatius (A.D. 115) and Polycarp (A.D. 130) refer to various New Testament books.
    - (d) Irenaeus (A.D. 180) attests to the canonical recognition of virtually the entire New Testament.

- (e) Origen (A.D. 185-254) mentions most books of the New Testament by name, stating that a few were disputed by some.
  - (f) Eusebius (A.D. 265-340) mentions all as acknowledged except James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2-3 John.
  - (g) Athanasius (A.D. 367) gave us the earliest list of New Testament books that are exactly like our present New Testament.
- (4) Up to the year A.D. 180, all our New Testament books are found in either direct quotations or allusions in early writings of the leaders of the churches. The church leaders never used noncanonical books with the same authority as the New Testament books.
4. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa in A.D. 393 (Hippo Regius) and A.D. 397 (Carthage).
- a) No “council” conferred any authority upon these books that they did not already possess. The “council” only confirmed what was already known to be true: the books were accepted by early Christians and churches that knew the apostles and prophets who actually wrote the books.
  - b) The books that were canonized were those that enjoyed a special status and were utilized both frequently and universally by the church, recognizing their innate worth and divine inspiration. Scholarly attacks against the New Testament canon have always been in regard to the books that are included, not excluded.
  - c) “The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the church included them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect ... What these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities, but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities” (F. F. Bruce).
5. Why the Apocryphal books are rejected.
- a) None of them enjoyed any more than a temporary or local recognition.
  - b) Most of them never did have anything more than a semi-canonical status. The limited acceptance enjoyed by these books is attributable to the fact that they attached themselves to references in canonical books.
  - c) No major “church council” included them as inspired New Testament books.

**Conclusion.** David Dockery wrote, “No Christian, confident in the providential working of his God and informed about the true nature of the canonicity of His word, should be disturbed about the dependability of the Bible we now possess.” J. I. Packer added, “The church no more created the canon than Newton created the law of gravity; recognition is not creation.” These “missing” books were never really missing; the early Christians who opposed them would write about their beliefs and the books they were opposing. Critics think it strengthens their case to say, “But early disciples threw out these lost books.” Actually, it proves these books were not accepted because they did not agree with inspired scripture.



The Catholic church, contrary to their claims, did not determine nor protect the canon. In fact, they have added books which are clearly not inspired. It is sad that people are often looking to add books or materials at the level of scripture, and yet few have ever really read and understood what is already written in the 66 books of the Bible.