

Bible, Canonicity of. *Canonicity* (Fr. *canon*, rule or norm) refers to the normative or authoritative books inspired by God for inclusion in Holy Scripture. Canonicity is determined by God (see [BIBLE, EVIDENCE FOR](#)). It is not the antiquity, authenticity, or religious community that makes a book canonical or authoritative. A book is valuable because it is canonical, and not canonical because it is or was considered valuable. Its authority is *established* by God and merely *discovered* by God's people. 📖

Definition of Canonicity. The distinction between God's determination and human discovery is essential to the correct view of [canonicity](#), and should be drawn carefully:

The Authority Relationship Between Church and Canon

Incorrect View	Biblical View
The church is determiner of the canon.	The church is discoverer of the canon.
The church is mother of the canon.	The church is child of the canon.
The church is magistrate of the canon.	The church is minister of the canon.
The church is regulator of the canon.	The church is recognizer of the canon.
The church is judge of the canon.	The church is witness of the canon.
The church is master of the canon.	The church is servant of the canon.

In the "Incorrect View" the authority of the Scriptures is based upon the authority of the church; the correct view is that the authority of the church is to be found *in* the authority of the Scriptures 📖. The incorrect view places the church *over* the canon, whereas the proper position views the church *under* the canon. In fact, if in the column titled "Incorrect View," the word *church* be replaced by God, then the proper view of the canon emerges clearly. It is God who *regulated* the canon; man merely *recognized* the divine authority God gave to it. God *determined* the canon, and man *discovered* it. Louis Gaussen gives an excellent summary of this position:

In this affair, then, the Church is a servant and not a mistress; a depository and not a judge. She exercises the office of a minister, not of a magistrate.... She delivers a testimony, not a judicial sentence. She discerns the canon of the Scriptures, she does not make it; she has recognized their authenticity, she has not given it.... The authority of the Scriptures is not founded, then, on the authority of the Church: It is the church that is founded on the authority of the Scriptures. [Gaussen, 137]

Discovering Canonicity. Appropriate methods must be employed to discover which

books God determined to be canonical. Otherwise, the list of canonical books might be varied and incorrectly identified. Many procedures used in the study of the Old Testament canon have been marred by the use of fallacious methods (see [APOCRYPHA, OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS](#)).

Inadequate Criteria for [Canonicity](#). Five mistaken methods have particularly troubled the church (see Beckwith, 7–8):

1. failure to distinguish a book that was “known” from a book that carried God’s authority;
2. failure to distinguish disagreement about the canon between different parties from uncertainty about the canon within those parties;
3. failure to distinguish between the adding of books to the canon and the removal of books from it;
4. failure to distinguish between the canon that the community recognized and eccentric views of individuals;
5. failure to properly use Jewish evidence about the canon transmitted through Christian hands, either by denying the Jewish origins or by ignoring the Christian medium through which it has come (Beckwith, 7–8).

Principles of [Canonicity](#). Granted that God gave authority and hence [canonicity](#) to the Bible, another question arises: How did believers become aware of what God had done? The accepted canonical books of the Bible themselves refer to other books that are no longer available, for example, the “Book of Jasher” ([Josh. 10:13](#)) and “the Book of the Wars of the Lord” ([Num. 21:14](#)). Then there are *Apocryphal* books and the so-called “lost books.” How did the Fathers know those were not inspired? Did not [John \(21:25\)](#) and [Luke \(1:1\)](#) speak of a profusion of religious literature? Were there not false epistles ([2 Thess. 2:2](#))? What marks of inspiration guided the Fathers as they identified and collected the inspired books? Perhaps the very fact that some canonical books were doubted at times, on the basis of one principle or another, argues both for the value of the principle and the caution of the Fathers in their recognition of [canonicity](#). It provides assurance that the people of God really included the books God wanted.

Five foundational questions lie at the very heart of the discovery process:

Was the book written by a prophet of God? 🕯 The basic question was whether a book was prophetic. Propheticity determined [canonicity](#). A prophet was one who declared what God had disclosed. Thus, only the prophetic writings were canonic. Anything not written by a prophet of God was not part of the Word of God. The characteristic words

“And the word of the Lord came to the prophet,” or “The Lord said unto,” or “God spoke” so fill the Old Testament that they have become proverbial. If substantiated these claims of inspiration are so clear that it was hardly necessary to discuss whether some books were divine in origin. In most cases it was simply a matter of establishing the authorship of the book. If it was written by a recognized apostle or prophet, its place in the canon was secured.

Historical or stylistic (external or internal) evidence that supports the genuineness of a prophetic book also argues for its canonicity. This was exactly the argument Paul used to defend his harsh words to the Galatians ([Gal. 1:1–24](#)). He argued that his message was authoritative because he was an authorized messenger of God, “an apostle not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father” ([Gal. 1:1](#)). He also turned the tables on his opponents who preached “a different gospel; which is really not another; only ... to distort the gospel of Christ” ([Gal. 1:6–7](#)). His opponents’ gospel could not be true because they were “false brethren” ([Gal. 2:4](#)).

It should be noted in this connection that occasionally the Bible contains true prophecies from individuals whose status as people of God is questionable, such as Balaam ([Num. 24:17](#)) and Caiaphas ([John 11:49](#)). However, granted that their prophecies were consciously given, these prophets were not writers of Bible books, but were merely quoted by the actual writer. Therefore, their utterances are in the same category as the Greek poets quoted by the apostle Paul (cf. [Acts 17:28](#); [1 Cor. 15:33](#); [Titus 1:12](#)).

The arguments Paul used against the false teachers at Galatia were also used as grounds for rejecting a letter that was forged or written under false pretenses. One such letter is mentioned in [2 Thessalonians 2:2](#). A book cannot be canonical if it is not genuine. A book might use the device of literary impersonation without deception. One writer assumes the role of another for effect. Some scholars feel such is the case in Ecclesiastes, if *Koheleth* wrote autobiographically as though he were Solomon (see Leupold, 8f.). Such a view is not incompatible with the principle, provided it can be shown to be a literary device and not a moral deception. However, when an author pretends to be an apostle in order to gain acceptance of his ideas, as the writers of many New Testament *Apocryphal* books did, then it is moral deception.

Because of this “prophetic” principle, 2 Peter was disputed in the early church. Even Eusebius in the fourth century said, “But the so-called second Epistle we have not received as canonical, but nevertheless it has appeared useful to many, and has been studied with other Scriptures” (Eusebius 1:193). On the basis of differences in the style of writing, it was felt by some that the author of 2 Peter could not be the same as the author of 1 Peter. But 2 Peter claimed to have been written by “Simon Peter, a servant

and apostle of Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1). Thus, the epistle was either a forgery or there was great difficulty in explaining its different style. Those who were disturbed by such evidence doubted the genuineness of 2 Peter and it was placed among the antilegomena books for a time. It was finally admitted on the grounds that it was Peter’s genuine writing. The differences in style can be accounted for by the time lapse, different occasions, and the fact that Peter verbally dictated 1 Peter to an amanuensis (or secretary; see 1 Peter 5:13).

Inspiration was so certain in many prophetic writings that their inclusion was obvious. Some were rejected because they lacked authority, particularly the pseudopigrapha. These books provided no support for their claim. In many cases the writing is fanciful and magical. This same principle of authority was the reason the book of Esther was doubted, particularly since the name of God is conspicuously absent. Upon closer examination, Esther retained its place in the canon after the Fathers were convinced that authority was present, although less observable.

Was the writer confirmed by acts of God? 🕯 A miracle is an act of God to confirm the word of God given through a prophet of God to the people of God. It is the sign to substantiate his sermon; the miracle to confirm his message. Not every prophetic revelation was confirmed by a specific miracle. There were other ways to determine the authenticity of an alleged prophet. If there were questions about one’s prophetic credentials it could be settled by divine confirmation, as indeed it was on numerous occasions throughout Scripture (Exodus 4; Numbers 16–17; 1 Kings 18; Mark 2; Acts 5; see [MIRACLES IN THE BIBLE](#)).

There were true and false prophets (Matt. 7:15), so it was necessary to have divine confirmation of the true ones. Moses was given miraculous powers to prove his call (Exod. 4:1–9). Elijah triumphed over the false prophets of Baal by a supernatural act (1 Kings 18). Jesus was attested to by miracles and signs God performed through him (Acts 2:22). As to the apostles’ message, “God was also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to his own will” (Heb. 2:4). Paul gave testimony of his apostleship to the Corinthians, declaring, “the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles” (2 Cor. 12:12; see [MIRACLES, APOLOGETIC VALUE OF](#)).

Does the message tell the truth about God? 🕯 Only immediate contemporaries had access to the supernatural confirmation of the prophet’s message. Other believers in distant places and subsequent times had to depend on other tests. One such test was the *authenticity* of a book. That is, does the book tell the truth about God and his world as known from previous revelations? God cannot contradict himself (2 Cor. 1:17–18), nor

can he utter what is false ([Heb. 6:18](#)). No book with false claims can be the Word of God. Moses stated the principle about prophets generally that

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, “Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. [[Deut. 13:1–3](#)]

So any teaching about God contrary to what his people already knew to be true was to be rejected. Furthermore, any predictions made about the world which failed to come true indicated that a prophet’s words should be rejected. As Moses said to Israel,

And you may say in your heart, “How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?” When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him. [[Deut. 18:21–22](#)]

A prophet who made such false claims might be stoned. The Lord said, “The prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in my name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die” ([Deut. 18:20](#)). That kind of punishment assured no repeat performance by that prophet, and it gave other prophets pause before they said, “Thus says the Lord.”

Truth in itself does not make a book canonical. This is more a test of *inauthenticity* of a book, rather than *canonicity*. It is a negative test that could eliminate books from the canon. The Bereans used this principle when they searched the Scriptures to see whether Paul’s teaching was true ([Acts 17:11](#)). If the preaching of the apostle did not accord with the teaching of the Old Testament canon, it could not be of God.

Much of the *Apocrypha* was rejected because it was not authentic. The Jewish Fathers and early Christian Fathers rejected, or considered second-rate, these books because they had historical inaccuracies and even moral incongruities. The Reformers rejected some because of what they considered to be heretical teaching, such as praying for the dead, which [2 Maccabees 12:45](#) supports. The apostle John strongly urged that all purported “truth” be tested by the known standard before it be received ([1 John 4:1–6](#)).

The test of authenticity was the reason James and Jude have been doubted. Some have thought Jude inauthentic because it may quote inauthentic pseudepigraphical books ([Jude 9, 14](#); see [Jerome, 4](#)). [Martin Luther](#) questioned the *canonicity* of James

because it lacks an obvious focus on the cross. [Martin Luther](#) thought the book appeared to teach salvation by works. Careful study has cleared James of these charges, and even Luther came to feel better about them. Historically and uniformly, Jude and James have been vindicated and their [canonicity](#) recognized after they have been harmonized with the rest of Scripture.

Did it come with the power of God? 🕯 Another test for [canonicity](#) is a book's power to edify and equip believers. This requires the power of God. The Fathers believed the Word of God to be "living and active" ([Heb. 4:12](#)) and consequently ought to have a transforming force ([2 Tim. 3:17](#); [1 Peter 1:23](#)). If the message of a book did not effect its stated goal, if it did not have the power to change a life, then God was apparently not behind its message. A *message* of God would certainly be backed by the *might* of God. The Fathers believed that the Word of God accomplishes its purpose ([Isa. 55:11](#)).

Paul applied this principle to the Old Testament when he wrote to Timothy, "And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation" ([2 Tim. 3:15 KJV](#)). If it is of God, it will work—it will come to pass. This simple test was given by Moses to try the truth of a prophet's prediction ([Deut. 18:20ff.](#)). If what was foretold did not materialize, it was not from God.

On this basis, heretical literature and good noncanonical apostolic literature was rejected from the canon. Even those books whose teaching was spiritual, but whose message was at best only devotional, were deemed noncanonical. Such is the case for most literature written in the apostolic and subapostolic periods. There is a tremendous difference between the canonical books of the New Testament and other religious writings of the apostolic period. "There is not the same freshness and originality, depth and clearness. And this is no wonder, for it means the transition from truth given by infallible inspiration to truth produced by fallible pioneers" (Berkhof, 42). The noncanonical books lacked power; they were devoid of the dynamic aspects found in inspired Scripture. They did not come with the power of God.

Books whose edifying power was questioned included Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs) and Ecclesiastes. Could a book that is erotically sensual or skeptical be from God? Obviously not; as long as these books were thought of in that manner, they could not be considered canonical. Eventually, the messages of these books were seen as spiritual, so the books themselves were accepted. The principle, nevertheless, was applied impartially. Some books passed the test; others failed. No book that lacked essential edification or practical characteristics was considered canonical.

Was it accepted by the people of God? 🕯 A prophet of God was confirmed by an act of God (miracle) and was recognized as a spokesman by the people who received the mes-

sage. Thus, the seal of canonicity depended on whether the book was accepted by the people. This does not mean that everybody in the community to which the prophetic message was addressed accepted it as divinely authoritative. Prophets ([1 Kings 17–19](#); [2 Chron. 36:11–16](#)) and apostles ([Galatians 1](#)) were rejected by some. However, believers in the prophet's community acknowledged the prophetic nature of the message, as did other contemporary believers familiar with the prophet. This acceptance had two stages: initial acceptance and subsequent recognition.

Initial acceptance of a book by the people to whom it was addressed was crucial. Paul said of the Thessalonians, “We also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God’s message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God” ([1 Thess. 2:13](#)). Whatever subsequent debate there may have been about a book’s place, the people in the best position to know its prophetic credentials were those who knew the writer. The definitive evidence is that which attests acceptance by contemporary believers.

There is ample evidence that books were immediately accepted into the canon. Moses’ books were immediately placed with the ark of the covenant ([Deut. 31:26](#)). Joshua’s writing was added ([Josh. 24:26](#)). Following were books by Samuel and others ([1 Sam. 10:25](#)). Daniel had a copy of Moses and the Prophets, which included the book of his contemporary Jeremiah ([Dan. 9:2, 10–11](#)). Paul quoted the Gospel of Luke as “Scripture” ([1 Tim. 5:18](#)). Peter had a collection of Paul’s “letter” ([2 Peter 3:16](#)). Indeed, the apostles exhorted that their letters be read and circulated among the churches ([Col. 4:16](#); [1 Thess. 5:27](#); [Rev. 1:3](#)).

Some have argued that [Proverbs 25:1](#) shows an exception. It suggests that some of Solomon’s proverbs may not have been collected into the canon during his lifetime. Rather, “the men of Hezekiah ... transcribed” more of Solomon’s proverbs. It is possible that these additional proverbs (chaps. [25–29](#)) were not officially presented to the believing community during Solomon’s life, perhaps because of his later moral decline. However, since they were *authentic* Solomonic proverbs there was no reason not to later present and at that time immediately accept them as authoritative. In this case [Proverbs 25–29](#) would not be an exception to the canonic rule of immediate acceptance.

It is also possible that these later chapters of Proverbs were presented and accepted as authoritative during Solomon’s lifetime. Support for this view can be derived from the fact that the Solomonic part of the book may have been compiled in three sections, which begin at [1:1](#), [10:1](#), and [25:1](#). Perhaps these were preserved on separate scrolls. The word *also* in [Proverbs 25:1](#) can refer to the fact that Hezekiah’s men also copied this last section (scroll) along with the first two sections (scrolls). All three scrolls would have

been immediately accepted as divinely authoritative and were only copied afresh by the scholars.

Since Scripture of every time period is referred to in later biblical writings, and each book is quoted by some early church Father or listed in some canon, there is ample evidence that there was continuing agreement within the covenant community concerning the canon. That certain books were written by prophets in biblical times and are in the canon now argues for their canonicity. Along with evidence for a continuity of belief, this argues strongly that the idea of canonicity existed from the beginning. The presence of a book in the canon down through the centuries is evidence that it was known by the contemporaries of the prophet who wrote it to be genuine and authoritative, despite the fact that succeeding generations lacked definitive knowledge of the author's prophetic credentials.

Later debate about certain books should not cloud their initial acceptance by immediate contemporaries of the prophets. True canonicity was *determined* by God when he directed the prophet to write it, and it was immediately *discovered* by the people addressed.

Technically speaking, the discussion about certain books in later centuries was not a question of canonicity but of *authenticity* or *genuineness*. Because later readers had neither access to the writer nor direct evidence of supernatural confirmation, they had to rely on historical testimony. Once they were convinced by the evidence that books were written by accredited spokespeople for God, the books were accepted by the church universal. But the decisions of church councils in the fourth and fifth centuries did not determine the canon, nor did they first discover or recognize it. In no sense was the authority of the canonical books contingent upon the late church councils. All the councils did was to give *later, broader, and final* recognition to the facts that God had inspired the books, and the people of God had accepted them.

Several centuries went by before all the books in the canon were recognized. Communication and transportation were slow, so it took longer for the believers in the West to become fully aware of the evidence for books that had circulated first in the East, and vice versa. Prior to 313 the church faced frequent persecution that did not allow leisure for research, reflection, and recognition. As soon as that was possible, it was only a short time before there was general recognition of all canonical books by the regional councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397). There was no great need for precision until a dispute arose. Marcion published his gnostic canon, with only Luke and ten of Paul's Epistles, in the middle of the second century. Spurious gospels and epistles appeared throughout the second and third centuries. Since those books

claimed divine authority, the universal church had to define the limits of God's authentic, inspired canon that already was known.

Applying Principles of Canonicity. Lest the impression be given that these principles were explicitly and mechanically applied by some commission, some explanation is needed. Just how did the principles operate in the consciousness of the early Christian church? Although the issue of the discovery of the canon center about the Old and New Testaments alike, J. N. D. Kelly discusses these principles as they apply to the New Testament canon. He writes,

The main point to be observed is that the fixation of the finally agreed list of books, and of the order in which they were to be arranged, was the result of a very gradual process.... Three features of this process should be noted. First, the criterion which ultimately came to prevail was apostolicity . Unless a book could be shown to come from the pen of an apostle, or at least to have the authority of an apostle behind it, it was peremptorily rejected, however edifying or popular with the faithful it might be. Secondly, there were certain books which hovered for a long time on the fringe of the canon, but in the end failed to secure admission to it, usually because they lacked this indisputable stamp.... Thirdly, some of the books which were later included had to wait a considerable time before achieving universal recognition.... By gradual stages, however, the Church both in East and West arrived at a common mind as to its sacred books. The first official document which prescribes the twenty-seven books of our new Testament as alone canonical is Athanasius's Easter letter for the year 367, but the process was not everywhere complete until at least a century and a half later. [Kelly, 59–60]

Some Principles Are Implicit While Others Are Explicit. All criteria of inspiration are necessary to demonstrate the canonicity of each book. The five characteristics must at least be implicitly present, though some of them are more dominant than others. For example, the dynamic equipping power of God is more obvious in the New Testament Epistles than in the Old Testament historical narratives. "Thus-says-the-Lord" authority is more apparent in the Prophets than in the poetry. That is not to say that authority isn't in the poetic sections, nor a dynamic in the redemptive history. It does mean the Fathers did not always find all of the principles explicitly operating.

Some Principles Are More Important Than Others. Some criteria of inspiration are more important than are others, in that the presence of one implies another, or is a key to others. For example, if a book is authoritatively from God, it will be dynamic—accompanied by God's transforming power. In fact, when authority was

unmistakably present, the other characteristics of inspiration were automatically assumed. Among New Testament books the proof of apostolicity, its prophetic nature, was often considered a guarantee of inspiration (Warfield, 415). If propheticity could be verified, this alone established the book. Generally speaking, the [church Fathers](#) were only explicitly concerned with apostolicity and authenticity. The edifying characteristics and universal acceptance of a book were assumed unless some doubt from the latter two questions forced a reexamination of the tests. This happened with 2 Peter and 2 John. Positive evidence for the first three principles emerged victorious.

The witness of the [Holy Spirit](#). The recognition of [canonicity](#) was not a mere mechanical matter settled by a synod or ecclesiastical council. It was a providential process directed by the [Spirit of God](#) as he witnessed to the church about the reality of the Word of God (see [HOLY SPIRIT, ROLE IN APOLOGETICS](#)). People could not identify the Word until the [Holy Spirit](#) opened their understanding. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice” ([John 10:27](#)). This is not to say that the [Holy Spirit](#) mystically spoke in visions to settle questions of [canonicity](#). The witness of the Spirit convinced them of the reality that a God-breathed canon existed, not its extent (Sproul, 337–54). Faith joined science; objective principles were used, but the Fathers knew what writings had been used in their churches to change lives and teach hearts by the [Holy Spirit](#). This subjective testimony joined the objective evidence in confirming what was God’s Word.

Tests for [canonicity](#) were not mechanical means to measure the amount of inspired literature, nor did the [Holy Spirit](#) say, “This book or passage is inspired; that one is not.” That would be disclosure, not discovery. [The Holy Spirit](#) providentially guided the examination process and gave witness to the people as they read or heard.

Conclusion. It is important to distinguish between the *determination* and the *discovery* of [canonicity](#). God is solely responsible for determining; God’s people are responsible for discovery. That a book is canonical is due to divine *inspiration*. How it is known to be canonical is due to a process of human recognition. Was a book (1) written by a spokesperson for God, (2) who was confirmed by an act of God, (3) told the truth (4) in the power of God and (5) was accepted by the people of God? If a book clearly had the first mark, [canonicity](#) was often assumed. Contemporaries of a prophet or apostle made the initial confirmation. Later [church Fathers](#) sorted out the profusion of religious literature to officially recognize what books were divinely inspired in the manner of which Paul speaks in [2 Timothy 3:16](#).

Sources

R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism*
 L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*
 Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb ed.
 L. Gaussen, *Theopneustia*
 N. L. Geisler and W. E. Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*
 Jerome. *Lives of Illustrious Men*
 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*
 J. P. Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*
 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*
 R. C. Sproul, “The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit,” in N. L. Geisler, ed. *Inerrancy*
 B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*

Bible Criticism. Criticism as applied to the Bible simply means the exercise of judgment. Both conservative and nonconservative scholars engage in two forms of biblical criticism: *lower criticism* deals with the text ; *higher criticism* treats the source of the text. Lower criticism attempts to determine what the original text said, and the latter asks who said it and when, where, and why it was written.

Most controversies surrounding Bible criticism involve *higher criticism*. Higher criticism can be divided into negative (destructive) and positive (constructive) types. Negative criticism denies the authenticity of much of the biblical record. Usually an antisupernatural presupposition (see [MIRACLES, ARGUMENTS AGAINST](#); [MIRACLES, MYTH AND](#)) is employed in this critical approach. Further, negative criticism often approaches the Bible with distrust equivalent to a “guilty-until-proven-innocent” bias.

Negative New Testament Criticism. Historical, Source, Form, Tradition, and Redaction methods (and combinations thereof) are the approaches with the worst record for bias. Any of these, used to advance an agenda of skepticism, with little or no regard for truth, undermine the Christian apologetic.

Historical Criticism. Historical criticism is a broad term that covers techniques to date documents and traditions, to verify events reported in those documents, and to use the results in historiography to reconstruct and interpret. The French Oratorian priest Richard Simon published a series of books, beginning in 1678, in which he applied a rationalistic, critical approach to studying the Bible. This was the birth of historical-critical study of the Bible, although not until Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827) and Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791) was the modern historical-critical pattern set. They were influenced by the secular historical research of Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831; *Römische Geschichte*, 1811–12), Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886; *Geschichte*

der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494–1535), and others, who developed and refined the techniques. Among those influenced was Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1810–1877). He combined elements of Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), and orthodox [Lutheranism](#) with historical categories and the critical methods to make a biblical-theological synthesis. This model stressed “superhistorical history,” “holy history,” or “salvation history” (*Heilsgeschichte*)—the sorts of history that need not be literally true. His ideas and terms influenced [Karl Barth](#) (1886–1968), [Rudolf Bultmann](#) (1884–1976), and others in the twentieth century. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, capable orthodox scholars challenged “destructive criticism” and its rationalistic theology.

Among more conservative scholars were George Salmon (1819–1904), Theodor von Zahn (1838–1933), and R. H. Lightfoot (1883–1953), who used criticism methods as the bases for a constructive criticism. This constructive criticism manifests itself most openly when it considers such matters as miracles, virgin birth of [Jesus](#), and bodily resurrection of Christ (see [RESURRECTION, EVIDENCE FOR](#)). Historical criticism is today taken for granted in biblical studies. Much recent work in historical criticism manifests rationalistic theology that at the same time claims to uphold traditional Christian doctrine. As a result, it has given rise to such developments as [source criticism](#).

[Source Criticism](#). Source criticism, also known as literary criticism, attempts to discover and define literary sources used by the biblical writers. It seeks to uncover underlying literary sources, classify types of literature, and answer questions relating to authorship, unity, and date of Old and New Testament materials (Geisler, 436). Some literary critics tend to decimate the biblical text, pronounce certain books inauthentic, and reject the very notion of verbal inspiration. Some scholars have carried their rejection of authority to the point that they have modified the idea of the canon (e.g., with regard to pseudonymity) to accommodate their own conclusions (*ibid.*, 436). Nevertheless, this difficult but important undertaking can be a valuable aid to biblical interpretation, since it has bearing on the historical value of biblical writings. In addition, careful literary criticism can prevent historical misinterpretations of the biblical text.

[Source criticism](#) in the New Testament over the past century has focused on the so-called “Synoptic problem,” since it relates to difficulties surrounding attempts to devise a scheme of literary dependence that accounts for similarities and dissimilarities among the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Theories tend to work with the idea of a now-absent Q or *Quelle* (“Source”) used by the three evangelists, who wrote in various sequences, with the second depending on the first and the third on the other two. These theories were typical forerunners of the Two-Source theory advanced by B. H.

Streeter (1874–1937), which asserted the priority of Mark and eventually gained wide acceptance among New Testament scholars. Streeter’s arguments have been questioned, and his thesis has been challenged by others. Eta Linnemann, once a student of Bultmann and a critic, has written a strong critique of her former position in which she uses source analysis to conclude that no synoptic problem in fact exists. She insists that each Gospel writer wrote an independent account based on personal experience and individual information. She wrote: “As time passes, I become more and more convinced that to a considerable degree New Testament criticism as practiced by those committed to historical-critical theology does not deserve to be called science” (Linnemann, 9). Elsewhere she writes, “The Gospels are not works of literature that creatively reshape already finished material after the manner in which Goethe reshaped the popular book about Dr. Faust” (ibid., 104). Rather, “Every Gospel presents a complete, unique testimony. It owes its existence to direct or indirect eyewitnesses” (ibid., 194).

Form Criticism. Form criticism studies literary forms, such as essays, poems, and myths, since different writings have different forms. Often the form of a piece of literature can tell a great deal about the nature of a literary piece, its writer, and its social context. Technically this is termed its “life setting” (*Sitz im Leben*). The classic liberal position is the documentary or J-E-P-D Pentateuchal source analysis theory established by Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) and his followers (see [PENTATEUCH, MOSAIC AUTHORSHIP OF](#)). They actually attempted to mediate between [traditionalism](#) and skepticism, dating Old Testament books in a less supernaturalistic manner by applying the “documentary theory.” These documents are identified as the “Jahwist” or Jehovistic (J), dated in the ninth century B.C., the Elohist (E), eighth century, the Deuteronomist (D), from about the time of Josiah (640–609), and the Priestly (P), from perhaps the fifth century B.C. So attractive was the evolutionary concept in literary criticism that the source theory of Pentateuchal origins began to prevail over all opposition. A mediating position of some aspects of the theory was expressed by C. F. A. Dillman (1823–1894), Rudolph Kittel (1853–1929), and others. Opposition to the documentary theory was expressed by Franz Delitzsch (1813–1890), who rejected the hypothesis outright in his commentary on Genesis, William Henry Green (1825–1900), James Orr (1844–1913), A. H. Sayce (1845–1933), Wilhelm Möller, Eduard Naville, Robert Dick Wilson (1856–1930), and others (see Harrison, 239–41; Archer; Pfeiffer). Sometimes form-critical studies are marred by doctrinaire assumptions, including that early forms must be short and later forms longer, but, in general, [form criticism](#) has been of benefit to biblical interpretation. [Form criticism](#) has been most profitably used in the study of the Psalms (Wenham, “History and the Old Testament,” 40).

These techniques were introduced into New Testament study of the Gospels as *Formgeschichte* (“form history”) or *form criticism*. Following in the tradition of Heinrich Paulus and Wilhelm De Wette (1780–1849), among others, scholars at Tübingen built on the foundation of *source criticism* theory. They advocated the priority of Mark as the earliest Gospel and multiple written sources. William Wrede (1859–1906) and other form critics sought to eliminate the chronological-geographical framework of the Synoptic Gospels and to investigate the twenty-year period of oral traditions between the close of New Testament events and the earliest written accounts of those events. They attempted to classify this material into “forms” of oral tradition and to discover the historical situation (*Sitz im Leben*) within the early church that gave rise to these forms. These units of tradition are usually assumed to reflect more of the life and teaching of the early church than the life and teaching of the historical Jesus. Forms in which the units are cast are clues to their relative historical value.

The fundamental assumption of *form criticism* is typified by Martin Dibelius (1883–1947) and Bultmann. By creating new words and deeds of Jesus as the situation demanded, the evangelists arranged the units of oral tradition and created artificial contexts to serve their own purposes. In challenging the authorship, date, structure, and style of other New Testament books, destructive critics arrived at similar conclusions. To derive a fragmented New Testament theology, they rejected Pauline authorship for all Epistles traditionally ascribed to him except Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Galatians (Hodges, 339–48).

Thoroughgoing form critics hold two basic assumptions: (1) The early Christian community had little or no genuine biographical interest or integrity, so it created and transformed oral tradition to meet its own needs. (2) The evangelists were compiler-editors of individual, isolated units of tradition that they arranged and rearranged without regard for historical reality (see Thomas and Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* [281–82], who identify Dibelius, Bultmann, Burton S. Easton, R. H. Lightfoot, Vincent Taylor, and D. E. Nineham as preeminent New Testament form critics).

Tradition Criticism. Tradition criticism is primarily concerned with the history of traditions before they were recorded in writing. The stories of the patriarchs, for example, were probably passed down through generations by word of mouth until they were written as a continuous narrative. These oral traditions may have been changed over the long process of transmission. It is of great interest to the biblical scholar to know what changes were made and how the later tradition, now enshrined in a literary source, differs from the earliest oral version.

Tradition criticism is less certain or secure than literary criticism because it begins

where literary criticism leaves off, with conclusions that are in themselves uncertain. It is difficult to check the hypotheses about development of an oral tradition (Wenham, *ibid.*, 40–41). Even more tenuous is the “liturgical tradition” enunciated by S. Mowinckel and his Scandinavian associates, who argue that literary origins were related to preexilic sanctuary rituals and sociological phenomena. An offshoot of the liturgical approach is the “myth and ritual” school of S. H. Hooke, which argues that a distinctive set of rituals and myths were common to all Near Eastern peoples, including the Hebrews. Both of these approaches use Babylonian festival analogies to support their variations on the classical literary-critical and tradition-critical themes (Harrison, 241).

Form criticism is closely aligned with tradition criticism in New Testament studies. A review of many of the basic assumptions in view of the New Testament text have been made by Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, and I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* and *I Believe in the Historical Jesus*. Also see the discussions in Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* and *Introduction to the New Testament as Canon*, and Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* and *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*.

Redaction Criticism. Redaction criticism is more closely associated with the text than is traditional criticism. As a result, it is less open to the charge of subjective speculation. Redaction (editorial) critics can achieve absolute certainty only when all the sources are used that were at the disposal of the redactor (editor), since the task is to determine how a redactor compiled sources, what was omitted, what was added, and what particular bias was involved in the process. At best, the critic has only some of the sources available, such as the books of Kings used by the writers of Chronicles. Elsewhere, in both the Old and the New Testaments, the sources must be reconstructed out of the edited work itself. Then redaction criticism becomes much less certain as a literary device (Wenham, “Gospel Origins,” 439).

Redaction critics tend to favor a view that biblical books were written much later and by different authors than the text relates. Late theological editors attached names out of history to their works for the sake of prestige and credibility. In Old and New Testament studies this view arose from historical criticism, source criticism, and form criticism. As a result, it adopts many of the same presuppositions, including the documentary hypothesis in the Old Testament, and the priority of Mark in the New Testament.

Evaluation. As already noted, higher criticism can be helpful as long as critics are content with analysis based on what can be objectively known or reasonably theorized. Real criticism doesn’t begin its work with the intent to subvert the authority and teach-

ing of Scripture.

Kinds of Criticism Contrasted. However, much of modern biblical criticism springs from unbiblical philosophical presuppositions exposed by Gerhard Maier in *The End of the Historical Critical Method*. These presuppositions incompatible with Christian faith include deism, materialism, skepticism, agnosticism, Hegelian [idealism](#), and existentialism. Most basic is a prevailing naturalism (antisupernaturalism) that is intuitively hostile to any document containing miracle stories (see [MIRACLES IN THE BIBLE](#); [MIRACLES, MYTH AND](#)). This naturalistic bias divides negative (destructive) from positive (constructive) [higher criticism](#):

	Positive Criticism (Constructive)	Negative Criticism (Destructive)
Basis	Supernaturalistic	Naturalistic
Rule	Text is “innocent until proven guilty”	Text is “guilty until proven innocent”
Result	Bible is wholly true	Bible is partly true
Final Authority	Word of God	Mind of man
Role of Reason	To discover truth (rationality)	To determine truth (rationalism)

Some of the negative presuppositions call for scrutiny, especially as they relate to the Gospel record. This analysis is especially relevant to [source criticism](#), [form criticism](#), and redaction criticism, as these methods challenge the genuineness, authenticity, and consequently the divine authority of the Bible. This kind of biblical criticism is unfounded.

Unscholarly bias. It imposes its own antisupernatural bias on the documents. The originator of modern negative criticism, [Benedict Spinoza](#), for example, declared that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, nor Daniel the whole book of Daniel, nor did any miracle recorded actually occur. Miracles, he claimed, are scientifically and rationally impossible.

In the wake of Spinoza, negative critics concluded that Isaiah did not write the whole book of Isaiah. That would have involved supernatural predictions (including knowing the name of King Cyrus) over 100 years in advance (see [PROPHECY AS PROOF OF THE BIBLE](#)). Likewise, negative critics concluded Daniel could not have been written until 165 B.C. That late authorship placed it after the fulfillment of its detailed description of

world governments and rulers down to Antiochus IV Epiphanes (d. 163 B.C.). Supernatural predictions of coming events was not considered an option. The same naturalistic bias was applied to the New Testament by David Strauss (1808–1874), Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), and Bultmann, with the same devastating results.

The foundations of this antisupernaturalism crumbled with evidence that the universe began with a big bang (see [EVOLUTION, COSMIC](#)). Even agnostics such as Robert Jastrow (Jastrow, 18), speak of “supernatural” forces at work (Kenny, 66; see [AGNOSTICISM; MIRACLE; MIRACLES, ARGUMENTS AGAINST](#)), so it is sufficient to note here that, with the demise of modern antisupernaturalism, there is no philosophical basis for destructive criticism.

Inaccurate view of authorship. Negative criticism either neglects or minimizes the role of apostles and eyewitnesses who recorded the events. Of the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and John were definitely eyewitnesses of the events they report. Luke was a contemporary and careful historian ([Luke 1:1–4](#); see Acts). Indeed, every book of the New Testament was written by a contemporary or eyewitness of Christ. Even such critics as the “Death-of-God” theologian John A. T. Robinson admit that the Gospels were written 40 and 65 (Robinson, 352), during the life of eyewitnesses.

But if the basic New Testament documents were composed by eyewitnesses, then much of destructive criticism fails. It assumes the passage of much time while “myths” developed. Studies have revealed that it takes two generations for a myth to develop (Sherwin-White, 190).

What Jesus really said. It wrongly assumes that the New Testament writers did not distinguish between their own words and those of Jesus. That a clear distinction was made between Jesus’ words and those of the Gospel writers is evident from the ease by which a “red letter” edition of the New Testament can be made. Indeed, the apostle Paul is clear to distinguish his own words from those of Jesus (see [Acts 20:35](#); [1 Cor. 7:10, 12, 25](#)). So is John the apostle in the Apocalypse (see [Rev. 1:8, 11, 17b–20](#); [2:1f.](#); [22:7, 12–16, 20b](#)). In view of this care, the New Testament critic is unjustified in assuming without substantive evidence that the Gospel record does not actually report what Jesus said and did.

Myths? It incorrectly assumes that the New Testament stories are like folklore and myth. There is a vast difference between the simple New Testament accounts of miracles and the embellished myths that did arise during the second and third centuries A.D., as can be seen by comparing the accounts. New Testament writers explicitly disavow myths. Peter declared: “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales (mythos) when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were

eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16). Paul also warned against belief in myths (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14).

One of the most telling arguments against the myth view was given by C. S. Lewis:

First then, whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to lack literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading ... If he tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he had read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel ... I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. [Lewis, 154–55]

Creators or recorders? Unfounded higher criticism undermines the integrity of the New Testament writers by claiming that Jesus never said (or did) what the Gospels claim. Even some who call themselves evangelical have gone so far as to claim that what “‘Jesus said’ or ‘Jesus did’ need not always mean that in history Jesus said or did what follows, but sometimes may mean that in the account at least partly constructed by Matthew himself Jesus said or did what follows” (Gundry, 630). This clearly undermines confidence in the truthfulness of the Gospels and the accuracy of the events they report. On this critical view the Gospel writers become creators of the events, not recorders.

Of course, every careful biblical scholar knows that one Gospel writer does not always use the same words in reporting what Jesus said as does another. However, they always convey the same meaning. They do select, summarize, and paraphrase, but they do not distort. A comparison of the parallel reports in the Gospels is ample evidence of this.

There is no substantiation for the claim of one New Testament scholar that Matthew created the Magi story (Matt. 2) out of the turtledove story (of Luke 2). For according to Robert Gundry, Matthew “changes the sacrificial slaying of ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,’ at the presentation of the baby Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:24; cf. Lev. 12:6–8), into Herod’s slaughtering of the babies in Bethlehem” (ibid., 34–35). Such a view not only degrades the integrity of the Gospel writers but the authenticity and authority of the Gospel record. It is also silly.

Neither is there support for Paul K. Jewett, who went so far as to assert (Jewett, 134–35) that what the apostle Paul affirmed in 1 Corinthians 11:3 is wrong. If Paul is in error, then the time-honored truth that “what the Bible says, God says” is not so.

Indeed, if Jewett is right, then even when one discovers what the author of Scripture is affirming, he is little closer to knowing the truth of God (cf. [Gen. 3:1](#)). If “what the Bible says, God says” (see [BIBLE, EVIDENCE FOR](#)) is not so, then the divine authority of all Scripture is worthless.

The early church’s stake in truth. That the early church had no real biographical interest is highly improbable. The New Testament writers, impressed as they were with the belief that [Jesus](#) was the long-promised Messiah, the Son of the living God ([Matt. 16:16–18](#)), had great motivation to accurately record what he actually said and did.

To say otherwise is contrary to their own clear statements. John claimed that “[Jesus](#) did” the things recorded in his Gospel ([John 21:25](#)). Elsewhere John said “What ... we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we beheld and our hands handled ... we proclaim to you also” ([1 John 1:1–2](#)).

Luke clearly manifests an intense biographical interest by the earliest Christian communities when he wrote: “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught” ([Luke 1:1–4](#)). To claim, as the critics do, that the New Testament writers lacked interest in recording real history is implausible.

The work of the Holy Spirit. Such assumptions also neglect or deny the role of the [Holy Spirit](#) in activating the memories of the eyewitnesses. Much of the rejection of the Gospel record is based on the assumption that the writers could not be expected to remember sayings, details, and events twenty or forty years after the events. For [Jesus](#) died in [33](#), and the first Gospel records probably came (at latest) [between 50 and 60](#) (Wenham, “Gospel Origins,” 112–34).

Again the critic is rejecting or neglecting the clear statement of Scripture. [Jesus](#) promised his disciples, “The Helper, the [Holy Spirit](#), whom the Father will send in My name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” ([John 14:26](#)).

So even on the unlikely assumption that no one recorded anything [Jesus](#) said during his lifetime or immediately after, the critics would have us believe that eyewitnesses whose memories were later supernaturally activated by the [Holy Spirit](#) did not accurately record what [Jesus](#) did and said. It seems far more likely that [the first-century eyewitnesses were right and the twentieth-century critics are wrong](#), than the reverse.

Guidelines for Biblical Criticism. Of course biblical scholarship need not be destructive. But the biblical message must be understood in its theistic (supernatural) context and its actual historical and grammatical setting. Positive guidelines for evangelical scholarship are set forth in Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics” (see Geisler, *Summit II: Hermeneutics*, 10–13. Also Radmacher and Preus, *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, esp. 881–914). It reads in part as follows:

Article XIII. WE AFFIRM that awareness of the literary categories, formal and stylistic, of the various parts of Scripture is essential for proper exegesis, and hence we value genre criticism as one of the many disciplines of biblical study. WE DENY that generic categories which negate the historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual.

Article XIV. WE AFFIRM that the biblical record of events, discourses and sayings, though presented in a variety of appropriate literary forms, corresponds to historical fact. WE DENY that any such event, discourse or saying reported in Scripture was invented by the biblical writers or by the traditions they incorporated.

Article XV. WE AFFIRM the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will account for all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text. WE DENY the legitimacy of any approach to Scripture that attributes to it meaning which the literal sense does not support.

Article XVI. WE AFFIRM that legitimate critical techniques should be used in determining the canonical text and its meaning. WE DENY the legitimacy of allowing any method of biblical criticism to question the truth or integrity of the writer’s expressed meaning, or of any other scriptural teaching.

Redaction versus Editing. There are important differences between destructive redaction and constructive editing. No knowledgeable scholars deny that a certain amount of editing occurred over the biblical text’s thousands of years of history. This legitimate editing, however, must be distinguished from illegitimate redaction which the negative critics allege. The negative critics have failed to present any convincing evidence that the kind of redaction they believe in has ever happened to the biblical text.

The following chart contrasts the two views.

Legitimate Editing	Illegitimate Redacting
Changes in form	Changes in content

Scribal changes	Substantive changes
Changes in the text	Changes in the truth

The redaction model of the canon confuses legitimate scribal activity, involving grammatical form, updating of names, and arrangement of prophetic material, with illegitimate redactive changes in actual content of a prophet's message. It confuses acceptable scribal transmission with unacceptable tampering. It confuses proper discussion of which text is earlier with improper discussion of how later writers changed the truth of texts. There is no evidence that any significant illegitimate redactive changes have occurred since the Bible was first put in writing. On the contrary, all evidence supports a careful transmission in all substantial matters and in most details. No diminution of basic truth has occurred from the original writings to the Bibles in our hands today (see [OLD TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS](#); [NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS](#)).

Sources

- O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*
W. R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem*
R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*
G. Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*
R. Jastrow, "A Scientist Caught between Two Faiths" in CT, 6 August 1982
P. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*
E. Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*
C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*
E. Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible*
———, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?*
G. M. Maier, *The End of the Historical Critical Method*
Marshall, I. H., *The Origins of New Testament Christology*
A. Q. Morton, and J. McLeman, *Christianity in the Computer Age*
E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus, *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*
J. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*
E. P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition*
A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*
B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins*
R. L. Thomas, "An Investigation of the Agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark," *JETS* 19, (1976)
R. L. Thomas, "The [Hermeneutics of Evangelical Redaction Criticism](#)," *JETS* 29/4 (December 1986)

J. W. Wenham, "Gospel Origins," *TJ* 7, (1978)

———, "History and The Old Testament," *Bib. Sac*, 124, 1967

Bible, Evidence for. The Bible claims to be and proves to be the Word of God. It was written by prophets of God, under the inspiration of God.

Written by Prophets of God. The biblical authors were prophets and apostles of God (see [MIRACLES, APOLOGETIC VALUE OF; PROPHECY AS PROOF OF BIBLE](#)). There are many designations for prophet, and these are informative about their role in producing Scripture. They are called:

1. A man of God ([1 Kings 12:22](#)), meaning chosenness.
2. A servant of the Lord ([1 Kings 14:18](#)), indicating faithfulness.
3. A messenger of the Lord ([Isa. 42:19](#)), showing mission.
4. A seer (ro'eh), or beholder (hozeh) ([Isa. 30:9–10](#)), revealing insight from God.
5. A man of the Spirit ([Hosea 9:7 KJV](#); cf. [Micah 3:8](#)), noting spiritual indwelling.
6. A watchman ([Ezek. 3:17](#)), relating alertness for God.
7. A prophet (most frequently), marking a spokesman for God.

The work of a biblical prophet is described in vivid terms: "The Lord has spoken; who can but prophesy" ([Amos 3:8](#)). He is one who speaks "all the words which the Lord has spoken" ([Exod. 4:30](#)). God said to Moses of a prophet, "I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" ([Deut. 18:18](#)). He added, "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take away from it" ([Deut. 4:2](#)). Jeremiah was commanded: "This is what the LORD says: Stand in the courtyard of the LORD's house and speak to all the people.... Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word" ([Jer. 26:2](#)).

A prophet was someone who said what God told him to say, no more and no less.

Moved by the Spirit of God. Throughout Scripture, the authors claimed to be under the direction of the Holy Spirit. David said, "The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue" ([2 Sam. 23:2](#)). Peter, speaking of the whole Old Testament, added, "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 Peter 1:21](#)).

Not all prophets were known by that term. David and Solomon were kings. But they were mouthpieces of God, and David is called a "prophet" in [Acts 2:29–39](#). Moses was a lawgiver. He too was a prophet or spokesman for God ([Deut. 18:18](#)). Amos disclaimed the term "prophet," in that he was not a professional prophet, like Samuel and his "school of the prophets" ([1 Sam. 19:20](#)). Even if Amos was not a prophet by office, he

was one by gift (cf. [Amos 7:14](#)). God used him to speak. Nor did all prophets speak in an explicit “Thus says the Lord” first-person style. Those who wrote historical narrative spoke in an implied “Thus *did* the Lord” approach. Their message was about the acts of God in relation to the people and their sins. In each case God made the prophet a channel through which to convey his message to us.

Breathed Out by God. Writing about the entire Old Testament canon, the apostle Paul declared:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Jesus described the Scriptures as the very “word that comes out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). They were written *by* men who spoke *from* God. Paul said his writings were “words ... which the Holy Spirit teaches” (1 Cor. 2:13). As Jesus said to the Pharisees, “How is it then that David, *speaking by the Spirit*, calls him ‘Lord?’” (Matt. 22:43, emphasis added).

What the Bible Says. The basic logic of the inerrancy of Scripture is offered in the article, [Bible, Alleged errors in](#). That the Bible is God’s inerrant Word is expressed in several ways in Scripture. One is the formula, “What the Bible says, God says.” An Old Testament passage claims God said something, yet when this text is cited in the New Testament, the text tells us that the Scriptures said it. Sometimes the reverse is true. In the Old Testament it is said that the Bible records something. The New Testament declares that God said it. Consider this comparison:

What God Says ...	the Bible Says
Genesis 12:3	Galatians 3:8
Exodus 9:16	Romans 9:17
What the Bible Says ...	God Says
Genesis 2:24	Matthew 19:4, 5
Psalm 2:1	Acts 4:24, 25
Psalm 2:7	Hebrews 1:5
Psalm 16:10	Acts 13:35
Psalm 95:7	Hebrews 1:5
Psalm 97:7	Hebrews 1:6
Psalm 104:4	Hebrews 3:7
Isaiah 55:3	Acts 13:34

Scripture's Claims. “Thus Says the Lord.” Phrases such as “thus says the Lord” (for example, [Isa. 1:11, 18](#); [Jer. 2:3, 5](#)), “God said” ([Gen. 1:3](#)), and “the Word of the Lord came” ([Jer. 34:1](#); [Ezek. 30:1](#)) are used hundreds of times in Scripture to stress God’s direct, verbal inspiration of what was written.

“*The Word of God.*” At some points the Bible claims, forthrightly and unequivocally, to be “the Word of God.” Referring to Old Testament commands, [Jesus](#) told the Jews of his day, “Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition” ([Matt. 15:6](#)). Paul speaks of the Scriptures as “the oracles of God” ([Rom. 3:2](#)). Peter declares, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” ([1 Peter 1:23](#)). The writer of Hebrews affirms, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword” ([Heb. 4:12](#)). 🗝

The Claim of Divine Authority. Other words or phrases used in Scripture entail the claim of God’s authority. [Jesus](#) said the Bible will never pass away and is sufficient for faith and life ([Luke 16:31](#); cf. [2 Tim. 3:16–17](#)). He proclaimed that the Bible possesses divine inspiration ([Matt. 22:43](#)) and authority ([Matt. 4:4, 7, 10](#)). It has unity ([Luke 24:27](#); [John 5:39](#)) and spiritual clarity ([Luke 24:25](#)).

The Extent of Its Biblical Authority. The extent of divine authority in Scripture includes:

1. all that is written—[2 Timothy 3:16](#);
2. even the very words—[Matthew 22:43](#); [1 Corinthians 2:13](#);
3. and tenses of verbs—[Matthew 22:32](#); [Galatians 3:16](#);
4. including even the smallest parts of words—[Matthew 5:17, 18](#).

Even though the Bible was not verbally dictated by God, the result is as perfectly God’s thoughts as if it had been. The Bible’s authors claimed that God is the source of the very words, since he supernaturally superintended the process by which each human wrote, using their vocabulary and style to record his message ([2 Peter 1:20–21](#)).

Presented in Human Terms. Although the Bible claims to be the Word of God, it is also the words of human beings. It claims to be God’s communication to people, in their own language and expressions.

First, every book in the Bible was the composition of *human writers*.

Second, the Bible manifests different *human literary styles*, from the mournful meter of lamentations to the exalted poetry of Isaiah, from the simple grammar of John to the complex Greek of Hebrews. Their choices of metaphors show that different writers used their own background and interests. James is interested in nature. [Jesus](#) uses urban

metaphors, and Hosea those of rural life.

Third, the Bible manifests *human perspectives and emotions*; David spoke in [Psalm 23](#) from a shepherd's perspective; Kings is written from a prophetic vantage point, and Chronicles from a priestly point of view; Acts manifests a historical interest and 2 Timothy a pastor's heart. Paul expressed grief over the Israelites who had rejected God ([Rom. 9:2](#)).

Fourth, the Bible reveals human thought patterns and processes, including reasoning (Romans) and memory ([1 Cor. 1:14–16](#)).

Fifth, writers of the Bible used human sources for information, including historical research ([Luke 1:1–4](#)) and noncanonical writings ([Josh. 10:13](#); [Acts 17:28](#); [1 Cor. 15:33](#); [Titus 1:12](#); [Jude 9, 14](#)).

Original Text Is Without Errors, Not the Copies. As noted in the article Bible, Alleged Errors in, this does not mean that every copy and translation of the Bible is perfect. God breathed out the originals, not the copies, so inerrancy applies to the original text, not to every copy. God in his providence preserved the copies from substantial error. In fact, the degree of accuracy is greater than that of any other book from the ancient world, exceeding 99 percent (see [NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS; OLD TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS](#)).

The Overall Evidence. Considered as a totality, evidences for the Bible's claim to be the Word of God are overwhelming.

The Testimony of Christ. Perhaps the strongest argument that the Bible is the Word of God is the testimony of Jesus (see [BIBLE, JESUS' VIEW OF](#)). Even non-Christians believe he was a good teacher. Muslims believe him to be a true prophet of God (see [MUHAMMAD, ALLEGED DIVINE CALL OF](#)). Christians, of course, insist that he is the Son of God as he claimed to be ([Matt. 16:16–18](#); [Mark 2:5–11](#); [John 5:22–30](#); [8:58](#); [10:30](#); [20:28–29](#)) and proved to be by numerous miracles ([John 3:2](#); [Acts 2:22](#); see [MIRACLES IN THE BIBLE](#)). Even the *Qur'an* admits that Jesus did miracles (see [MUHAMMAD, ALLEGED MIRACLES OF](#)), and that the Bible Christians used in Muhammad's day (☞ A.D. seventh century) was accurate, since they were challenged to consult it to verify Muhammad's claims.

[Jesus](#) affirmed the Old Testament to be the Word of God and promised to guide his disciples to know all truth. [Jesus](#) claimed for the Bible:

1. Divine authority—[Matthew 4:4, 7, 10](#)
2. Indestructibility—[Matthew 5:17–18](#)
3. Infallibility or unbreakability—[John 10:35](#)
4. Ultimate supremacy—[Matthew 15:3, 6](#)

5. Factual inerrancy—[Matthew 22:29](#); [John 17:17](#)
6. Historical reliability—[Matthew 12:40](#), [24:37–38](#)
7. Scientific accuracy—[Matthew 19:4–5](#); [John 3:12](#)

The authority of [Jesus](#) confirms the authority of the Bible. If he is the Son of God (see [CHRIST, DEITY OF](#)), then the Bible is the Word of God. Indeed, if [Jesus](#) were merely a prophet, then the Bible still is confirmed to be the Word of God through his prophetic office. Only if one rejects the divine authority of Christ can he consistently reject the divine authority of the Scriptures. If [Jesus](#) is telling the truth, then it is true that the Bible is God's Word.

Manuscript Evidence. New Testament manuscripts are now available [P](#) from the third and fourth centuries, and fragments that may date back as far as [P](#) the late first century. From these through the medieval centuries, the text remained substantially the same. There are earlier and more manuscripts for the New Testament than for any other book from the ancient world. While most books exist in ten or twenty manuscripts dating from a [thousand years](#) or more after they were composed, one nearly entire manuscript, the *Chester Beatty Papyri*, was copied in [P](#) about 250. Another manuscript with the majority of the New Testament, called *Vaticanus*, is dated to [P](#) about 325.

The Biblical Authors. Whatever weaknesses they may have had, the biblical authors are universally presented in Scripture as scrupulously honest, and this lends credibility to their claim, for the Bible is not shy to admit the failures of his people.

They taught the highest standard of ethics, including the obligation to always tell the truth. Moses' law commanded: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" ([Exod. 20:16](#)). Indeed, only one "whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart" ([Ps. 15:2](#)), who "has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellow-man, [and] who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the LORD, who keeps his oath even when it hurts" were considered righteous.

The New Testament also exalts integrity, commanding: "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor" ([Eph. 4:25](#)). The person who "loves and practices falsehood" will be excluded from heaven, according to [Revelation 22:15](#). Absolute truthfulness was extolled as a cardinal Christian virtue.

The biblical writers not only taught the highest moral standards, including truthfulness, but they exemplified them in their lives. A true prophet could not be bought off. As one prophet who was tempted confessed, "I could not go beyond the command of

the Lord” ([Num. 22:18](#)). What God spoke, the prophet had to declare, regardless of the consequences. Many prophets were threatened and even martyred but never recanted the truth. Jeremiah was put into prison for his unwelcome prophecies ([Jer. 32:2; 37:15](#)) and even threatened with death ([Jer. 26:8, 24](#)). Others were killed ([Matt. 23:34–36; Heb. 11:32–38](#)). Peter and the eleven apostles ([Acts 5](#)), as well as Paul ([Acts 28](#)), were all imprisoned and most were eventually martyred for their testimony ([2 Tim. 4:6–8; 2 Peter 1:14](#)). Indeed, being “faithful unto death” was an earmark of early Christian conviction ([Rev. 2:10](#)).

People sometimes die for false causes they believe to be true, but few die for what they know to be false. Yet the biblical witnesses, who were in a position to know what was true, died for proclaiming that their message came from God. This is at least *prima facie* evidence that the Bible is what they claimed it to be—the Word of God.

The Miraculous Confirmation. It is always possible that someone believes he or she speaks for God and does not. There are false prophets ([Matt. 7:15](#)). This is why the Bible exhorts: “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” ([1 John 4:1](#)). One sure way a true prophet can be distinguished from a false one is miracles ([Acts 2:22; Heb. 2:3–4](#)). A miracle is an act of God, and God would not supernaturally confirm a false prophet to be a true one (see [MIRACLES IN THE BIBLE; PROPHECIES AS PROOF OF THE BIBLE](#)).

When Moses was called of God, he was given miracles to prove he spoke for God ([Exodus 4](#)). Elijah on Mount Carmel was confirmed by fire from heaven to be a true prophet of the true God ([1 Kings 18](#)). Even Nicodemus acknowledged to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him” ([John 3:2](#)).

Even the *Qur’an* recognized that God confirmed his prophets ([sura 7:106–8, 116–119](#)), including Jesus, by miracles. God is said to have told Muhammad, “If they reject thee, so were rejected apostles before thee, who came with clear signs” ([sura 17:103](#)). Allah says, “Then We sent Moses and his brother Aaron, with Our signs and authority manifest” ([sura 23:45](#)). Interestingly, when Muhammad was challenged by unbelievers to perform like miracles, he refused (see [sura 2:118; 3:183; 4:153; 6:8, 9, 37](#)). In Muhammad’s own words (from the *Qur’an*), “They [will] say: ‘Why is not a sign sent down to him from his Lord?’ ” since even Muhammad admitted that “God hath certainly power to send down a sign” ([sura 6:37](#); see [MUHAMMAD, ALLEGED MIRACLES OF; QUR’AN, ALLEGED DIVINE ORIGIN OF](#)). But miracles were a mark of Jesus’ ministry, as of other prophets and apostles ([Heb. 2:3–4; 2 Cor. 12:12](#); see [MIRACLES, APOLOGETIC VALUE OF](#)).



When asked by John the Baptist if he was the Messiah, Jesus responded, “Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached” ([Luke 7:20–22](#)).

Miracles, then, are a divine confirmation of a prophet’s claim to be speaking for God (see [MIRACLE](#)). But of all the world’s religious leaders, only the Judeo-Christian prophets and apostles were supernaturally confirmed by genuine miracles of nature that could not possibly have been self-delusion or trickery. Confirming miracles included the turning of water into wine ([John 2](#)), healing of those with organic sicknesses ([John 5](#)), multiplying food ([John 6](#)), walking on water ([John 6](#)), and raising the dead ([John 11](#)).

Muslims allege that Muhammad did miracles, but there is no support for this claim, even in the *Qur’an* (for his refusal to do miracles, see [sura 3:181–84](#); see [MUHAMMAD, CHARACTER OF](#)). Only the Bible is supernaturally confirmed.

Predictions by Biblical Prophets. Unlike any other book, the Bible offers specific predictions that were written hundreds of years in advance of their literal fulfillment. Many of these center around the coming of Christ and others around world events. For a discussion of a number of these, see [PROPHECY AS PROOF OF THE BIBLE](#). While Bible critics play with the dating of Old Testament books to claim that predictions were written after their fulfillment, these claims abuse credibility. In some cases of more recent fulfillment no such claims are even possible. These fulfillments stand as a mark of the Bible’s unique, supernatural origin.

The Unity of the Bible. One supporting line of evidence for the Bible’s divine origin is its unity in great diversity. Even though composed by many people of diverse backgrounds over many years, Scripture speaks from one mind.

Not taking into account unknowns in the dating for Job and sources Moses could have used, the first book was written no later than  1400 B.C. and the last shortly  before A.D. 100. In all there are sixty-six different books, written by perhaps forty different authors of different backgrounds, educational levels, and occupations. Most was written originally in Hebrew or Greek, with some small portion in Aramaic.

The Bible covers hundreds of topics in literature of widely varying styles. These include history, poetry, didactic literature, parable, allegory, apocalyptic, and epic.

Yet note the amazing unity. These sixty-six books unfold one continuous drama of redemption, paradise lost to paradise regained, creation to the consummation of all things (see Sauer). There is one central theme, the person of [Jesus Christ](#), even by implication in the Old Testament ([Luke 24:27](#)). In the Old Testament Christ is anticipated; in the New Testament he is realized ([Matt. 5:17–18](#)). There is one message: Humankind’s

problem is sin, and the solution is salvation through Christ ([Mark 10:45](#); [Luke 19:10](#)).

Such incredible unity is best accounted for by the existence of a divine Mind that the writers of Scripture claimed inspired them. This Mind wove each of their pieces into one mosaic of truth.


Critics claim this is not so amazing, considering that succeeding authors were aware of preceding ones. Hence, they could build upon these texts without contradicting them. Or, later generations only accepted their book into the growing canon because it seemed to fit.

But not all writers were aware that their book would come to be in the canon (for example, Song of Solomon and the multiauthor Proverbs). They could not have slanted their writing to the way that would best fit. There was no one point when books were accepted into the canon. Even though some later generations raised questions as to how a book came to be in the canon, there is evidence that books were accepted immediately by the contemporaries of the writers. When Moses wrote, his books were placed by the ark ([Deut. 31:22–26](#)). Later, Joshua was added, and Daniel had copies of these works, plus even the scroll of his contemporary Jeremiah ([Dan. 9:2](#)). In the New Testament, Paul cites Luke ([1 Tim. 5:18](#), cf. [Luke 10:7](#)), and Peter possessed at least some of Paul's Epistles ([2 Peter 3:15–16](#)). While not every Christian everywhere possessed every book immediately, it does seem that some writings were accepted and distributed immediately. Perhaps others were disseminated more slowly, after they were determined to be authentic.

Even if every author possessed every earlier book, there is still a unity that transcends human ability. The reader might assume that each author was an incredible literary genius who saw both the broader unity and “plan” of Scripture and just how his piece would fit in it. Could even such geniuses write so that the unforeseen end would come out, even though they could not know precisely what that end would be? It is easier to posit a superintending Mind behind the whole who devised the plot and from the beginning planned how it would unfold.

Suppose a book of family medical advice was composed by forty doctors over 1500 years in different languages on hundreds of medical topics. What kind of unity would it have, even assuming that authors knew what preceding ones had written? Due to superstitious medical practice in the past, one chapter would say that disease is caused by demons who must be exorcised. Another would claim that disease is in the blood and must be drained by blood-letting. Another would claim disease to be a function of mind over matter. At best, such a book would lack unity, continuity, and usefulness. It would hardly be a definitive source covering the causes and cures of disease. Yet the Bible, with

greater diversity, is still sought by millions for its solutions to spiritual maladies. It alone, of all books known to humankind, needs a God to account for its unity in diversity.

Archaeological Confirmation. Archaeology cannot directly prove the Bible's inspiration; it can confirm its reliability as an historical document. This is an indirect confirmation of inspiration. (See [ARCHAEOLOGY, NEW TESTAMENT](#) , and [ARCHAEOLOGY, OLD TESTAMENT](#), for some of this evidence.) The conclusion of that evidence was summed up by Nelson Glueck that "no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible" (Glueck, 31). Millar Burroughs notes that "more than one archaeologist has found his respect for the Bible increased by the experience of excavation in Palestine" (Burroughs, 1).

Testimonies of Transforming Power. The writer of Hebrews declares that "the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword" ([4:12](#)). The apostle Peter added, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" ([1 Peter 1:23](#)). While not in the area of primary evidence, a subjective, supporting line of evidence is the change in life that God's Word brings. While early Islam spread by the power of the sword, early Christianity spread by the sword of the Spirit, even as Christians were being killed by the power of the Roman sword.

The great Christian apologist [William Paley](#) summarized the differences between the growth of Christianity and Islam vividly:

For what are we comparing? A Galilean peasant accompanied by a few fishermen with a conqueror at the head of his army. We compare [Jesus](#), without force, without power, without support, without one external circumstance of attraction or influence, prevailing against the prejudices, the learning, the hierarchy, of his country, against the ancient religious opinions, the pompous religious rites, the philosophy, the wisdom, the authority of the Roman empire, in the most polished and [enlightened](#) period of its existence,—with Mahomet making his way amongst Arabs; collecting followers in the midst of conquests and triumphs, in the darkest ages and countries of the world, and when success in arms not only operated by that command of men's wills and persons which attend prosperous undertakings, but was considered as a sure testimony of Divine approbation. That multitudes, persuaded by this argument, should join the train of a victorious chief; that still greater multitudes should, without any argument, bow down before irresistible power—is a

conduct in which we cannot see much to surprise us; in which we can see nothing that resembles the causes by which the establishment of Christianity was effected. [Paley, 257]

Despite the later misuse of military power in the Crusades and at isolated times earlier, the fact is that *early* Christianity grew by its spiritual power, not by political force. From the very beginning, as it is today around the world, it was the preaching of the Word of God which transformed lives that gave Christianity its vitality ([Acts 2:41](#)). For “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” ([Rom. 10:17](#)).

Conclusion. The Bible is the only book that both claims and proves to be the Word of God. It claims to be written by prophets of God who recorded in their own style and language exactly the message God wanted them to give to humankind. The writings of the prophets and apostles claim to be the unbreakable, imperishable, and inerrant words of God. The evidence that their writings are what they claimed to be is found not only in their own moral character but in the supernatural confirmation of their message, its prophetic accuracy, its amazing unity, its transforming power, and the testimony of [Jesus](#) who was confirmed to be the Son of God.

Sources

- M. Burrows, [What Mean These Stones?](#)
F. S. R. L. Gaussen, [Theopneustia](#)
N. L. Geisler, ed., [Inerrancy](#)
——— and A. Saleeb, [Answering Islam](#)
——— and W. E. Nix, [General Introduction to the Bible](#), rev. ed.
N. Glueck, [Rivers in the Desert](#)
R. L. Harris, [Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible](#)
C. F. H. Henry, [Revelation and the Bible](#)
A. A. Hodge, et al., [Inspiration](#)
H. Lindsell, [The Battle for the Bible](#)
J. Packer, [“Fundamentalism” and the Word of God](#)
B. B. Warfield, [Limited Inspiration](#)
———, [The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible](#)
C. Wilson, [Rocks, Relics, and Reliability](#)
J. D. Woodbridge, [Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Roger McKim Proposal](#)
E. Yamauchi, [The Stones and the Scriptures](#)