

Wheat from the Chaff
Establishing the Canon
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1. This is the last presentation in this series looking at the human authors and contexts of the books that make up the Protestant Bible.
2. Today, we will look at how the books in the Bible were selected.
3. In the process, we will look at some other writings that were not selected.
4. We will then consider what it means that the Bible is the word of God.

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1. The Jewish Bible, on which the Protestant Old Testament is based, includes 24 individual books, organized into three sections – the Torah, meaning Teachings; the Nevi'im, meaning Prophets, and the Ketuvim, meaning Writings.
2. The Jewish Bible is called the Tanakh based on the first letter of the three sections.
3. Scholars remain uncertain about exactly when and how those 24 books were selected, with most believing the final selection did not take place until about 100 A.D.
4. By that time, most of the books comprising the New Testament had been written and Christianity had begun to separate from Judaism.

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1. At the time most of the books of the Protestant Old Testament were being written, the Jewish people did not have a conception of a single book that would encompass all their most important writings.
2. Instead, they had writings from various periods, some considered more reliable than others and all considered subject to revision and replacement.
3. In about 400 A.D., the prophet Nehemiah reported that Ezra had read to the people **“the book of the law of Moses,”** but says nothing about any other books being important at the time. *Nehemiah* 8:1.
4. 2 Maccabees, written in the second century B.C., says that Nehemiah also **“founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings.”** *2 Maccabees* 2:13.

5. Exactly what was in that library is not clear.

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1. In about 180 B.C, Ben Sira, a resident of Jerusalem, wrote a book formally titled the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach and usually called simply Sirach or Ecclesiasticus.
2. Chapters 44 to 49 of Sirach identify a series of great men of Jewish history, beginning with Enoch and ending with Nehemiah.
3. The accomplishments of each man are summarized in ways we can recognize as being based on writings in the Old Testament.
4. For example, with respect to Joshua, Sirach states: **“Was it not through him that the sun stood still and one day became as long as two?”** *Sirach* 46:4.
5. This is obviously based on *Joshua* 10:13, which reports: **“The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day.”**
6. Scholars have concluded that the men and their accomplishments reported in Sirach match, in order, those identified in the five books of the Teachings, the seven books of the Prophets and five books of the Writings. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* at 479 n. 33.
7. Sirach also identifies **“Twelve [Minor] Prophets”** contained on a single scroll. *Sirach* 49:10.
8. The author of Sirach therefore identifies, by implication, 18 books worthy of inclusion in his work, all of which are in the Old Testament.
9. Sirach does not any include references to Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations or Song of Songs, all now included in the Tanakh.
10. The reason for the omission of Daniel is clear – it had not yet been written.
11. The other books of the current Tanakh, which all existed at the time, were apparently not considered worthy of inclusion.
12. In about 132 B.C., the grandson of Ben Sira wrote a prologue to Sirach to introduce his Greek translation.
13. The prologue refers to **“the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors,”** which the author calls **“scriptures.”** *Sirach* 1:1.
14. The prologue to Sirach is the earliest known example of dividing the books in the Tanakh into three categories -- books of Moses, books of the Prophets and other books.

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1. Sirach was one of several Jewish writings written before the time of Jesus that became known as the Apocrypha, a word originally meaning hidden, that introduced new ideas into Jewish thought.
2. For example, Sirach introduces the idea that God can be addressed as **“Father.”** *Sirach* 23:1, 4-5.
3. Tobit describes a wicked demon named “Asmodeus,” who opposes God and his angels, a new concept in Jewish thought. *Tobit* 3:8, 17.
4. 1 and 2 Maccabees, written in the second century B.C. describe the Maccabean Revolt against Greek rule and Second Maccabees provides an unambiguous statement about bodily resurrection at the end of time. *2 Maccabees* 7:10 – 14.
5. The Wisdom of Solomon, usually called simply Wisdom, was written sometime in the first century B.C. and introduces into Jewish thought the idea of a final judgment and an immortal soul that leaves the body at death. *Wisdom* 3:18; 9:14 – 15.
6. Other writings of the period include Judith and Baruch.

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1. At the time of Jesus, these books existed alongside the writings used by Ben Sira.
2. Tobit and Sirach were both found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, used by Jews living in Qumran.
3. Philo of Alexandria, whose first century writings influenced early Christians, cited Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon in addition to books of the Torah.
4. The books of the Apocrypha were included in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in widespread use at the time of Jesus.
5. Some of the teachings of Jesus are sufficiently close to those in Sirach that one author states: **“Jesus knew the writings of Ben Sira and could adapt them to his own teaching.”** Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period* at 105.
6. Another author concludes Paul **“had at sometime read and [was] impressed by the Wisdom of Solomon.”** Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* at 158.
7. Despite their apparent familiarity with the works of the Apocrypha, neither Jesus nor any of the New Testament writers expressly quote from the Apocrypha, suggesting they were not valued in the same way as the earlier works relied on by Ben Sira.

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1. The writer of the Gospel of Luke recognized the three-part division of Jewish writings identified as **“scriptures”** that first appeared in Sirach. *Luke 24:27*.
2. Luke quotes Jesus as saying: **“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”** *Luke 24:44*.
3. The New Testament writers quoted from many of the same books relied upon in Sirach and added allusions to Daniel and Ruth. *Matthew 1:5; 24:15*.
4. New Testament writers made no references to Esther, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations or Song of Songs, all eventually included in the Tanakh.

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1. In about 97 A.D. Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote a book entitled “Against Apion,” seeking to demonstrate the superiority of Jewish thought over that of the Greeks.
2. Without identifying his source, he identified **“only twenty-two books”** Jews believed **“justly deserved to be divine.”** Josephus, *Against Apion 1:8*.
3. Of the 22 books, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, **“five belong to Moses,”** 13 were attributed to **“the prophets”** and **“four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life.”** *Id.*
4. Scholars do not agree on the identity of the 22 books identified by Josephus.
5. Some argue that they included the 24 books of the Tanakh by combining Ruth with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah.
6. Others point to a book from the same time known both as 4 Ezra and 2 Esdras.
7. It says that God had sanctioned **“twenty-four books,”** the current number of books in the Tanakh. *2 Esdras 14:45*.
8. Some scholars believe that the discrepancy is based on the uncertain status at the time of Josephus of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, both eventually included because of claims they were written by Solomon.

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1. Whatever the explanation for the discrepancy, by the second century, Jewish authorities seem to have settled on the 24 books now included in the Tanakh.
2. Seeing that the Septuagint and the Apocrypha were being used by Christians, in the second century **“the Jews abandoned the use of the Greek Septuagint, and this**

circulated henceforth solely among the Christians.” Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* at 175.

3. In about 135 A.D., a rabbi said that books of the Apocrypha were **“those of heretics.”** Stone, *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* at 300.
4. The Tanakh came to be seen as only those books written in Hebrew before 400 B.C., which excluded the Apocrypha.
5. The idea seems to have been that God’s revelations had stopped at the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, who had assembled a book of Hebrew writings.
6. Because Daniel was thought at the time to have been written during the exile, it was included in the Jewish canon even though most scholars today believe it was written in about 164 B.C. by unknown authors.

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1. The Jewish determination of the books of the Tanakh did not affect the views of early Christians about which books were part of their Old Testament.
2. The Codex Sinaiticus is one of the two oldest Bibles known to exist.
3. It was written between 325 A.D. and 360 A.D. and is named for the Sinai desert, where it was found in St. Catherine’s Monastery.
4. Its Old Testament, based on the Septuagint, includes Tobit, Judith, 1 and 4 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach, all books rejected for the Tanakh.

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1. In about 367 A.D., in his annual Easter letter, Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, set out what books should be considered part of the Christian Old Testament.
2. He stated that the books of the Apocrypha were **“not canonical,”** but were **“recommended for reading.”** Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 342.

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1. Most Christians at the time rejected this conclusion.
2. Early church leaders, familiar with only the Septuagint, continued to consider the Apocrypha part of the Old Testament.
3. **“Augustine considered the Old Testament to be comprised of 45 books, including Tobit, Judith, and 1 and 2 Maccabees, Ecclesiasticus, and Wisdom.”** Surburg, *Introduction to the Intertestamental Period* at 93.

4. In 382 A.D., the Council of Rome accepted as authoritative all the books of the Apocrypha except Baruch.
5. When Jerome created the Vulgate, a Latin Bible, in the fourth century, he included some books of the Apocrypha, but separated them from his translation of the Tanakh.
6. Over time, Latin translations of other books of the Apocrypha became part of many Christian Bibles.
7. For most Christians, Sirach, Tobit, Wisdom and 1 and 2 Maccabees were part of their Old Testaments even though not part of the Jewish Tanakh.

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1. That view of the Old Testament changed beginning in the early sixteenth century, when Martin Luther was confronted by church leaders with *2 Maccabees* 12:43-45 as support for their teachings about purgatory and prayers for the dead.
2. Because Luther rejected purgatory and prayers for the dead, but accepted the truth of Scripture, he concluded that *2 Maccabees*, which had been rejected by the Jews at least in part because of its use by Christians, should not be relied upon by Christians either.
3. And because Tobit and other books of the Apocrypha expressly teach salvation by works, which Luther also rejected, he concluded that none of the books of the Apocrypha were authoritative.
4. When Luther published his German translation of the Bible, he put the seven most popular books of the Apocrypha -- Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach and Baruch – in an appendix sandwiched between the Old and New Testaments.
5. He prefaced the appendix as follows: **“Apocrypha – that is, books which are not held equal to the Holy Scriptures, and yet are profitable and good to read.”**
6. Today, most Protestant Bibles omit from their Old Testaments any books that are not part of the Tanakh, thereby excluding the Apocrypha.
7. Protestant Bibles divide and re-arrange the 24 books of the Tanakh, resulting in an Old Testament of 39 books.

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1. Responding to Protestant claims that the books of the Apocrypha were not Holy Scripture, a session of the Council of Trent held by Roman Catholics in 1546 declared that the books of the Apocrypha rejected by Luther were sacred and canonical.

2. Those books are part of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles today.
3. Those Bibles also include sections of Esther and Daniel that are not included in the Protestant Old Testament.

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1. When the Jewish canon was being finalized, Christians were at the beginning of a nearly 300-year process to settle on the writings now known as the New Testament.
2. As we saw last week, by about 100 A.D., the Gospels now attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were being used by different groups of Christians.
3. The letters of Paul were being circulated beyond the churches to which they had been addressed.
4. By 120 A.D. or so, all the books included in the New Testament we know today had been written.
5. But they were not the only books about Jesus then in circulation.

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1. Near the end of the first century, **“the floodgates opened . . . and Christians of varying theological and ecclesiastical persuasion wrote all kinds of books.”** Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 2.
2. This is an area near Nag Hammadi, along the Nile River in the middle of Egypt.

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1. In 1945, farmers digging here found a jar that contained 13 leather bound books containing about 48 different writings.
2. Those writings included the Gospel of Truth, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of the Egyptians, Gospel of Mary, Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles, Apocalypse of Paul, First Apocalypse of James, Second Apocalypse of James, Apocalypse of Peter.
3. These books are associated with second century Christians known as “Gnostics.”

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1. Gnostics, not all of whom were Christians, believed that the world we live in was created by **“an inferior and ignorant deity who erroneously imagined he was God Almighty.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 114.

2. The Gnostics believed that if they could obtain secret wisdom about the true God, they could somehow escape the awful world in which they lived.
3. Those Gnostics who became Christians believed that Jesus had the secret wisdom they sought and they set about trying to learn that wisdom.
4. They believed that the Gospel of John was talking about that secret wisdom when it said: **“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** *John* 8:32.
5. The Gnostic gospels and other writings were devoted to finding that wisdom and conveying it to others.

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1. The Gospel of Judas, found in Egypt, reflects the Gnostic thinking.
2. Jesus tells Judas that he will exceed all the disciples because he **“will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”** *The Gospel of Judas* at 43.
3. Jesus asks Judas to betray him so that his spirit can be liberated.

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1. The Gospel of Thomas includes 114 sayings identified as **“the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.”** Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library* at 126.
2. Consistent with Gnostic teaching, Saying 1 says: **“Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.”**
3. Although the exact identity of Didymos Judas Thomas is not clear, many associate him with the Disciple Thomas, who had to be shown the wounds of Jesus before he would believe that he was no longer dead.
4. This association is based on *John* 20:24, which notes that **“Thomas (called Didymus), one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.”**

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1. Approximately 80 of the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas are very similar to those in the New Testament.
2. For example, Saying 20 says that the Disciples asked Jesus what the kingdom of heaven was like and he said to them: **“It is like a mustard seed. It is the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky.”**
3. In *Mark* 4:31-32, Jesus gives an almost identical answer to the same question.

4. Because of the number of sayings that appear both in the traditional Gospels and in the Gospel of Thomas, some scholars believe it may have been written by people who had actually heard Jesus speak and may be more accurate than the traditional Gospels.

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1. Others believe that the Gospel of Thomas was written much later than the four Gospels.
2. They point out that many sayings are unlike those in the traditional Gospels.
3. For example, Saying 56 says: **“Jesus said, ‘Whoever has come to understand the world has found (only) a corpse, and whoever has found a corpse is superior to the world.’”**
4. Saying 70 says: **“Jesus said, ‘That which you have will save you if you bring it forth from yourselves. That which you do not have within you [will] kill you if you do not have it within you.’”**

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1. The separate Infancy Gospel of Thomas probably began to circulate in the early second century and includes stories about Jesus during his childhood.
2. There are versions of the text in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Slavonic, Georgian, Ethiopic, and Arabic and evidence that it was used in churches in the Middle East at least into the seventh century.
3. In one story, five-year-old Jesus made 12 sparrows out of mud on the Sabbath and brought them to life by simply speaking to them. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 58.
4. The same story is in the Quran, in which Jesus says: **“I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, that I determine for you out of dust the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird with Allah’s permission”** Quran 3:49.

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1. The Proto-Gospel of James, written in the second century, identifies Mary’s parents as a wealthy man named Joachim and his wife Anna. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 64.
2. The Proto-Gospel of James established the tradition that Mary’s mother was named Anna or Anne, honored in this church north of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.
3. It reports that when Mary was in the cave after giving birth to Jesus, a woman, apparently a midwife, who did not believe that a virgin could have a child **“examine[d] her condition”** and assured herself that Mary was, in fact, a virgin. *Id.* at 70.

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1. Other gospels that circulated in the second century attempted to remove all blame for Jesus' death from Pontius Pilate, shown here washing his hands.
2. The Gospel of Peter blames the decision to crucify Jesus on Herod and the Jews and completely exonerates Pontius Pilate. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 17-24.
3. It also includes details of the resurrection of Jesus, in which the cross itself walks and talks. *Id.*
4. The Gospel of Peter was more popular than the Gospel of Mark during the early days of the church and reflected growing anti-Semitism. *Id.*

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1. By the middle of the second century, there was no consensus on which of the many gospels in circulation was more reliable than any others.
2. In about 150 A.D., Justin Martyr quoted from existing writings in making his arguments in support of Christianity.
3. **“But he never names these books: he instead simply calls them the ‘Memoirs of the Apostles.’ And he never indicated that there were just four of them.”** Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code* at 84.
4. Ironically, the first person to establish a list of Christian writings considered authentic was later condemned as a heretic.

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1. Although few Christians today have ever heard of him, Marcion was **“by all counts one of the most significant Christian thinkers and writers of the early centuries.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 103.
2. He who was born in 85 A.D. in Sinope, a sea port city on the southern edge of the Black Sea, and grew up in a church in which his father was the minister.
3. From his comparison of the letters of Paul with the Septuagint, Marcion concluded that **“the God of the Jewish Scriptures must be seen as a second, inferior deity, distinct from and opposed to the true God.”** Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* at 68.
4. Marcion presented his conclusion that there were two Gods to a church council in Rome, which excommunicated him for heresy in 144 A.D.

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1. Marcion then did what thousands of people since have done when they disagreed with the teachings of their church – he started his own church.
2. Within six years the number of Marcionites was about equal to the total of all other Christian groups.
3. This is an inscription from a Marcionite church found in Syria.
4. For use in his church, Marcion made a list of the 11 books he considered authoritative -- the Gospel of Luke and 10 letters of Paul.
5. Marcion did not include three letters -- 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus – that many scholars today believe were not written by Paul.
6. Believing that Jesus had simply arrived as an adult, Marcion eliminated from Luke the story of Jesus' conception and birth.
7. Many scholars see in Marcion's list the beginning of the idea of a New Testament including a selected list of writings.

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1. Other Christian groups found other Gospels uniquely authoritative.
2. The Ebionites **“regarded Jesus as an ordinary human being, the human son of Mary and Joseph.”** McGrath, *Historical Theology* at 45.
3. The Ebionites relied exclusively on **“a version of Matthew's gospel translated into Aramaic but without the passages on the virgin birth.”** Wade, *The Faith Instinct* at 164.
4. Followers of Valentinus relied exclusively on the Gospel of John. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Followers* at 91.

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1. By the second half of the second century, orthodox church leaders began trying to identify which of the many Gospels in circulation were authentic and which were not.
2. To counter what they believed to be the heresies of Marcion, the Ebionites and the Gnostics, they came up with their own lists of authentic books.
3. They also wanted to have a list of books comparable to the recently established canon of the Jews, with whom Christians were now competing.
4. In about 180 A.D., Irenaeus, a bishop from an area that is now in France, wrote: **“It is not possible that the Gospels can be either greater or fewer in number than**

they are. Just as there are four regions of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and since the Church is disseminated over all the earth, and the pillar and mainstay of the Church is the Gospel, the breath of life, it is fitting that she have four pillars, breathing immortality on every side and enkindling life in men anew.” Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 91.

5. Irenaeus selected Matthew, Mark, Luke and John over the many competing gospels because he thought they had been written either by an apostle or a student of an apostle. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology* at 52.

6. Irenaeus also described as **“scripture”** a book called “Shepherd of Hermas,” which reports a series of visions about Jesus. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* at 155.

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1. In about 1740, an Italian historian named Muratori found an 85-line document fragment written in Latin in a library in Milan.

2. Most scholars believe the fragment, called the Muratorian Fragment, is a translation of a Greek document written in about 180 A.D. listing books thought to include authentic teachings. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 107-08.

3. The fragment lists 22 books included in today’s New Testament -- four Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, thirteen letters of Paul, the letter of Jude, two letters of John, and the Apocalypse of John, today called Revelation. *Id.*

4. The list does not include Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter and 3 John, all of which are in today’s New Testament.

5. The list also includes the Apocalypse of Peter and the Wisdom of Solomon, books not included in today’s New Testament.

6. The Muratorian Fragment rejects Paul’s letters to the Laodiceans and the Alexandrians as having been **“forged in Paul’s name to further the heresies of Marcion.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 241.

7. Finally, it rejects the Shepherd of Hermas because it had been written recently.

8. The effort to authenticate certain books and reject others had its intended effect.

9. **“By 190 A.D. the churches clearly accepted the idea of Christian Scriptures alongside Jewish Scriptures, one fulfilling what the other promises.”** Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* at 66.

10. But the task of establishing which books were authentic was far from complete.

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1. In about 325 A.D., Eusebius wrote a ten-volume History of the Church, volume 3 of which reports on the status of the books claimed to be part of the New Testament.
2. In the category of **“Recognized Books,”** Eusebius placed the four gospels, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul, Hebrews, 1 Peter and 1 John. Eusebius, *The History of the Church* at 88.
3. He identified as **“disputed, but familiar to most”** the letters of Jude and James and those identified as 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John. *Id.*
4. He also identified the following **“Spurious Books”**: Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Revelation of Peter, Barnabas and Teachings of the Apostles. *Id.* at 89.
5. He rejected as forgeries the **“Gospels of Peter, Thomas, Mattias, and several others besides these,”** and **“the Acts of Andrew, John or other apostles.”** *Id.*
6. Eusebius placed the Revelation of John into two contradictory categories, saying that some viewed it as Recognized and others viewed it as Spurious. *Id.*
7. In volume 7, Eusebius quoted a long letter from Dionysus, a former bishop of Alexandria, saying his **“predecessors rejected [Revelation] and pulled it entirely to pieces, criticizing it chapter by chapter, pronouncing it unintelligible and its title false.”** *Id.* at 240.

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1. The Codex Sinaiticus **“is the oldest complete manuscript of the New Testament that exists today.”** Lightfoot, *How we got the Bible* at 51.
2. In addition to the 27 books we now consider the New Testament, it includes Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas, works that had been deemed “Spurious” by Eusebius only a few years earlier.

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1. The Codex Claromontanus is ancient manuscript containing the letters attributed to Paul and the letter to the Hebrews.
2. Someone inserted into the document a list of books considered to be authentic at the time, omitting Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Hebrews.
3. The list includes as authentic the Shepherd of Hermas and Barnabas.

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1. In 367 A.D., Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, sought to bring a close to ongoing debates about which books should be included in the New Testament.

2. In his annual Easter letter to his churches in Alexandria, he identified the same 27 books we have in our New Testament, saying that “[o]nly in these is the teaching of piety proclaimed. Let no man add to these, nor take away from them.” Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 342.
3. Athanasius gave the benefit of the doubt to all the books identified as “Disputed” by Eusebius and simply proclaimed them authentic, attributing Hebrews to Paul. *Id.*
4. **“Most Christians ended up agreeing with the canon laid out by Athanasius.”** Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code* at 94.
5. After all, Athanasius had won the debate with Arius about the divinity of Jesus at the Council of Nicaea, leading to Arius being deemed a heretic.
6. But that was not enough for everyone, even in Alexandria.
7. A few years later, a famous teacher in Alexandria claimed 2 Peter was a forgery and quoted from Shepherd of Hermas and Barnabas. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 231.

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1. In 393 A.D., Augustine convinced the Synod of Hippo to acknowledge that the New Testament included only the books identified by Athanasius.
2. This action was accepted by other synods and became accepted by the Roman Catholic Church and later by Greek Orthodox and Protestants.
3. But, as Bart Ehrman writes: **“there has never been complete agreement on the canon throughout the Christian world.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 231.
4. In the fifth century, the church in Syria excluded 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation, all considered “Disputed” by Eusebius.
5. The Church in Ethiopia has 35 books in its New Testament, including Sinodos, the Book of Clement, the Book of the Covenant and Didascalia.

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1. As we come to the end of this series, it seems appropriate to try to answer a basic question that I suggested when I began – what should Christians make of all this?
2. What should we make of the fact that by the beginning of the fourth century, the authenticity of some of the books we have in our Bibles was disputed and some at that time considered Revelation to be “Spurious”?
3. What should we make of the fact that Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox have in their Old Testaments books they believe reflect the words of God that Protestants have left out because Martin Luther believed they did not?

4. And looking back at last week's presentation, what should we make of the fact that the Gospel of John says that Jesus was arrested before the Passover meal and the other Gospels say he was arrested after that meal?
5. Or what should we make of the fact that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke contain irreconcilable versions of the genealogy of Jesus or that David may not have written the Psalms?

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1. Let's first look at the Gospels, which contain variations in their accounts of Jesus' life and death.
2. Because of these contradictions, the late Christopher Hitchens writes: **“Either the Gospels are in some sense literal truth, or the whole thing is essentially a fraud and perhaps an immoral one at that.”** Hitchens, *God is Not Great* at 120.

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1. But that criticism and similar ones seeking to undermine the authority of the Bible overlook the most important and irrefutable fact – every one of the Gospels reports not only that Jesus was crucified, but that he was raised from the dead.
2. Even Mark, which generally describes Jesus as a human being adopted by God at his baptism, says: **“He has risen.”** *Mark* 16:6.
3. Because no one claims that any writing says otherwise, what difference should it make to Christians if Jesus was arrested before the Passover meal or after?
4. Skeptics' claims that differences in details mean that the agreement on fundamentals is false is upside down – the agreement on fundamentals is what is important.
5. If all witnesses to an accident agree that car the car going north hit the car going south, but disagree about the speed of the cars, we still reliably conclude that the car going north hit the car going south.

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1. The insistence of some Christians that every word of the Bible has to be literally true supports the claims of those who attack the Bible based on its inconsistencies.
2. In her book, *The Bible*, Karen Armstrong, a former nun, writes: **“The Bible is in danger of becoming a dead or irrelevant letter; it is being distorted by claims for its literal infallibility.”** Armstrong, *The Bible* at 229.
3. As she states: **“If an interpretation concentrate[s] only on what the Biblical author said, and ignore[s] the way generations of Jews and Christians ha[ve] understood it, it distort[s] the significance of the Bible.”** *Id.* at 221.

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1. Those who would ridicule the Bible point to statements inconsistent with our current understanding of science, such as the one in Joshua that “[t]he sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day.” *Joshua* 10:13.
2. We can believe that God gave Joshua courage to fight his battles without believing that the earth literally stopped moving around the sun.
3. Even today people claim that in crucial situations it seems as if time stands still.
4. The real point of the story is that the “**LORD listened to a man.**” *Joshua* 10:14.

Slide 42

1. In Genesis, Adam and Eve “**hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.**” *Genesis* 3:8.
2. In Luke, Jesus “**knew what [people] were thinking.**” *Luke* 5:22.
3. Marcion argued that a God who can determine what people think cannot be the same God as one who cannot find people hiding among the trees.
4. But Marcion ignored a crucial fact that the Bible itself makes clear – as time went by, people of God came to a more and more sophisticated understanding of his nature.
5. According to *Numbers* 23:19, “**God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind.**”
6. God’s nature may be unchanging, but the human understanding of that nature is constantly evolving.

Slide 43

1. I want to end this series by trying to answer the most important question of all about the Bible – in what sense is it or does it include the words of God?
2. We surely can agree that any contradictions and errors are not God’s words, but the words of fallible human beings seeking to interpret the words of God.
3. And we can surely agree that at least some of the words in the Bible were written down by people with human objectives and biases and reflect the limits of human understanding.
4. But we can also agree that Jews and Christians for thousands of years have found in the words of the Bible comfort and inspiration and an understanding of the nature of God and God’s purpose for their lives.
5. We don’t have to believe that David wrote the 23rd Psalm to know that hearing its words at times of crisis or loss comforts us.

6. Whoever wrote those words was inspired in ways that move us even today.
7. In every meaningful sense, those and many other similar passages in the Bible are the words of God.

Slide 44

1. We don't have to assume that Matthew's genealogy of Jesus is accurate to know the Sermon on the Mount helps us know how God wants us to live.
2. That is, of course, the primary purpose of Scripture.
3. As whoever wrote the second letter to Timothy said: **“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 Timothy* 3:16-17.
4. In every meaningful sense, the Sermon on the Mount contains the words of God.
5. In every meaningful sense, the command of Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves is the word of God.
6. Each of you will have your own examples of Biblical teachings that are meaningful in your lives and have brought you closer to God.
7. Those examples, and I am sure you have many, are the words of God, speaking directly to you.

Slide 45

1. In *How to Read the Bible*, James Kugel, an orthodox Jewish scholar, writes: **“[I]t is not the divine origin of each and every word that gives Scripture its authority, but the fact that the Bible as we know it was at one point put forth as the law of the land . . . and accepted as such by Jews and, later, by Christians. Undoubtedly, it did contain some ‘words of God’ . . . , but that is not the source of Scripture’s authority. Its authority derives from its having been accepted in its present form – words of and word about God all together – and given the status of Scripture, the great book of divine teaching.”** Kugel, *How to Read the Bible* at 567.
2. Once we can all agree that any inconsistencies in the Bible do not detract from its overall authority, we can appreciate how people of faith, all believing the Bible contains the words of God, can come to different conclusions about some matters while still believing in those teachings on which there is fundamental agreement.
3. And once we can all agree that the Bible includes the words of God despite any errors and contradictions, we will have rescued it from those critics who say that if a single word is not true, none of it can be true.
4. With that simple understanding, based on common sense, the Bible can resume, without apology or embarrassment, the place of importance it deserves in our lives.

5. It is to foster that understanding that I have made these presentations.

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