

How We Got Our New Testament
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Introduction

We call the 27 books that comprise our New Testament the “New Testament **Canon**.” The word “canon” is actually a Greek word that means “**rule**” or “**measure**.”

For example, the word “canon” is used in Galatians 6:16—“As for all who walk by this **rule**, peace and mercy be upon them.” In the overall context of the letter to the Galatians, Paul is saying that there is a **standard** by which he wanted the church to measure up, and whoever was not walking according to that standard was not living out the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Notice, then, that a canon is a standard that **limits** or **confines**.

When applied to the New Testament, the word canon means those original, Greek writings which **measure up to** or **meet the standard of** being the Word of God.

And the canon **limits** those writings to 27 “books”—no greater, no fewer; 27 books which are believed to comprise the authoritative writings divinely given by God to the church.

Yet a 27-book New Testament canon raises several questions which God’s people should be able to answer, especially when skeptics attack the accuracy and authority of the Bible:

1. How do we know that these and these only 27 Greek documents are the writings God gave to the church?
2. Are the present Greek copies of these books accurate?
3. Do we have confident English translations of the original Greek?
4. Why are other early writings rejected from the canon, even though they claim to be from God or his apostles?

Question 1: Why these and these only 27 New Testament Books?

The Attack: The New Testament canon was formed by the followers of one version of Christianity which dominated in the first centuries A.D. Because they were the most politically powerful, they were able to reject and destroy the other writings and call their own version “orthodox” (correct doctrine). Then they rewrote history to make people think that their version of Christianity was the original version, and the other versions were “heterodox” (different/false doctrine).

This view was articulated by Walter Bauer (1877–1960), who argued that it is not scientific to assume that what we call “orthodoxy” came first, and that “heresy” is a diversion from the original teaching. When we think this way we merely side with the “winners” who forced their views on the “losers,” destroyed their texts as best they could and wrote the historical account in order to convince everyone afterwards that their view was always the right view—the one taught by Jesus and his apostles. In other words, what we call “heresy” actually came *before* what we call “orthodoxy,” not the other way around.

Recently, Bauer’s views have been republished in the writings of Bart D. Ehrman, who is the “James A. Gray Distinguished Professor” in the Department of Religion at UNC, Chapel Hill. Ehrman continues to publish books such as these titles:

Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why. HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know About Them). HarperCollins, 2009.

Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are. HarperCollins, 2011.

The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations. (Co-authored with Zlatko Pleše.) Oxford University Press, 2011.

Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth. HarperCollins, 2012.

Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics. Oxford University Press, 2012.

The Other Gospels: Accounts of Jesus from Outside the New Testament. Oxford University Press, 2013.

How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee. HarperOne, 2014.

In the contemporary climate of postmodernism, the Bauer/Ehrman teaching sounds very attractive. Ehrman revises church history to show how those who wanted simply to follow their own interpretation of Jesus’ teaching were scandalized and demonized by the authoritarian Roman church and other powerhouses of religion, and forced to give up their own sacred texts. Many of these texts were destroyed, others were buried and recently rediscovered.

[For an orthodox response to Ehrman, read Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture’s Fascination with Diversity has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity.* Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2010.]

The Answer: There are two answers to the question, *Why these and these only 27 New Testament Books?* There is a *theological* answer, and a *historical* answer. Not only do they answer the Bauer/Ehrman attack, but they also give us assurance that our New Testament canon was providentially and supernaturally given to us by God.

1. The Theological Answer: We have these 27 books because God himself gave them to the church.

a. *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God* (2 Tim 3:16).

(1) “Scripture” = a reference to OT Scriptures (*mainly*), but applies to all of the Bible.

(2) “Inspiration” = the Greek word *theopneustos*, or God-breathed. So the word does not really refer to *inspiration* but *spiration*

God “**breathed**” his word through the men who wrote it down.

Note: This God’s “breathing” does not explain the *process* of *how* God gave us the Scriptures. It merely tells us that the Bible is sourced in God himself; it came from his innermost being; God himself breathed it out.

b. *Men from God spoke as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit* (2 Pet 1:20–21).

The Spirit *superintended* the process of the writing of the word of God, even though the way the Word was written happened in a variety of ways. What are some of the ways that God gave his word in the New Testament?

(1) Eye witness accounts (Matt, John, Luke [writing Acts], Peter)

(2) Historical investigation (Luke writing his gospel and Acts)

(3) Occasional Letters to the churches or to individuals (Paul, Peter, James, John): example, Jude, who was going to write about salvation, but found it necessary to write about contending for the faith (Jude 3)

(4) Use of a scribe (*amanuensis*) or written by hand. *Who wrote Romans?* Paul. But see Rom 16:22! The Bible says Tertius wrote Romans!

Note Paul’s own hand – 1 Cor 16:21–23; Gal 6:11–18 (“what large letters”); Col4:18; 2 Thess 3:17–18 (“I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.”)

(5) Direct revelation from Jesus and angels (John writing Revelation)

Summary: *Why these and these only 27 books?* Theologically, *these are the books that God, through the superintending work of the Spirit, led men to write, “breathing” his word through them.* This is Scripture’s own claim.

2. The Historical Answer: We have these 27 books because these are the books *which the church itself, over time, recognized as “God-breathed” Scripture. In other words, they recognized that these books “measure up to” being the very word of God.*
 - a. New Testament Writings were recognized as Scripture by other NT authors.
 - (1) 1 Tim 5:18. “For the **Scripture** says: ‘You must not muzzle an ox that is threshing grain,’ [cf. Deut 25:4] and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages’” [cf. Luke 10:7]
 - (a) The author was referring to a **written** source (“Scriptures”).
 - (b) That source was considered to be authoritative like Deuteronomy.
 - (2) 2 Pet 3:15–16. “[Paul] speaks about these things in *all his letters*, in which there are some matters that are hard to understand. The untaught and unstable twist them to their own destruction, as they also do with *the rest of the Scriptures.*”
 - (a) Peter views Paul’s letters as “**Scripture.**”
 - (b) He accepted his letters as Scripture even while the NT was still being produced.
 - (c) He seems to have in mind a *collection* of letters, a collection of at least 3, probably more (note “all” his letters).

Excursus on Ancient Letter Writing and Letter Collections

1. Letter copying very expensive and time-consuming.
2. The author would often retain his own copy, making his own collection.
3. Collections were put in an order that was easiest to copy: largest to smallest, similar books together.
4. Books “traveled” around the ancient world bound together in collections. For example:
 - a. The four Gospels are always found together.
 - b. Books were collected into blocks: Matthew—John | Romans—Galatians | Ephesians—2 Thess. | 1 Timothy—Philemon | Hebrews | Catholic Epistles | Revelation
 - c. The manuscripts show evidence of an editor, possibly an apostle (John?), superintending the collection and copying process from a very early date.
 - (1) *Nomina Sacra*, “sacred names,” are abbreviated identically in every manuscript.
 - (2) The titles of the writings show an obvious editor. Gospels = “According to.” Paul’s epistles = “To the Romans, to the Corinthians,” etc. Catholic epistles = “Of/from James, of/from Peter,” etc.

- b. There is evidence in the **Apostolic Fathers** that the church recognized the 27 canonical books as Scripture at a very early date.
- (1) 1 Clement: refers to many NT books the same way he refers to the OT
 - (2) 2 Clement: “And another Scripture says, ‘I came not to call the righteous, but sinners’” (quotation of Mark 2:17).
 - (3) Polycarp to the Philippians: “Only, as it is said in these scriptures, “*be angry but do not sin,*” and “*do not let the sun set on your anger*” (Polycarp *Phil* 12.1 quoting Eph 4:25).
 - (4) All books except 3 John cited as authoritative Scripture in AF.
- c. There is other early evidence that the church recognized the 27 canonical books.
- (1) **Marcion’s Canon**” (c. 144)
 - (a) Marcion rejected all NT writings that were pro-Jewish in his estimation, retaining only the following: Luke, Rom, 1–2 Cor, Gal, Eph, Phil, Col, 1–2 Thess, Phile.
 - (b) **Significance:** If Marcion rejected *other* NT writings, what writings was he rejecting? The fact that he could choose some *and not others* implies that there was an established corpus of documents which were considered authoritative.
 - (2) “**Muratorian Canon**” (c. 170)
 - (a) Named for the man who discovered it, Father Ludovico Antonio Muratori, a highly acclaimed Italian historian in the early 18th century (1672–1750).
 - (b) The “Muratorian Canon” is a fragment of a Latin translation of a Greek ms containing a list of NT books, believed to be composed around 170 A.D.
 - (c) The Muratorian Canon lists at least 22 of the 27 books of the NT canon: The four Gospels, Acts, Paul’s 13 Epistles, at least two of John’s letters (maybe three), Jude, and Rev (excludes Heb, James, 1, 2 Peter, possibly one of John’s epistles).
 - (d) **Significance:** A recognizable “canon” in the second century.
 - (3) **Eusebius’s *History of the Church*, 3.25.1–7** (ca. 320–330)
 - (a) Eusebius recognized the 4 Gospels, Acts, Paul’s Epistles, 1 John, 1 Pet, and Rev (with reservation).
 - (b) Eusebius considered “doubtful” Jas, Jude, 2 Pet, 2 and 3 John, but still included them as possibilities.
 - (c) By contrast, Eusebius lists several other contenders as rejected or heretical.
 - (d) **Significance:** The 27 NT books are considered as universally recognized or doubtfully so, neither more nor less, as opposed to several other books which were not to be included.

- (4) **Athanasius's** Festal (Easter) Letter of 367
- (a) Athanasius (b. ca. 296–298 – d. 2 May 373) was the 20th bishop of Alexandria.
 - (b) One of the annual duties of the bishop was to compose a letter to the churches declaring when Easter should be observed that year. The letter would also contain a homily on a particular subject. In 367 the subject was the books that were considered apostolic and authoritative for the church.
 - (c) He stated, “There must be no hesitation to state again the [books] of the NT; for they are these:” and then listed the 27 books that we now have in our NT *in the same order in which we have them today*.
 - (d) **Significance:** First full canon of the NT that we know of.
- d. Factors which urged the church to select a canon. These are circumstances within the providence of God, which spurred the church forward in adopting a canon. (Main points below cited from Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Lion and the Lamb* [B&H Publishing, 2012], 5–6.)
- (1) “The **prophetic** nature of the NT books”: they were prophetic, valuable, and worthy of preservation.
 - (2) “The church’s need for **authoritative** Scriptures”: the church needed copies of apostolic teaching to read in the churches alongside the Hebrew OT (cf. 1 Thess 5:27; 1 Tim 4:13); this required a selection process.
 - (3) “Heretical challenges” such as Marcion (above) encouraged the church to “**correct**” the heresy proactively.
 - (4) “**Missionary outreach**”: books began to be translated into other languages, hence the question, “Which books should be translated?”
 - (5) “**Persecution**”: Diocletian in 303 ordered all Christian books to be burned, forcing believers to choose, if they could hide some of their books, which were most precious to them. There are detailed accounts of thorough searching for the “books composed by the impious Christians,” and of those who chose to suffer execution than to release the sacred Scriptures. When the Imperial officer knocks on your door and asks for your sacred book, are you going to give him John or the Gospel of Thomas? The Epistle of Peter, or the Epistle of Barnabas? To hand over the Scriptures would have been a matter of conscience, which is why we surmise that believers at this time were encouraged to say what their most sacred books were.
- e. Criteria for deciding which book was canonical:
- (1) **Apostolicity:** if it was written by or in direct association with an apostle.
 - (2) **Orthodoxy:** if the writing conformed to the church’s *regula fidei* (“rule of faith”).
 - (3) **Antiquity:** if the writing was produced during the apostolic era.
 - (4) **Ecclesiastical Usage:** if the writing was widely accepted in the churches.

- f. Significant conclusions from the theological and historical development of the NT canon:
- (1) The church did not *invent* its Scriptures; the Word was *delivered* to the saints (Jude 3).
 - (2) The church is under the authority of the Scriptures. *The church did not create the Canon; the Canon created the church!*
3. A Response to Bart Ehrman and the Bauer Thesis.
- a. In his *Lost Christianities* (2009), Ehrman offers reasons why the Christianity expressed in the NT canon we have today simply “won” over other expressions of Christianity. Four main reasons are: (1) their religion was rooted in ancient beliefs that made it palatable to Rome; (2) they rejected the practices of Judaism such as circumcision which had equal effect on its acceptance; (3) the power of church hierarchy, especially Rome, enforced the faith on other cultures; and (4) good communication (e.g. Ignatius journey to Rome and the communication to the other churches). I find it highly unlikely that Christianity caught on because it was palatable to anyone. For one, the cross was an offense. For another, Christians were severely persecuted, often cruelly tortured and executed because of their faith. Christianity was not at all palatable to Rome; it was an enigma to Rome. And no amount of attraction other than the efficacy of the gospel itself, through the power of the Spirit, would have caused it to spread. This is to say that there was something inherent in the truth of Christianity itself that was eternal, that stood the test of time and attack, and will continue to do so into the future.
 - b. Ehrman also makes these assumptions: (1) one faith is as good as another; (2) history is determined by its “winners”; (3) the “winners” establish orthodoxy; (4) there was no “original right” with respect to truth; and (5) another faith could have won. There is nothing new in Ehrman’s views. There were all asserted by Walter Bauer less than a century ago and were *defeated* by Christian scholars. They are assumptions that are raised by an empirical view of history, which is left to explain how a seemingly marginal religion based upon an obscure Jewish figure in Palestine could reshape the entire world. They are assumptions divorced from belief in a God of providence, if they involve any faith at all, and only in a postmodern climate could Ehrman succeed in reviving them.
 - c. We should beware, however, that Ehrman’s view is the prevailing view in the West today. And it is important for scholars and pastors to be able to articulate a response to Ehrman in order to bolster the spiritual understanding and faith of the Church.
 - d. The idea of “Christianities” is condemning to the faith of Scripture. To have more than one “Christianity” is to have *no true* Christianity, no true gospel, no true Savior. This means that, in the end, Ehrman’s book is a version of the very heresy he treats so lightly as if to think the heterodoxical view could have “triumphed” instead. It is for this reason that I suggest a better title for *Lost Christianities* is, simply, *Lost*.

Question 2: Are the Greek Copies of the NT Manuscripts Accurate?

The Attack: We do not possess the original copies (autographs) of the NT. In fact, we don't even have a direct copy of the original, nor a copy of a copy, nor even a copy of a copy of a copy. So we are not able to get very close to the original source. Furthermore, the copying of copies of the Greek manuscripts were not perfect; copyists made mistakes along the way. So the ancient New Testament Greek manuscripts from which we derive our English translations have been corrupted through time.

The Answer: The history of the translation of the Greek text reveals to us how amazingly preserved are our New Testament documents. In this section we will cover a very brief history of the transmission of the Greek New Testament.

1. There are no **originals** (autographs); only copies.
2. These copies were written primarily on **papyrus** or **parchment**. Ancient books were copied on "rolls"; but the phenomenon of Christianity is that it gave rise to the *codex*, where more could be fitted by writing on both sides of the surface.
3. The Greek NT was translated into several other **languages**: Syriac, Latin, Coptic.
4. The Greek NT was also quoted by the church fathers in their writings. In fact, if we had no Greek text whatsoever, we could still reconstruct almost the entire NT from the quotations of the Fathers.
5. Through a long and complicated history of scribal reproductions, thousands of copies and deteriorating fragments of copies of Greek texts and translations were repositied in churches, monasteries, and libraries all over the world, primarily in and around urban centers where Christianity thrived (e.g. Alexandria, Egypt; Jerusalem; Rome; Constantinople or modern Istanbul).
6. These repositories of texts gave rise to several text types called "**families**" of Greek manuscripts which were copied independently from one another:
 - a. **Alexandrian** Family (Egyptian): Often *oldest* because of the preserving climate
 - b. **Western** Family (Italy, Gaul, North Africa including Egypt)
 - c. **Byzantine** (Syria): the *latest* text type and one bearing readings which were often "smoothed" out (not like comparing the NASB to the NIV, but perhaps the ESV).
 - d. **Caesarean** (Jerusalem): appears to have originated in Alexandria, but brought to Caesarea where it was copied by Christian groups and took on a family life of its own; repositied in and around Jerusalem.

7. The Publication of the Greek New Testament (after the movable type printing press was invented around 1440):
 - a. The **Textus Receptus** (“received” or “popular” text): 1515–16
 - (1) Desiderius **Erasmus** of Rotterdam (1469–1536) was commissioned to produce a printable Greek text.
 - (2) The project was hurried because the publisher was eager to get the volume on the market.
 - (3) Erasmus was allowed little time to find suitable manuscripts upon which to base his Greek New Testament. In the end, he settled on about six or seven late mss of the Byzantine family. There were about a dozen places where the Greek text was actually missing (mainly at the end of Revelation), which Erasmus “filled in” from the Latin translation. [Rev 22:19 – “book of life” (AV) vs. “tree of life” (non-AV).]
 - (4) The first edition was full of typographical errors which were edited in several subsequent editions for over 100 years. In 1633 an edition was published which boasted that the reader was holding in his hands “the text that was now received by all.” For some reason, this phrase captured people’s imaginations, and the phrase *textus receptus* or “received text” became the common name for this series of Greek New Testaments.
 - (5) The TR became *the definitive Greek text used by the church*, to the point that even when later scholars desired to produce a GNT, they were fearful of publishing a Greek text that differed from the TR.
 - (6) The TR is the Greek text upon which the King James Bible is based. There is a lot of popular superstition, hundreds of years old, which still surrounds this translation and the text upon which it is based.
 - b. Editions of the GNT after the TR
 - (1) Johann Jakob **Griesbach** (1745–1812): Made significant advancements in our understanding of the text of the Greek New Testament; *the first who dared to publish an edition of the Greek text which departed from the reading of the TR*.
 - (2) Lobegott Friedrich Constantin von **Tischendorf** (1815–74): discovered and published more manuscripts and editions of the GNT than any other single scholar. *Known for his great discoveries of ancient manuscripts*.
 - (3) Brooke Foss **Westcott** (1825–1901) and Fenton John Anthony **Hort** (1828–92) published in 1881 the most significant critical edition of the GNT to that date. *A “critical text” is a Greek text with notes showing the variations between the mss*.
 - (4) Eberhard **Nestle** published an edition based on Tischendorf and the Westcott/Hort editions in 1898. This GNT was later revised by Erwin Nestle and Kurt Aland. Today this publication is in its 27th edition. (NA27)
 - (5) The **United Bible Societies** published an edition in 1966 which sought to include all of the important variations between Greek mss. It was specifically designed for use by pastors and students. Today it is in its 4th edition. (UBS4)
 - (6) Modern versions are based upon a critical text, mainly NA27 or UBS4.
 - (7) The NKJV follows the TR, but includes notes indicating alternate readings in the other editions of the GNT.

8. Today, the original text of the GNT is preserved through thousands of copies: almost **6,000** Greek manuscripts, over **10,000** Latin translation mss, and more than **9,300** early versions have so far been discovered, and are continuing to be discovered.
9. Concerning the variations between the manuscripts:
 - a. Variations are mostly **very minor**.
 - b. In the vast majority of cases, the original text can be easily discerned through the process of **textual criticism**. Examples of text critical principles:
 - (1) The text closest to the original will be more accurate, since mistakes happen over time.
 - (2) The majority of texts that agree often outweigh the few which differ. *However . . .*
 - (3) If the majority reading occurs in the same “family,” and the other families bear a different reading, it may be that the one family is corrupted.
 - (4) Critics often ask, “Which reading best explains the other(s)?” For instance, the shorter and more complicated readings are to be preferred in most cases because scribes tended to *add* words to make a text easier to understand or to make the theology more accurate.
 - (5) A vast majority of differences are obvious mistakes in spelling or word order: a scribe may have missed a line or picked up at another point in the text.
 - (6) Some well-known examples of textual variations:
 - (a) Eph 1:7 versus Col 1:14 – Col does not have “through his blood.” It is evident since the phrase is lacking in the best mss that a scribe interpolated the phrase from Ephesians.
 - (b) Ending of Mark’s Gospel – In the best mss, Mark’s gospel ends at verse 8. But there are at least four versions of a longer ending of Mark which have been in circulation since perhaps the fourth century. There is abundant evidence that a scribe or scribes added the last sixteen verses in order to smooth out the rather abrupt ending to Mark. Nevertheless, in order to give deference to the time-honored tradition of the longer Markan ending, the editors of the GNT have included the ending in brackets. Several English versions have followed suit.
 - (c) 1 John 5:7–8 in the KJV. Called the *Comma Johanneum*, the AV adds the words, “the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth.” Erasmus was forced to add these words to the TR even though he made a notation that they are not original.
 - (d) Rev 19:22 – Where the GNT has “tree of life,” the TR has “book of life.” This, again, is due to Erasmus. Because he did not have the last six verses of Revelation, he translated them from the Latin Vulgate, which contained the error, “book of life.” (The Latin was incorrect because an earlier scribe had misread *ligno* (tree) and instead wrote *libro* (book).

- (7) The cases where the original reading is very difficult to discern would fill up only half a page of the GNT; and if we made all of the wrong choices concerning which was accurate, the choices would have no impact on our orthodoxy.
- (8) The differences are the exception to the rule. There are no variations between the majority of the Greek mss that we have available to us. Multiple witnesses to the original *autographs* have preserved for us the very word of God.
- (9) *We must bear in mind that our confidence that we have the divine, authoritative Word is only partially augmented by the fact that we have a well-attested text. As believers, we also are assured by the fact that the Bible claims to be God's word, its claims correspond to reality, though written by so many human authors it displays remarkable unity of faith, its power to transform lives as well as whole people groups is evident, and by the witness of the Holy Spirit within us.*

Question 3: Do We Have Accurate English Translations?

The Attack: There are several ways that people have tried to undermine the publication of good translations and the work of competent translators. For instance, one view insists that there is one and only one translation that God has blessed in the English language and it alone should be used. Another view despairs that an accurate translation is possible because of the multiplicity of ways different translations have brought the original language into modern English.

The Answer: Understanding a little of translation history, and seeing the process of how the Bible is translated from one language to another, and recognizing that we have many good translations available to us to compare with each other boosts our confidence in modern translations.

Because this topic is so immense, we are going to center our thoughts around an informal article on Bible translations written by Daniel B. Wallace, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, director of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, and scholarly author.

Daniel B. Wallace, "Choosing a Bible Translation"
 Bible Study Magazine (Nov–Dec, 2008): 23–26
 [Additions appear in text boxes.]

Before the year 1881, you had three choices for an English Bible translation: the KJV, the KJV, or the KJV. Obviously, this is no longer the case. How did the King James Version get dethroned? Which translation is best today? Are any of the modern translations faithful to the original?

What is a Faithful Translation?

Many people today think that a faithful translation of the Bible means a "word-for-word" translation. If the original has a noun, they expect a noun in the translation. If the original has sixteen words, they don't want to see seventeen in the translation. This type of translation is called "formal equivalence." The KJV, ASV and NASB come the closest to this ideal.

On the other end of the spectrum is a "phrase-for-phrase" translation, also known as a "dynamic equivalence" or, more recently, as a "functional equivalence" translation. A dynamic equivalence translation is not as concerned with the grammatical form of the original language, as it is with the meaning of the original. It allows more room for interpretation and is easier to understand. The NIV and the NEB follow this philosophy.

Approaches to Translation	
Formal Equivalence	Dynamic Equivalence
<p>Word-for-word</p> <p>Sometimes stilted language, harder to read</p> <p>Aims for strictly "literal" rendition of the words of the original</p>	<p>Thought-for-thought</p> <p>Flows nicely, easier to read</p> <p>Aims to communicate the <i>thought</i> of the original, even if words are changed</p>

The Difficulty of Translating a Language

Anyone who has learned a second language knows that a word-for-word translation is impossible much or most of the time. Idioms and colloquialisms in a language need to be paraphrased to make sense in another language.

Even the KJV translators realized this. In a couple of places in the Old Testament, the Hebrew text literally reads, "God's nostrils enlarged." But, the KJV translates this as, "God became angry"—which is what the expression means. In Matthew 1:18 the KJV says that Mary was found to be with child. But the Greek is quite different and quite graphic: "Mary was having it in the belly!" In many places in Paul's letters, the KJV reads, "God forbid!" But the original has neither "God" nor "forbid." Literally, it says, "May it never be!" (as most modern translations render it).

Therefore, when we speak of a translation being faithful to the original, we need to clarify the question: Is it faithfulness to form? Or, faithfulness to meaning? Sometimes faithfulness to one involves lack of fidelity to the other. There are problems with each of the translation philosophies. The KJV, with its attempted fidelity to form, does not make sense in some passages. (In 1611, these instances did not make sense either). Likewise, The NASB often contains wooden, stilted English.

On the other hand, functional equivalence translations sometimes go too far in their interpretation of a particular phrase. The NIV, in Eph 6:6, tells slaves to "Obey (their masters) not only to win their favor." However, the word "only" is not in the Greek, and I suspect that Paul did not mean to imply it either. This reveals one of the problems with dynamic equivalence translations: the translators don't always know whether their interpretation is correct. The addition of one interpretively-driven word can change the entire meaning of a clause or a passage.

Some versions don't interpret—they distort. Some are notorious for omitting references to Christ's blood, or for attempting to deny his deity. In these instances, the translators are neither faithful to the form or the meaning. They have perverted the Word of God.

Yet, functional equivalence translators who are honest with the text often make things very clear. In Phil 2:6, for example, the NIV tells us that Jesus was "in [his] very nature God." But most formal equivalence translations state that he was in the form of God. The problem with these formally correct translations is that they are misleading: the Greek word for "form" here means essence or nature.

A formal equivalence translation lets the reader interpret for himself or herself. However, the reader often does not have the background information or the tools to interpret accurately. The net result is that he or she runs the risk of misunderstanding the text, simply because their translation was not clear enough. On the other hand, a functional equivalence translation is usually clear and quite understandable. But if the translators missed the point of the original (either intentionally or unintentionally) they may communicate an idea foreign to the biblical text.

Which Translation Is Best?

To the question: Which translation is best?—There can be no singular answer. I suggest that every Christian who is serious about studying the Bible own at least two translations. At least one formal equivalence (word-for-word) translation and one functional equivalence (phrase-for-phrase) translation. It would be even better to have two good functional equivalence translations because in this type of translation, the translator is also the interpreter. If the translator's interpretation is correct, it can only clarify the meaning of the text; if it is incorrect, then it only clarifies the interpretation of the translator!

The King James Version (KJV) and The New King James Version (NKJV)

The KJV has with good reason been termed, "the noblest monument of English prose" (RSV preface). Above all its rivals, the KJV has had the greatest impact in shaping the English language. It is a literary masterpiece. But, lest anyone wishes to revere it because it was "good enough for Jesus," or some such nonsense, we must remember that the KJV of today is not the KJV of 1611. It has undergone three revisions, incorporating more than 100,000 changes. Even with all these changes, much of the evidence from new manuscript discoveries has not been incorporated. The KJV was translated from later manuscripts that are less accurate to the original text of the Bible. Furthermore, there are over 300 words in the KJV that no longer mean what they meant in 1611. If one wishes to use a Bible that follows the same Greek and Hebrew texts as the KJV, I recommend the New King James Version (NKJV).

Revised Standard Version (RSV) and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The RSV was completed in 1952 and was intended to be, in part, a revision of the KJV. Its attempt to be a fairly literal translation makes its wording still archaic at times. The NRSV follows the same principle of translation, though it has been updated based on new manuscript discoveries, exegetical insights, and linguistic theories. Much of the difficult wording has been made clearer, and gender-inclusive language has been incorporated. At times, this is very helpful; at other times, it is misleading.

The American Standard Version (ASV) and The New American Standard Bible (NASB)

Like the RSV, the ASV and NASB were intended to be a revision of the KJV. However, there are three major differences between the RSV and the NASB: (1) the NASB is less archaic in its wording; (2) its translators were more theologically conservative than the RSV translators; and (3) because of the translators' desire to adhere as closely as possible to the wording of the original, the translation often contains stilted and wooden English.

New English Bible (NEB) and the Revised English Bible (REB)

The NEB was completed in 1971, after a quarter of a century of labor. It marks a new milestone in translation: it is not a revision of the KJV, nor of any other version, but a brand new translation. It is a phrase-for-phrase translation. Unfortunately, sometimes the biases of the translators creep into the text. The REB follows the same pattern as the NEB: excellent English, though not always faithful to the Greek and Hebrew.

New International Version (NIV) & Today's New International Version (TNIV)

The NIV was published in 1978. It may be considered a counterpart to the NEB. (The NEB is strictly a British product, while the NIV is an international product). It is more of a phrase-for-phrase translation than a word-for-word translation. The translators were generally more conservative than those who worked on the NEB. I personally consider it the best phrase-for-phrase translation available today. However, its major flaw is its simplicity of language. The editors wanted to make sure it was easy to read. In achieving this goal, they often sacrificed accuracy. In the New Testament, sentences are shortened, subordination of thought is lost, and conjunctions are often deleted.

The TNIV is to the NIV what the NRSV is to the RSV. Gender-inclusive language is used, and specific terminology is clarified (e.g., instead of "the Jews," the TNIV will read "the Jewish leaders," and when "Christ" is used as a title, is substituted for "Messiah"). This is usually helpful, but such interpretations built into a translation can at times be misleading.

The Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)

The HCSB, first published in 1999, uses a translational philosophy called "optimal equivalence." Where a word-for-word translation is not clear in English, they will opt for a phrase-for-phrase translation. The translation incorporates new manuscript discoveries, as well as contains many important translational footnotes. The HCSB is a nice alternative to choosing between a formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence translation.

English Standard Version (ESV)

The ESV, published in 2001, is the newest and most up-to-date formal equivalent translation. The ESV has eliminated the stilted English of translations like the NASB, while maintaining the literary excellence of translations like the KJV. Even though the ESV is a new translation, it maintains some of the theological terms that have systematically developed in English (e.g., justification, sanctification and propitiation). The ESV has also consistently translated specific terms in the original language to make theological developments easier to follow, and English concordance searches more accurate. Like the KJV, it has many unforgettable expressions, suitable for memorizing.

New English Translation (NET)

The net Bible was published in 2005. The net has all the earmarks of a great translation. At times, it is more accurate than the NASB, more readable than the NIV, and more elegant than either. It is clear and eloquent, while maintaining the meaning of the original. In addition, the notes are a genuine gold mine of information, unlike those found in any other translation. The net aims to be gender-neutral. The net Bible is the Bible behind the bibles. It's the one that many modern translators use to help them work through the original language and express their meaning in literate English. I would highly recommend that each English-speaking Christian put this Bible on their shopping list.

New World Translation

Finally, a word should be said about the New World Translation by the Jehovah's Witnesses. Due to the sectarian bias of the group, as well as to the lack of genuine biblical scholarship, I believe that the New World Translation is by far the worst translation in English dress. It purports to be word-for-word, and in most cases is slavishly literal to the point of being terrible English. But, ironically, whenever a "sacred cow" is demolished by the biblical writers themselves, the Jehovah's Witnesses twist the text and resort to an interpretive type of translation. In short, it combines the cons of both worlds, with none of the pros.

Conclusions

In summary, I would suggest that each English-speaking Christian own at least an RSV, NIV, and NET. For someone who wishes to study the Bible, an ESV, KJV and NEB would also make good additions to their library. And then, make sure that you read the book!

Question 4: Why Are Other Ancient Writings Not in the Canon?

The Attack: Other ancient writings that were published around the same time as the New Testament ought to be included in the canon. After all, they were considered sacred writings by people who were following Jesus of Nazareth, and several of them were considered at one time or another to be in the canon.

The Answer: Other writings did not make it into the NT canon because they were not recognized by the church universally to be of the standard of God-breathed Scripture. This observation does not depend upon merely upon the conclusion that the church came to in the first Christian centuries. It also means that if the church were to begin afresh, selecting for its canon among those ancient documents, in time we would still come independently to the same conclusion.

The writings that did not make it into the New Testament canon are now contained either in the collection of Apostolic Fathers or in the collection known as New Testament Apocrypha. We will examine some of those writings according to the criteria that the church used when judging for itself what was inspired of God and what was not.

1. The Criteria

Criteria for deciding which book was canonical:

- (1) **Apostolicity**: if it was written by or in direct association with an apostle.
- (2) **Orthodoxy**: if the writing conformed to the church's *regula fidei* ("rule of faith")
- (3) **Antiquity**: if the writing was produced during the apostolic era
- (4) **Ecclesiastical Usage**: if the writing was widely accepted in the churches

2. The Literature

a. Apostolic Fathers

Summary of the Apostolic Fathers

E. Glenn Hinson, *Holman Bible Dictionary*

Early Christian authors believed to have known the apostles. The Apostolic Fathers are not mentioned in the Bible. Five Apostolic Fathers appear in the original seventeenth century list: Barnabas, Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Hermas. Today the list usually includes nine items, adding *The Didache*, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, *Papias*, and *Apology of Quadratus*. Although scholars dispute whether any of the writers knew the apostles, all but possibly two of the writings, *The Epistle to Diognetus* and the *Apology of Quadratus*, originated before A.D. 156.

The Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles was not rediscovered until 1883 despite the fact that it had considerable usage in early centuries. An early church manual, it may be the earliest of the Apostolic Fathers, in its current form no later than A.D. 100 but possibly much earlier. Part one (chs. 1-6) contains the Jewish catechetical material known as “The Two Ways” adapted to Christian usage by insertion of teachings of Jesus. Part two gives directions concerning baptism (7), fasting and prayers (8), the eucharist (9-10), travelers who seek hospitality (11-13), worship on the Lord's day (14), and bishops and deacons (15). An exhortation to watchfulness concludes *The Didache*. Several allusions indicate Syria (perhaps Antioch) as the place of origin.

The Apostolic Fathers include **two writings under the name of Clement**, a Roman presbyter-bishop at the end of the first century, but only his letter to the Corinthians, the Epistle of 1 Clement can be considered authentic. What is entitled The Second Letter of Clement to the Corinthians is actually an early sermon which dates from around A.D. 140.

Clement, whom early lists named as the third bishop of Rome (after Linus and Anacletus), composed his letter, reliably dated A.D. 96, in response to a disturbance in the church at Corinth. A group of younger members had revolted against the presbyter-bishops and driven them out. In part one (1-36) Clement appealed on behalf of the Church of Rome for unity, using numerous biblical examples. In part two (37-61) he discussed the divisions at Corinth and called for the restoration of order by submission to persons appointed presbyters by the apostles and their successors. Interestingly he drew his organizational pattern from the military structure used at Qumran. In his conclusion (62-65) he expressed hope that the letter bearer would return with news of reconciliation.

The so-called Second Letter of Clement urges hearers to repent for too great attachment to the “world.” The author cited authoritative writings that are now definitely identified as Gnostic in the library discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt.

En route to Rome, where he suffered martyrdom during the reign of Trajan (98-117), **Ignatius**, Bishop of Antioch, wrote seven letters called the Epistles of Ignatius. At Smyrna he composed letters thanking the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles for sending messengers to greet him. From there he also sent a letter to the church at Rome begging them not to intercede on his behalf with the Emperor since he desired to be “ground by the teeth of wild beasts” so as to become “pure bread of Christ.” (**Romans 4:1**). At Troas he learned that persecution had ceased at Antioch and wrote to the churches of Philadelphia and Smyrna as well as to Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, entreating them to send messengers to Antioch to congratulate the faithful on the restoration of peace. In his letters Ignatius mentioned tensions within the communities to which he wrote and urged, as a solution, acceptance of episcopal authority. His special pleading would suggest that the churches of Asia Minor had not yet accepted rule by a single bishop with presbyters and deacons subordinate to him. Both Gnostic and Jewish leanings may have created the problem.

Papias was a bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor who, according to Irenaeus his pupil, was a hearer of John, the disciple and a friend of Polycarp. He wrote a five-volume work called Interpretation of the Lord's Oracles of which only fragments remain in the writings of others.

The date of his writing is disputed either being around 110 or 120. Papias died a martyr's death around A.D. 155.

Polycarp's **Epistle of Polycarp** is a cover letter sent with “as many as he had” of the letters of Ignatius at the request of the church of Philippi. Because in its present form the letter is a virtual mosaic of quotations from the collected letters of Paul, P. N. Harrison proposed a two-letter hypothesis. According to this proposal, chapter 13 would be the cover letter written at the time of Ignatius's martyrdom, Romans 1-12 a later composition dated around 135. The letter is primarily an exhortation to true faith and virtue.

Included in the Apostolic Fathers is **The Martyrdom of Polycarp**, the oldest account of a martyr's death recorded soon after it happened in 156. Written to strengthen faith in time of persecution, the account is somewhat embellished by miraculous happenings, for example, so much blood spurting from a wound in Polycarp's side that it extinguished the fire consuming him. The Martyrdom is notable as the first Christian writing to use the word “catholic” in reference to the church.

The so-called **Epistle of Barnabas** is neither a letter nor the work of Barnabas, Paul's companion and fellow missionary. An allusion to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 (**Romans 16:3-4**) as an event of the distant past precludes such an early date. The main part of this sermon or treatise (chs. 1-17) attempts to prove that the Jews misunderstood the Scriptures from the beginning because they interpreted them literally. Had they interpreted properly, they would have recognized Jesus as the fulfillment of the law. The author himself engaged in some rather fanciful allegorical exposition. To the apology is appended a Jewish document known as “The Two Ways” (of life and death).

Identified by the *Muratorian Canon* as the brother of Pius, Bishop of Rome around 140-150, Hermas indicates that he had been brought to Rome after being taken captive and was purchased by a woman named Rhoda. Using the form of an apocalypse or revelation, the Shepherd of Hermas deals with the heatedly debated question of repentance for serious post-baptismal sins such as apostasy, adultery, or murder. Some in Rome, evidently following Hebrews, took an inflexible stance: those who committed such serious offenses should suffer permanent exclusion. Hermas proposed one repentance following baptism, a view widely accepted in the early churches.

The **Epistle to Diognetus**, is misnamed and misplaced. An attractive apology or defense of Christianity, it is of uncertain but considerably later date than the Apostolic Fathers, perhaps as late as the third century. The author contrasts the unsatisfying faith of other religions with Christian teachings concerning love and good citizenship. Christians live in the same cities and observe many of the same customs, but they exhibit the “professedly strange character” of a “heavenly citizenship” that distinguishes them from others. What the soul is to the body is what they are to the world.

Like the Epistle to Diognetus, the **Apology of Quadratus** is believed to be dated considerably later than the Apostolic Fathers. The writing which is a fragment from a defense of Christianity addressed to the Emperor Hadrian, is preserved by Eusebius. Some scholars believe the Epistle to Diognetus and the Apology of Quadratus are the same.

While the writings designated Apostolic Fathers differ in the precision of their dating and authorship, as writings that predate the formation of the New Testament canon, they are invaluable resources for understanding post-apostolic Christianity.

E. Glenn Hinson

b. The New Testament Apocrypha

(1) **Apocryphal Gospels**

Apocryphal Gospels are stories about Jesus that reflect the stories found in the canonical gospels, but at various points go far beyond the canonical gospels. Especially unique about these gospels is that they contain stories that answer questions left unanswered in the brevity of the canonical gospels. For example, further details about Joseph and Mary and Jesus' birth, what Jesus was like as a young boy, events on earth after Jesus' death and resurrection.

The Gospel of Thomas has received much attention in recent years and has been counted by many in the historical Jesus movement as an authentic document to be read alongside Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In other words, they refer to the *five* gospels. But this gospel is very different in character than the other gospels, being merely a collection of sayings with little or no reference to place and time and events. Many of the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas are reflections of sayings found in the canonical gospels. It may represent a collection of Jesus sayings that were collected in the second century. But the sources for some of the sayings go back to the first half of the first century.

Gospel According to the Hebrews
Gospel of the Ebionites
Gospel of the Egyptians
Gospel of Marcion
Gospel of Peter
Gospel of the Twelve Apostles
Gospel of Barnabas
Gospel of Bartholomew
Protevangelium of James
Pseudo-Matthew
Nativity of Mary
Gospel of Joseph the Carpenter
The Passing of Mary
Gospel of Thomas
Gospel of Nicodemus
Acts of Pilate
Descent of Jesus into the Lower World

(2) **Apocryphal Acts**

Apocryphal Acts are stories about the apostles that are not recorded in the canonical book of Acts. They were most likely all composed in the second century.

The Acts of Andrew

The Acts of John

The Acts of Paul

The Acts of Peter

The Acts of Thomas

(3) **Apocryphal Epistles**

The Apocryphal Epistles are letters claiming to be genuine that are not found in the canonical epistles. Some of them are written for doctrinal purposes, while at least one, the Letter to the Laodiceans, appears to have been written only to “fill in the gap” left by Paul’s reference to a letter to the Laodiceans in Colossians 4:16.

The Letters of Christ and Abgar

The Letter of Lentulus

The Letter to the Laodiceans

The Correspondence of Paul and Seneca

The Epistle to the Alexandrians

(4) **Apocryphal Apocalypses**

Apocryphal apocalypses are sensationally written, elaborate prophecies about what will happen in the future, paralleling the canonical book of Revelation (called in Greek, “Apocalupsis”).

The Apocalypse of Peter

The Apocalypse of Paul

The Apocalypse of Thomas

The Questions of Bartholomew

The Letter of James

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