

## 1. Entering the debate

The apostle Paul was a brilliant academic and he was never afraid to enter into a rational debate with his opponents. When accused of being out of his mind for defending his position by reference to the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul insisted that his arguments were both ‘true and reasonable’ (Acts 26:25). With equal assurance, the fiery apostle held ‘discussions’ daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus at Ephesus (Acts 19:9), which meant that he both argued his case and lectured his hearers! Certainly Paul was confident of being able to ‘demolish’ the arguments of his opponents (2 Corinthians 10:5). His colleague Peter was equally insistent that Christians should always be prepared ‘to give an answer’ for their confidence (1 Peter 3:15) — just as a lawyer will defend his case in court — rather than rely on a dogmatic assertion of belief.

The purpose of this book is to enter the debate over the books that are found in the New Testament and to defend their right to be there.

To join some current discussions, one might be forgiven for assuming that the idea that there were other ‘gospels’ and associated writings in the early centuries of the church under the assumed name of the apostles is breaking news for the twenty-first century. On the contrary, 130 years ago B. Harris

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Cowper published a book entitled *The Apocryphal Gospels and other Documents Relating to the History of Christ*. Naturally it cannot take account of some recent discoveries like the Nag Hammadi Library or the Gospel of Judas, but Cowper translated a number of the false gospels and letters and confessed: 'Before I undertook this work I never realised, so completely as I do now, the impassable character of the gulf which separates the genuine Gospels from these.'<sup>1</sup> Cowper concluded: 'They are of no historical or doctrinal authority, and were never officially recognised in the Church.'<sup>2</sup>

More than this, Cowper quoted the severe judgement of the nineteenth-century scholar, Dr Charles John Ellicott, writing some two decades earlier: 'From all alike — from orthodox fathers, from early historians, from popes, from councils, from Romanist divines and Protestant commentators — the same amount of contempt and reprobation had been expended on the Apocryphal Gospels, and yet they live and thrive, and are, perhaps, now as much and as curiously read as ever.'<sup>3</sup>

A century and a half later, they are not only read but are being turned into popular novels for the diet of an unaware and gullible public.

However, the subject is not always as straightforward as we would like it to be: if only Peter, John and Paul had left us a list of books to be accepted for exclusive use by the church. On the other hand, it is not quite as complex as the books and articles of some modern academics would want us to believe. In the middle of the nineteenth century, one of the most scholarly writers on this subject, Dr Brooke Foss Westcott, a Fellow of Trinity College Cambridge, and Bishop of Durham, claimed: 'From the close of the second century the history of the Canon is simple and its proof clear.'<sup>4</sup> That may be a little overstated, but there are few if any who have studied the relevant documents more carefully or written more thoughtfully on the subject than the learned bishop.

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The battle being fought today is age old. None of the documents that are the subject of so much public interest are new — nor is our knowledge of their existence new. Nothing should have taken us by surprise, though the media would not be expected to know this. The Nag Hammadi Library is a collection of books by Gnostic heretics, and the early church leaders were exposing their crude heresies and loose lifestyle well before the end of the first century. The Gospel of Judas is of interest only because now, at last, we have a copy of it — its existence has been known since Irenaeus wrote against it more than nineteen hundred years ago.

The attraction of these ancient documents lies partly in their hitherto secrecy — and everyone loves an open secret — but especially in their opposition to the New Testament gospel record and their strange and esoteric twist of the truth. From the apostles on, Christian leaders exposed these false writings.

### A shift in the popular appetite

Modern writers who used the life of Christ as the basis for a novel at least took him seriously. *Ben Hur* by Lew Wallace (1888), Henryk Sienkiewicz in *Quo Vadis* (1896), *The Robe and The Big Fisherman* by Lloyd C. Douglas (1942) presented the public with a good read without damning the reliability of the Gospels.

All that has changed. From Nikos Kazantzakis in *The Last Temptation* (English translation 1961) to Gore Vidal's *Live from Golgotha* (1992) — a parody of the betrayal and crucifixion in which Jesus is rescued from the cross by a Japanese sun-goddess — to *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) and the blasphemy of Jerry Springer's *The Opera* (2005), the Gospels are trivialized or demonized. All this is to present a new and televised version of the life of Christ.

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Irving Wallace in *The Word* (1972) was an early entrant into the field of disparaging the historical records of the four Gospels via a novel, and this was followed by the more serious attempt at research of Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (1982), in which ‘historical evidence’ proved that Christ did not die on the cross but established a dynasty in the Merovingians, and that the legendary Holy Grail was the blood of this royal family. The theories of Baigent and co. were plundered by Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and its subsequent movie. The supposed ‘scholarship’ of Dan Brown’s novel debunked the four Gospels as fourth-century inventions — as if the mass of true scholarly evidence did not exist.

However, there was nothing new in all this: *The Brook Kerith* by George Moore (1916) was an earlier version of the same poor imagination devoid of any historical evidence. Others, especially Gruber and Kersten in *The Original Jesus* (1995), have suggested that the teaching of Jesus is rooted in Buddhism. All this nonsense finds a ready market among a willingly gullible public and it is the only knowledge many daily commuters have of the canon of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup>

## The smokers’ corner

We are hardly surprised to find popular novels denouncing the Bible. Anything that criticizes the Bible pays well. Irving Wallace put into the mouth of George Wheeler the following pronouncement on the Gospels: ‘These four Gospel writers had not lived with Jesus, observed him, seen him in the flesh. They had merely collected oral traditions, some writings from the early Christian community, and transcribed them on papyrus decades after the supposed death of Jesus. All this

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was frozen into the immutable canon that became our New Testament in the third or fourth century.<sup>6</sup> And again: ‘The modern biblical experts know that the present four gospels are not factual history... [they are] largely a series of myths strung together.’<sup>7</sup> Typically, of course, the ‘experts’ are hailed though no references are offered.

When Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln weighed in with *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and the assurance that the Gnostic gospels ‘enjoyed as great a claim to veracity as the books of the New Testament’, and that ‘The more one studies the Gospels, the more the contradictions between them become apparent’,<sup>8</sup> we were reading a mixture of serious research and simple invention.

No sooner had we recovered from that, than Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* claimed that ‘More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only relatively few were chosen for inclusion — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John among them’<sup>9</sup> and ‘The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.’<sup>10</sup> Thus ‘Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*.’<sup>11</sup>

It has long been the leisure pursuit of novelists to rewrite the history of Jesus of Nazareth. But then, this is the age for revising history. Apart from Holocaust deniers, we can read a biography or watch a programme assuring us that neither Nero nor Pilate deserve the bad press they have received, and that Judas was in reality the hero of the crucifixion story. We wait only for some imaginative historian to assure us that King Henry VIII was not such a bad husband after all!

In the light of this, it is hardly surprising when a writer presents us with a popular novel that offers the veneer of history to persuade us that for seventeen hundred years the Christian church has been reading the wrong source book for the authoritative life of its founder.

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However, it is a disturbing commentary on the level of academia at our red-brick universities when the Bible is petulantly dismissed by Prof. Richard Dawkins like this:

To be fair, the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and ‘improved’ by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Was that really the result of careful research by a professor at Oxford, or did Dawkins overhear it in the smokers’ corner of a sixth-form common room? Not content, he continued:

Ever since the nineteenth century, scholarly theologians have made an overwhelming case that the gospels are not reliable accounts of what happened in the history of the real world. All were written long after the death of Jesus, and also after the epistles of Paul.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly some *did* claim that in the nineteenth century, but this ‘overwhelming case’ is tired old theory now — as we shall see. However, our academic turns his attention to the Gospels:

The four Gospels that made it into the official canon, were chosen, more or less arbitrarily, out of a large sample of at least a dozen... Nobody knows who the four evangelists were, but they almost certainly never met Jesus personally.<sup>14</sup>

At least Richard has reduced Dan’s ‘eighty’ gospel contenders to ‘at least a dozen’. But all this is mind-boggling ignorance from a professor at Oxford.

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However, Oxford does not hold the pride of place in such academic foolishness. Back in the 1990s Barbara Thiering, for twenty-two years a lecturer at the University of Sydney Divinity School before her retirement, began publishing a cluster of books<sup>15</sup> in which she claims that Jesus was the leader of a radical faction of the Essene community, a major political movement to overthrow the pagan Roman Empire; he was not of virgin birth, did not die on the cross, was married to Mary Magdalene (whom he later divorced), fathered children who took an important role in the development of the new underground religion, and wrote the Gospel of John (with the help of Philip). He died some time after AD 64.

All this, and more, is claimed to be ‘an historical account of the life of Jesus’, but in reality it is the stuff of ‘Holocaust denial’. If the subject had not been Jesus of Nazareth, it would surely have been hard to find a publisher. It must come in the same category as *Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*<sup>16</sup> in which Professor John Marco Allegro of Manchester University, England, claimed that hidden in the New Testament was a code for the Sacred Mushroom that was the real heart of the Christian faith.

## The diet of ‘scholarship’

At one time, few criticized the absolute trustworthiness of the New Testament and in particular the Gospel records. Their convictions gave rise to the well-worn idiom ‘Gospel truth’. There were isolated sceptics of course. Back in the seventeenth century the Dutch theologian Baruch Spinoza investigated the Bible as an ordinary book: its date, context, authorship and setting. In the following century many ignored or even disparaged the Bible, like the third Earl of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times etc.* that was very influential in its time. But it was hardly scholarly.

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There was general agreement that the names that head the books in our English translations were either part of the earliest Greek texts that we possess, or they have a long and early tradition behind them. It was also accepted that the New Testament was completed somewhere between AD 50 and 100.<sup>17</sup>

However, by the nineteenth century all was to change. With the rise of biblical criticism, especially from Tübingen in Germany, the whole Bible was fair game for those who set out to discredit its reliability and therefore its message. Leading the pack was Professor Ferdinand Baur at Tübingen, who dismissed almost all the traditional views, and the following hounds tore into the New Testament. Most of the books were assumed to have been written around AD 150 and beyond, and the Gospel of John as late as AD 170. This cast serious doubt not only on the reliability of the New Testament text, but also on the actual canon of the New Testament. How do we know that the twenty-seven books are the right or only ones for our Bible? The short answer was that we could not.

Half a century on (around 1900), J. B. Lightfoot, a professor at Cambridge, dismissed the conclusions of Baur and set the dates much earlier. The German scholar Adolf von Harnack agreed. But still, most of the books were given a date well beyond AD 100 — making it impossible for any to have been written by or even with the knowledge of an apostle. However, few critics agreed with any of their colleagues as to the precise dates, authors or intended destinations of the New Testament books. The charge became a shambles.

Then, by the mid twentieth century, a significant change was discernable even among the most liberal critics. With the exception of 2 Peter (always an outcast and which was generally left alone in the cold around AD 125–150), most were considered to have been completed at least before AD 100. It can be seen, therefore, that those who still suggest a date for the New Testament books of between the second

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and third centuries are lagging somewhere around 150 years behind the progress of New Testament ‘scholarship’.

Of course, there are always exceptions or else New Testament studies would come to a halt. In 1985 a group of around 100 scholars, under the leadership of Dr Robert Funk, met at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. Known as the Jesus Seminar they set out to pool their scholarly research to discover how much of the Gospels could really be attributed to the precise days and words of Jesus. They circulated clever papers among themselves and met twice a year to vote on the sayings of Jesus. They voted by means of coloured beads. Red meant: ‘That’s Jesus alright’. Pink meant: ‘It sounds like Jesus’. Grey meant: ‘Well, maybe’; and black meant: ‘No way’.

The fruit of their research came out in 1993 under the title of *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. Unsurprisingly from a group of liberal academics, only around 18% of the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels could be classed as authentic or near authentic. Most of John’s Gospel was black. Jesus did not consider himself to be the Son of God, nor did he anticipate his death as the purpose of his life. We could reduce the Lord’s Prayer to ‘Our Father’ and the Beatitudes were lost altogether — and so on. *Time* magazine reported that just about all we know of the real Jesus, according to Dr Funk and his team, is that he had a disciple named Mary Magdalene, entered a synagogue at least once, and met some Pharisees. Fortunately there are not too many who take Dr Funk and his team seriously.

## Redating the New Testament

In 1976 John A. T. Robinson, Dean at Trinity College, Cambridge, and recognized as a first-class New Testament

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scholar, published a book called *Redating the New Testament*.<sup>18</sup> That book sent shock waves through the academic world of New Testament criticism. Although, as a liberal and critical scholar, Robinson began his work as a ‘theological joke’, the evidence increasingly compelled him to take his own results more seriously. He finally concluded that the entire New Testament as we know it had been completed before AD 70. It is certainly a work of detailed scholarship in which every New Testament book is examined carefully.

Early in his research Robinson discovered that the greatest argument for an early date of the Gospels and epistles was the total absence of any reference to the ‘single most datable and climactic event of the period — the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70’.<sup>19</sup> In this year, the besieging Roman army finally broke into the city, massacred its defenders and destroyed the temple. This would have been a conclusive vindication for the New Testament writers that God had finished with the ‘types and shadows’ of the Jewish ceremonial law. But there is not even a hint in any New Testament book that Jerusalem and the temple have been destroyed.

Robinson came to the conclusion that the only satisfactory reason for this silence is that the event had not yet taken place — a staggering conclusion for a liberal critic.

One reason most critical scholars placed the Gospels well beyond AD 70 was because these documents actually contained prophecies concerning the destruction of Jerusalem (e.g. Matthew 22:7; Mark 13:1–4; Luke 19:41–44; 21:20–24) — and the phenomena of prophecy could not be allowed. Even great minds in the prestigious universities of Europe overlooked the fact that you cannot prove a hypothesis by using that same supposition as your main piece of evidence.

There can, of course, be only one of three reasons for this significant silence:

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- Either, the writers had not heard about the fall of Jerusalem — which would be at least odd since many of them lived in the city!
- Or, there was a massive and well-kept conspiracy that they would not refer to it — for reasons completely unknown to us and far beyond the imagination of any critic.
- Or, it had not taken place at the time the Gospels and epistles were written.

Elsewhere, Robinson wisely considered that it was a reasonable working assumption that the Acts of the Apostles could be trusted until proved otherwise. This assumption, he concluded, has been ‘substantially vindicated’.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the ‘majority of English scholars’ accept Luke’s authorship of Acts.<sup>21</sup>

With painstaking care and methodical detail, Robinson examined every New Testament book to bring him to the inevitable conclusion that the entire canon was complete and circulating before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Unfortunately, the man in the street — and apparently even Professor Dawkins — is unaware of these conclusions by a highly regarded scholar and liberal critic of the New Testament. They are equally unaware of the fact that, just to take one example, most scholars, from whatever their critical position, believe that Revelation, the Gospel of John and the three letters of John were all completed well before AD 100.<sup>22</sup>

Robinson was compelled to admit that ‘There would seem to be a detectable swing back, if not to apostolic authorship [of the pastoral epistles] at any rate to taking seriously’ the possibility of their being penned in the lifetime of Paul.<sup>23</sup> That, of course, leaves us with the amusing possibility that the letters claiming to come from Paul were written within his lifetime, without his knowledge, by person or persons unknown, whilst the great apostle himself has left us not a word to his credit!

## 'The tyranny of unexamined assumptions'

Equally as illuminating as the conclusions John Robinson came to regarding the completion of the New Testament books are his comments about so much modern scholarship. Remember, Robinson was a liberal critic who, to the day of his death in 1983, had no hesitation in denying John as the author of the Apocalypse, and had no idea who wrote 2 Peter. Many of the intellectuals he criticized are revered in the world of biblical scholarship. Yet Robinson commented: 'Datings that seem agreed in the textbooks can suddenly appear much less secure than the consensus would suggest.'<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere he claims: 'It is astonishing that so much has continued to be built upon so little.'<sup>25</sup> And again: 'It is sobering too to discover how little basis there is for many of the dates confidently assigned by modern experts to the New Testament documents.'<sup>26</sup>

He wrote of 'circular arguments' and 'presuppositions'<sup>27</sup> and deplored what he called 'disconcertingly tenuous deductions', 'sheer scholarly laziness' and 'the tyranny of unexamined assumptions'.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the most damning comment is Robinson's perception of 'almost willful blindness' and 'the consistent evasion by modern commentators of a solution they have already prejudged to be impossible'.<sup>29</sup>

In defence of John the apostle as author of the Gospel that carries his name, Robinson comments: 'Most liberal scholars have allowed themselves to be insensitised, whether by the climate of critical opinion or for other reasons, to the very considerable strength [of the evidence] ... for the apostolic authorship of the fourth gospel'<sup>30</sup>— and here he is sufficiently honest to admit his own earlier failure on this very point.

In a different but related context, Professor Carsten Thiede has commented that presuppositions are hard to abandon and that 'The instinct to undermine the Gospels has overtaken the pre-modern instinct to take their truth for granted... Some

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scholars and writers will go to almost any length to avoid the charge of credulity.<sup>31</sup>

All of which makes Dawkins' confident affirmation that 'scholarly theologians have made an overwhelming case' against the reliability of the Gospels and Acts look, to be kind, a little fragile.

### Academic myopia

That 'willful blindness' that leads many modern scholars to evade a solution 'they have already prejudged to be impossible' is easily illustrated. We have already noted that the presence of prophecy in the Gospels concerning the destruction of Jerusalem led critical scholars to claim that this must mean the Gospels were written after the event. Yet the silence in Hebrews of any reference to the end of sacrifices (which all agree was the case after AD 70) is claimed to have no significance in the dating of the epistle. In other words, the voice of prophecy is dismissed and the evidence of silence is irrelevant.<sup>32</sup>

Something similar is found in the debate about the authorship of 2 Peter. The main argument against it coming from the hand of the apostle is that the Greek is so different from 1 Peter. One scholar, J. B. Mayor, calculated that there were 100 words common to the two books and 600 different words.<sup>33</sup> That was in 1907. However, when in 1965 A. Q. Morton ran the two books through a computer, the conclusion was that the two epistles were 'linguistically indistinguishable' (in other words, very likely from the same author). Many liberal scholars simply responded that this only proved that the method of using computers was a waste of time!<sup>34</sup>

Today, there is a new swing in favour of the evidence that the Gospels are not late writings but were penned early in the

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history of the Christian community and, notwithstanding the banal claims of recent popular novels and Oxford dons, the old idea that in the Gospels we cannot find the Jesus of history but only the whisper of the ‘Christ of faith’ — the faith of the third-century church — may at last be heading for its long-awaited grave.

Even the *National Geographic* magazine, in publicizing its recently deciphered (2005) Gospel of Judas, admitted that the four Gospels were written between AD 65 to 95<sup>35</sup> which, they claimed, was ‘long after the death of the evangelists’. That was a most significant statement. At one time it was assumed by critical scholars that the Gospels were the figment of the wishful imagination of the third-century church; however, now that such a wild view is no longer tenable, ‘between AD 65 to 95’ is assumed to be ‘long after the death of the evangelists’ — without any supporting evidence that all the evangelists were deceased by then!

For any other portion of ancient literature than the New Testament, there is one particular piece of evidence that would be almost conclusive in favour of an early date for at least the Gospel of Luke and the Acts. Robinson saw it, but he was not the first. The exciting events that take place prior to Paul’s arrival in Rome in Acts 28 lead us to expect some significant conclusion to the book. Here is the progress of action: arrest, lashing, inquisition, imprisonments, an appeal to the Emperor Nero, a shipwreck and miraculous rescue, and finally he arrives in Rome, is placed under house arrest and continues to share the gospel. The actual conclusion is a terrible anticlimax, and any reader with half a mind on what he is reading finds himself pleading: ‘And then what?’

Why did Luke end here? There is no evidence of anything having been added or taken away from this ending. Only one reasonable explanation is available: when Luke penned Acts, the rest of the story had not been completed. Thus, if Acts was

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completed before AD 64 (the possible date of Paul's fate), the Gospel of Luke must be earlier.

If, as some have suggested, Acts was a sort of apologia for Paul in his defence and thus Luke did not want to show the emperor in a bad light, it amounts to the same thing. Besides, by AD 68 Nero was dead, and no one in the Senate mourned his demise — least of all his successors — so Luke need not have been squeamish in recording Paul's brutal end. Luke may well have died before the outcome of Paul's trial but clearly he had written his Gospel before Acts (Acts 1:1).<sup>36</sup> Anyone writing this story years later would most certainly have added an informative conclusion. In the event, Acts doesn't conclude — it just stops.

There is far too much evidence that the records in our New Testament are both accurate and early — very much earlier than some academics had previously allowed. But old theories die hard and many will wage a guerrilla war against any views that establish the trustworthiness of the New Testament canon.

## The idea of a canon

It is a fact that whilst pagan religions vaguely share with Judaism and Christianity the idea of 'inspiration' from the gods, nothing in the ancient world religions compares with the clear Judaeo-Christian concept of a collection of authoritative books, compiled over many centuries, whose every word is considered to have a divine origin.

The word 'canon' comes from the Hebrew *kaneh* (a rod), and the Greek *kanon* (a reed). Among other things, the words referred equally to the measuring rod of the carpenter and the ruler of the scribe. It became a common word for anything that was the measure by which others were to be judged. In

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the ancient world the Greek authors were referred to as the ‘canon’ for the ‘absolute standard for pure language’.<sup>37</sup> Paul used the word twice in the New Testament, at Galatians 6:16 and 2 Corinthians 10:13; similarly, the early church leaders used it to refer to the body of Christian doctrine accepted by the churches.

Perhaps Clement of Alexandria, early in the third century, was the first to employ the word to refer to the Scriptures (the Old Testament).<sup>38</sup> Origen also used it in the same century,<sup>39</sup> and Athanasius a little later. From here on it became more common in Christian use with reference to a collection of books that are fixed in their number, divine in their origin and universal in their authority.

## Divine providence

If the early church leaders were concerned to know the identity of the writers of Scripture, they were equally concerned to recognize its divine origin. The New Testament is its own witness, not simply by its content, but by its claim. Our final appeal is not to man, not even to the early church leaders, but to God, who by his Holy Spirit has put his seal upon the New Testament. By their spiritual content and by the claim of their human writers, the twenty-seven books of our New Testament form part of the ‘God-breathed’ Scripture.

Anyone who has read even a little of the apocryphal and heretical writings produced in the first few centuries — and we will tiptoe into this dark realm in chapters 7 and 8 — will immediately see an enormous difference between these and the Gospels and the letters of the apostles.

The sixteenth-century French Reformer and theologian John Calvin expressed the significance of divine providence perfectly:

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Nothing, therefore, can be more absurd than the fiction, that the power of judging Scripture is in the Church, and that on her nod its certainty depends... How shall we be persuaded that it came from God without recurring to a decree of the Church? It is just the same as if it were asked: How shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Scripture bears upon the face of it as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black do of their colour, sweet and bitter of their taste... Our conviction of the truth of Scripture must be derived from a higher source than human conjectures, judgements or reasons: namely, the secret testimony of the Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

In all our discussion about the formation of the canon of the New Testament, we should never lose sight of the relationship between the human and the divine. The pattern for this is the way in which the Scriptures themselves were written. The true meaning of the Greek word *theopneustos* in 2 Timothy 3:16 reminds us that all Scripture is ‘God-breathed’ — yet it came through men moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). It is this harmony of the active mind of the human writer and the sovereign direction of the Holy Spirit that provides our confidence in God’s inerrant and infallible word for the human race.

In the same way, we may discuss and recognize the various human factors in the formation of the New Testament canon, but we should never overlook the superintendence of God ensuring that finally only the books that he wanted would form part of the New Testament. Dr Carl Henry commented on this phenomenon of the divine intervention of God:

The first observation to be made in an objective survey is the remarkably extensive agreement with which the early

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church distinguished a particular and limited group of writings from all other literature ... and received them as uniquely inspired and of divine authority.<sup>41</sup>

John Wenham expressed the same truth: ‘Grounds of canonicity are to be found in an interplay of subjective and objective factors overruled by Divine Providence.’<sup>42</sup>

It will be the contention of what follows to show that long before we have a directory of twenty-seven books, we have twenty-seven books being used as Scripture. Or, in the way Bruce Metzger phrased the question: ‘Should the canon be described as a collection of authoritative books or as an authoritative collection of books?’<sup>43</sup> The first is correct. The books of the New Testament carried their own authority and because of this they were recognized by the churches. The authority resided in the books themselves and not in the lists that they later entered. Metzger describes the position like this:

The books within the collection are regarded as possessing an intrinsic worth prior to their having been assembled, and their authority is grounded in their nature and source.<sup>44</sup>

## Summary

- There is little about the false documents that have aroused so much public interest in recent years that is new for New Testament scholars.
- Books on biblical themes have shifted from a popular and positive read to a trendy and wholly negative read.
- Even some academics who should know better persist in trotting out worn mantras about the unreliability of New Testament documents.

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- The New Testament scholar, John A.T. Robinson, has presented a formidable case for the entire New Testament having been completed before AD 70.
- Robinson also vigorously objected to academic dishonesty, myopia, assumptions and scholarly laziness.
- The Judaeo-Christian concept of a collection of authoritative books, compiled over many centuries, whose every word is considered to have a divine origin, is unique among religious literature.
- Divine providence cannot be ignored when discussing the canon of the New Testament.