

Episode 272

Jeff Laird

Hi, welcome to the Got Questions Podcast. My name is Jeff, filling in for Shea Houdmann. Today we've got a very interesting guest to have on the podcast. Sometimes we get questions that involve things about books of the Bible where there's almost this mystical aspect to it. People talk about things like the missing books, or the lost books, and the Dead Sea Scrolls come up very often with that. So the person that we're talking today is Wes Huff. He's the vice president of Apologetics Canada. He's got actual training in theological studies, sociology. He's working on a PhD regarding the New Testament, and he's also involved with an ongoing documentary series called Can I Trust the Bible? And we wanted Wes to come on because he's an expert on biblical manuscripts, and he takes this approach that if somebody doesn't think they can trust the Bible, then using the Bible as a reference to try to convince them of something in faith doesn't make a whole lot of sense. So, Wes, thanks for coming on and looking forward to sharing some of your expertise today.

Wes Huff

Yeah, glad to be here. Excited to talk about these topics.

Jeff Laird

Awesome. For those who aren't super familiar, if you want to give us just a kind of a rundown of your work and what sort of stuff you're involved in.

Wes Huff

Yeah, so as you said, I'm the recently minted VP of Apologetics Canada. I've been working with that particular ministry for it'll be five years in 2026 and just had the unique opportunity and privilege to be able to tell people about the reliability and trustworthiness and confidence that we have in the 66 books that we call the Bible.

Wes Huff

So I have been committing my life to learning about the history of the Bible and the Christian faith for a long time, a long time before I was ever with Apologetics Canada. And so I'm, like you said, I'm also a student myself, finishing up my PhD at the University of Toronto in early Christian scribal culture. So I look at manuscripts of Christian documents from the second and third centuries. But I also do a lot of comparative analysis with books from broader antiquity, some of the works that we call the classics, as well as apocryphal and pseudepigraphical documents. So some of the documents that we're going to be talking about today that maybe try to hitch themselves,

hitch their wagon to historical Christianity, but really end up appropriating names like Jesus.

Wes Huff

And so I'm also a father. I have four children. My oldest is six. My youngest is two months and a leader on the leadership staff at my church. So lots of different balls to juggle, but all a privilege and very thankful to God for what he's enabled me to be able to do.

Jeff Laird

Great. Well, we appreciate you taking some time out. Like I was saying, we get questions about that exact topic that you were talking about, these things that we would refer to the fancy terms of, you know, pseudepigraphy and apocrypha and things like that. It really just means these sort of mysterious books that sort of are associated with the Bible, but sort of are not. Sometimes people take that to the level of almost conspiracy theory that, you know, these are books that were deliberately withheld or that they were altered or changed. So when people hear the phrase Dead Sea Scrolls, a lot of different things go through their mind. Can you give just a sort of a layman's rundown of what the Dead Sea Scrolls really are?

Wes Huff

Yeah. So the Dead Sea Scrolls are often shrouded in more kind of mystery than I think is necessary. What we're talking about with the Dead Sea Scrolls are just a collection of scrolls, of documents that were found in and around the coast of the Dead Sea. So this is all ancient Jewish literature. It's found in places like Jericho and Qumran and Meribat and Gedi, Nahal Hever, Masada. And these are just locations around the coast of the Dead Sea. They encompass a body of literature that goes anywhere from the third century BC to the first century AD. And what we end up with is about 970 scrolls assembled from about 10,000 to 11,000 fragments that make up this collection. So we're not talking about one thing as much as we're talking about a pretty broad collection of things.

Wes Huff

This includes writings that we would associate with the Old Testament. All of the books of the Old Testament except for Esther have been found within that collection. I don't think that's a statement on how they viewed Esther as much as we just don't have a copy of it that survived. So these are 2,000-plus-year-old documents. But then there are also a number of other pieces of literature that are included within that grouping. The Book of Enoch, which we're going to be talking about, some books that we would call either apocryphal or deuterocanonical that are in the Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox Bibles, Book of Jubilees, Tobit, First and Second Maccabees, the Book of Sirach, and

then some books that nobody considers scripture. The War Scroll, the Rule of Blessing, the Community Rules, and even the Treasure Map. So what we have within the Dead Sea Scrolls is just, it's an umbrella term. It's a library of documents that come from a time period that just happened to have been found hidden in among the caves of the coast of the Dead Sea.

Jeff Laird

Great. I appreciate that. Now, what precisely does the Dead Sea Scrolls imply for things like the preservation and the reliability of manuscripts?

Wes Huff

Yeah, so there are a number of levels to that. Before the Dead Sea Scrolls, we had very few examples of ancient Hebrew testimonies of the Old Testament scriptures. So witnesses of the Hebrew text. In fact, we had more Greek translations of the Old Testament by far than we did have actual documentation and witnesses of the Hebrew Old Testament. There are some. It's not like we didn't have any.

Wes Huff

But when the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, what they opened up to us was really a picture of what the Hebrew Bible looked like in and around the time leading up to and concurrent with Jesus. So what it did for us is it showed us, it gave us a picture of what Jews who were reading Hebrew would have potentially been reading in that day.

Wes Huff

Now, the caveat to this is that a number, if not the majority of the Dead Sea Scrolls were written by a group called the Essenes and come from a community in Qumran. They were a sect of Christianity who had removed themselves from the community within Jerusalem and Israel formal. So they had a completely different understanding, thinking that the Jews within Israel and Jerusalem were corrupt. And so that in terms of some of the documents, like the community rules, outlines, you know, why they are a separatist group.

Wes Huff

But if you look at something like the more well-preserved copies that we find within the Dead Sea Scrolls, like the Isaiah Scrolls or the Psalms Scrolls, what we find there is a testimony of preservation that is pretty incredible. Some of it is very nearly identical. And then some of it is actually identical to what we have later on within the Middle Ages in what's referred to as the Masoretic Text. So that's the text that was copied throughout the Middle Ages. It is primarily what our Old Testaments for a long time have been translated from. But when we discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls between 1949 and 1957, what that did then for us is it moved our understanding of what the Hebrew

Bible looked like back, in some instances, a thousand years. And so it was pretty incredible.

Wes Huff

It also shed light on some of the understandings of things like the concepts of the Jewish Messiah. So there are a number of documents that refer to the role of the Jewish Messiah, what he was going to do, when he was going to come, and even alluding to him being a divine figure.

Wes Huff

And so any, I think, accusations of talking about how foreign it would have been to the first century Jews to understand the Messiah coming and being God himself, that that was a later Christian invention that was looked back on, I think we can look at, even if it's a small group and a minority understanding, it still would have been within the understanding of Orthodox Jewish practice to at least have the concept of a divine Messiah who is going to come and is going to rescue his people and it be Yahweh God himself.

Jeff Laird

Interesting. Interesting. So when we talk about the Dead Sea Scrolls, then we're not discovering books per se or texts that had never been thought of, never been known to the Christian community before. These are copies of the books of the Old Testament that already were known and established.

Wes Huff

Yeah, in regards to the Old Testament, I think I would say that that is true.

Jeff Laird

Okay.

Wes Huff

We did discover like the Copper Scroll, which is a treasure map.

We didn't have any evidence of that before, but that has no bearing on what we would have considered scripture. Any group within Christianity, Protestant, Orthodox, Coptic, Roman Catholic, none of the documents that say were new to us have any effect or bearing on the canons of scripture that we find within those respective denominations.

Jeff Laird

All right, that makes sense. Now, I know that not every book that's associated from ancient Jewish literature is going to be part of scripture, and some people disagree at times on which ones are. You mentioned a book, I think you mentioned the Book of Enoch, and that was included in the Dead Sea Scrolls. I know that there's contention around whether or not that really should be included in scripture. Do you have insight into what your studies lead you to believe about that?

Wes Huff

Yeah, so the Book of Enoch is an interesting document, and it is. It's old. The oldest portions of Enoch were found within the Dead Sea Scroll collections, sections like Book of the Watchers. They date in potentially 200 years before Jesus. The oldest evidence that we have for Enoch are fragmentary portions in Aramaic and Greek, and that's important too. The Old Testament that we have in our Protestant Bibles, the 39 books of the Old Testament, have Hebrew originations, whereas something like the Book of Enoch doesn't appear to be the case.

Wes Huff

It appears to be originally written in Aramaic and or Greek, and then we have later sections in Coptic, which is a later stage version of ancient Egyptian, and then Ge'ez, which is Ethiopic. So our earliest full copy of Enoch is an Ethiopic Ge'ez version from the 15th century. So prior to that, these exist in fragments, and they're eventually all put together in what we refer to as First Enoch.

Usually when we're talking about Enoch, we're talking about First Enoch. There's actually a First, Second, and Third Enoch, but Second and Third Enoch are generally understood to be much, much later after Jesus and comprise literature that can't really be pushed any time either in and around the time of Jesus or before that.

Wes Huff

So there were a handful of early Christians who actually entertained it as Scripture, but when we find these formal canon lists, when early Christians are talking about, okay, what is and isn't considered Scripture, nobody ends up mentioning Enoch. And the Jews at the time who do mention it, individuals like Josephus, very specifically say, if Enoch is talking about the great grandfather of Noah, Enoch, there are no books that were written before Moses, is what Josephus says. So he's this very important Romano-Jewish writer. He was a Roman general who during the siege of Jerusalem ended up, he surrendered. And so as part of his deal of not being killed, he ends up writing a bunch of these documents. And as part of an explanation of who the Jews are, one of the things he says is, we don't have an innumerable number of religious texts like the Greeks do. We have a set number. And he refers to them as being housed up in the temple. Now the temple was destroyed by that point, but he refers to them, we know what is Scripture and we know what isn't Scripture. And Enoch isn't in his collection.

Wes Huff

He was a Pharisee. And the only reason why it ends up in the Ethiopic canon, which it does, is largely due to the fact that about 300 years after Jesus, we have stories of Syrian missionaries who traveled down to what is now Ethiopia, what was then referred to as the kingdom of Aksum. They brought

with them a large body of literature, amongst which included the Greek translation of the Old Testament and a number of other Jewish and Christian Greek translations of works.

Wes Huff

And so the Ethiopic church, who is largely removed both geographically and philosophically from the discussions that were taking place about what canon is and isn't in the Greco-Roman empire, they appear to have just kind of accepted everything within their canon. And so the Book of Enoch is in the Ethiopic canon, but it's not because the more comprehensive questions about what Enoch is, you know, in Christian and Jewish communities, it has less to do with that.

Jeff Laird

It sounds like there's actually very good reason, pretty direct evidence that people in the early Jewish community didn't accept Enoch as part of Scripture, which is plenty good justification for us to say now that it shouldn't be included in Scripture. Are there other books that commonly come up for that? I think I've heard of the ones that I come across are Shepherd of Hermas. There's things associated with Thomas and with Peter, those in the same category?

Wes Huff

Yes and no. I mean, the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas were two early writings that if anything was in contention for being added to the New Testament, it's probably those two documents. They're very widely read and treasured and accepted. They largely contain what we would describe as like small Orthodox material. It's not heretical. It's not embellished like some of the other apocryphal works that we see floating around the ancient world, and it was read quite widely.

Wes Huff

The number one reason why neither of those books were eventually accepted is because the number one criteria when these canon conversations were taking place was what we refer to as apostolicity. Can we trace it to someone who knew Jesus or someone who knew someone who knew Jesus? And unequivocally, they say, well, we actually know who Hermas is.

Wes Huff

And I think it's the meritorium canon or what's sometimes referred to as the meritorium fragment, which comes in around the middle to the late second century, specifically says we know who Hermas is and we know his brother who was sitting on the chair of the bishop of Rome at the time. So he's too late, right? He's not closely tied to this eyewitness community of Jesus' followers within the earliest time period.

Wes Huff

And the provenance of the Epistle of Barnabas, it was kind of floating around that the Barnabas that was associated with the title could have been the Barnabas who was the traveling companion of Paul. But nobody could say that definitively.

Wes Huff

Whereas even with some of the other books that were in contention with that were bringing questions about the New Testament, like by the middle of the second century, everybody is in basic agreement about 22 of the 27 books that we call the New Testament. And then some others just had a little bit more time for the dust to settle on them, largely because of the questions of these other gospels that had names like Peter and John associated with them. So if you have a first and second Peter, okay, those are the letters that we have in our New Testament today. But then there's also a Gospel of Peter and an Acts of Peter and an Apocryphon of Peter and the list goes on and on. The early Christians are like, okay, let's make sure we can actually trace this to Peter. Let's make sure we are dividing what should be there and what shouldn't be there. And same thing with John, first, second, third John, that's a lot of letters by John considering we already have a gospel associated with John and John is tied to a revelation, right? The apocalypse. But then there are other letters floating around with John's name.

Wes Huff

So I think the questions about those were the early Christian communities doing their due diligence. And to be totally honest, looking at what they did kind of discern, it didn't take much digging. And even with something like the Book of Hebrews, which is our only formally anonymous book in the New Testament, there was still from a very, very early period, a direct association with the apostolic community.

Wes Huff

So books like the Shepherd of Hermes and the Epistle of Barnabas, were they in contention potentially at one time, but the early Christians really looked at them and said, you know, these don't really have a fighting chance. Likewise, something like Enoch, the conversations were okay. Well, Enoch, that's a character in the Old Testament. You do have this allusion in the Book of Jude to Enoch prophesize saying, and then there's kind of a paraphrastic quotation of Enoch, a section from 1st Enoch. And so there were discussions, you know, could this have been an actual legitimate book that ties to legitimate prophecy? But once again, when push comes to shove, everybody says, no, not really. And to be totally honest, although it's not extensively talked about in the early church, Enoch 71 refers to Enoch as the son of man from David, which is complicated for two reasons.

Wes Huff

First of all, Jesus is the son of man from David. And also it's quoting, or sorry, not David, Daniel. It's quoting Daniel, right? So it's quoting Daniel. It has to be written after the Book of Daniel. Right. And the Book of Daniel was written like during the Babylonian exile, right? So that pushes the date of Enoch further into this time period between the Old and the New Testament in this kind of intertestamental period. So I would say there's kind of some problematic, potentially heretical allusions to talking about Enoch as the Messiah and the son of man, the divine son of man from Daniel chapter 7. And the fact that it's referencing or appears to be referencing Daniel. And also it appears to be referencing other places in Deuteronomy as well. It just kind of pushes the date into a time frame when everybody was agreeing, okay, well, this is outside of the realm of scripture.

Jeff Laird

Yeah. What's curious to me is I can kind of look at this from two different sides. One is the, I don't want to dismiss it as the conspiracy theory side, but I can see a little bit of the interest in ancient texts and documents and, you know, digging in, you know, treasure caves and all that sort of stuff around there. What's a little more interesting to me is the question of, given the stuff that you're talking about, what's the pushback or what's the reasoning that people have for saying that something like Enoch should be considered part of scripture? Because if we're able to see the things you are, which is that here's the discussions that were being had, here's the manuscript evidence that we had, what's the reasoning that people have to really want to make these part of the canon of scripture?

Wes Huff

Yeah, I think there are a few factors that play into that. I think people are maybe authentically curious about Jude's reference to Enoch and I think that that is understandable. I think I would say adjacent to that is that, you know, Paul quotes pagan philosophers and that doesn't mean that he thinks they're scripture.

Jeff Laird

Right.

Wes Huff

It's simply like the utilization of literature in the day that would have made sense to the audience. So I think it's perfectly reasonable for Jude to reference Enoch or maybe there's another document, the Ascension of Moses and reference those because his audience would have understood them. And that'd be like an example of something significant that his audience would have understood. I think in our modern era, the book of Enoch is very

sensational. It talks about what happened. It's kind of an explanatory writing on like a behind the curtain look at Genesis chapter six, where just prior to the flood, you have this section where it says that the B'nai Elohim, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful and then procreated with them. And then that resulted in the Nephilim or, you know, the Greek translation of the Old Testament refers to as the Gigas, the giants who are men renowned and great warriors.

Wes Huff

And so it's this, it's a very, it's always been a cryptic passage that everybody from the ancient Jews to the early Christians to today, we kind of go, huh, there's something what's going on there. And there's lots of different explanations, both natural and supernatural that have been posited. And I think a lot of people like those things. They like the ideas of kind of having a behind the curtain understanding of angels and demons and giants. And it's fun.

Wes Huff

And actually a friend of mine who's in an Old Testament scholar, I asked recently, and I've gotten his permission to say, like, if I described Enoch as ancient Jewish fan fiction, would I be going too far? And he said, you know, you're not, you're not actually that far off. If just colloquially you were referred to as ancient Jewish fan fiction, that's kind of what it is. I don't know if the Jews who were writing Enoch meant to communicate that this is actually what took place as much as they were explicating on some things that were being talked about in the intertestamental period, right? Between the end of the Old Testament, the beginning of the New Testament that were explicating that we're kind of fleshing out. What do we do with these things? What do we do with the brokenness in the world?

Wes Huff

You know, Enoch is an apocryphal writing. Now it's one of many apocryphal writings that happen and apocryphal writings are full of imagery and allusions and numerology in a context where that had a lot more meaning. It doesn't necessarily today. We look at, you know, our modern world doesn't resonate with that to the same degree. And sometimes I think we take those things that were meant to be figurative or kind of an example of something that could be happening in the ancient world. And we apply a literalistic reading and go away. But apocryphal literature is full of this stuff.

Wes Huff

And this doubles with the early church as well. Revelation had a very early reception. And then when the church grew less Jewish, because the first Christians were Jewish believers and Jesus is the Messiah, when it became

more Gentile, well, the Gentiles didn't have a framework for apocalyptic literature. And so they're reading Revelation and they're going, I don't know what this is. Right? Like, we don't have too many works that have, you know, dragons in it. Let's kind of slow down on this one. Right. And so it has a very early reception. And then there's kind of this questioning about it, because I think people were genuinely just like, we're not sure how to think about this. But in the ancient world, there are a number of different apocryphal writings, amongst which Enoch is one of them. And a number of pseudepigraphical writings. You know, we both use that word for the listener. All that means is pseudo, strange, graphe writing. You know, think of a pseudonym, right? A false name.

Jeff Laird

Yeah.

Wes Huff

It's written. It's not your real name. You're writing under a pen name, a false name. Well, there's a number of these writings, Jewish writings, that even claim to be written by and about Adam and Eve. And so it's not like Enoch is unique in that sense. There's quite a bit of this. And I think if we're reading it with the intention of thinking that the authors really thought that they were communicating history, then that may or may not be the case.

Jeff Laird

So you would say that there's a level of value to ancient documents. I'm the type who says that any information is useful information. I mean, there's always something to be learned and to be gained. But I guess from a Christian standpoint, that there's something not scriptural, per se, but there can be things that are useful or worthwhile for us to know from these books?

Wes Huff

Yeah, I'm with you. I think we should read everything, simply because I think it gives us a perspective on being aware of what's going on and not being ignorant. So whether that's religious texts of other faith perspectives, the Bhagavad Gita, or the Quran, or the Book of Mormon, I think we should at least, we want people to represent our worldview correctly.

Jeff Laird

Yes.

Wes Huff

We should do some due diligence, especially for intending to talk to people of other perspectives, of understanding what they believe. I think that goes also for like, read the Gospel of Thomas, read the Gospel of Peter, read the Gospel of Judas, and read the Book of Enoch. I think it's only going to help you with the caveat in acknowledging what exactly these writings are. I think

the value of something like Enoch is communicating to us what the perspectives and the conversations were leading up to the time frame of Jesus about the afterlife, angels, demons, the Messiah. I think it can give us a picture in understanding how Jews were talking about and mulling through the concept of the Messiah leading up to Jesus.

Wes Huff

And then that can give us a framework, especially when you see in the Gospels, people talking about, you know, Jesus with the woman at the well, and she says, you know, well, the Messiah is going to come and he's going to reveal all these things. There was an expectation of that. And part of that lead up was writings like the Book of Enoch.

Jeff Laird

I can see how there's always historical, archaeological things that we can pick up from that. So from an apologetic standpoint, then, I think maybe an interesting way to ask this would be that I know that there's going to be apologetic value in having this information. And these are things that demonstrate that there's reliability, there's trustworthiness behind Scripture. What would you say in your experience is the things people come across that is the opposite? What's the first thing or the most difficult thing that some of these things present that's somebody would look at and go, wait a minute, as I'm learning these historical facts, this is now a challenge to me? Is there, you know, what's the thing that kind of at first you go, whoa, I don't, I don't know exactly how I'm supposed to process this.

Wes Huff

That's a good question. I think, think, you know, the phrase, read many good books, but live in Scripture. I think, you know, as long as we're keeping a framework for these things not being in contention to what we find in the Gospels, and even like, so I've said in the past, something like the Gospel of Thomas could very well have a, like some bearing on historical Jesus in that the author of the Gospel of Thomas appears to be aware of and drawing relatively significantly from the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And so I think what might throw some people off is when reading some of the apocryphal literature, reading the Gospel of Thomas and coming across something that actually does sound like it comes from the Gospels, that they're familiar with the biblical Gospels and then going, well, wait a minute, does this have any credence? And I mean, it's, it's, you have to keep it in the framework of the fact that there are other silly, heretical, outrageous things that are also in the Gospel of Thomas.

Jeff Laird

Right.

Wes Huff

But realizing that these people are not, they're not coming up with this stuff wholesale. They're trying to appropriate who Jesus is. And so they're not going to say, you know, this is a story about Jesus. He's a seven foot tall Jamaican man with dreadlocks because the early, I mean, obviously a hypothetical situation, you know, Jamaicans with dreadlocks in ancient Israel. But like people are, that's going to set off all the alarm bells and go, well, okay, that's not, that's not Jesus. So like you can call him Jesus, but that's not Jesus. There's going to be some molding and playing with the pliability of trying to also convince someone that this has provenance and credibility.

Wes Huff

Now, a lot of that literature, I think we can see very conclusively that what it's largely trying to do, especially with the stuff that comes after Jesus, that uses the name of Jesus and maybe even his other disciples, Thomas, Peter, Judas, Mary, and so on, is that they're taking Jesus and they're making him look like a pagan philosopher because they're trying to make him look palatable to a pagan audience. And so the question I think needs to be asked, okay, is it more likely that a Jewish rabbi living in first century Judea was a pagan who was later dressed up as a Judean? Or was he a Judean who was later dressed up as a pagan? Well, I think the answer is obvious, right? You know, if it walks like a duck and it quacks like a duck, it's probably a duck. And so if Jesus is living and he's being brought up in Nazareth, if he's traveling across Galilee, if he's spending a significant time in Jerusalem, well, he's going to be a first century Jew. And so making him into a second century pagan. Although, it might be subtle in ways it's going to always be a falsity, right? It's going to be an appropriation, and we see that in, you know, the breadth of the Gnostic literature, and not on Gnostic literature is created equal.

Wes Huff

The Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Peter are contradictory, and maybe it's pertinent to say that using this term Nostics is kind of like using the term the Dead Sea Scrolls. It's a category, but it doesn't encompass everything. If you ask me what are the Dead Sea Scrolls like, give me one example. I can't do that because it's a whole body of literature. What is Nosticism like? Well, there are some underlying similarities, but ultimately they are different sectarian Heredical philosophical groups that have similarities. There's a running thread through them but they're gonna have all sorts of different ideas and disagree with one another and so they are they were never overly an overly large group or an overly organized group especially compared to the early Christians.

Jeff Laird

Interesting. Well, that's I think it's all really good information It's neat to look like you would say, sort of behind the scenes, in a sense, and kind of seeing how are we picking apart these different manuscripts and these different texts to see what is there. Along those lines, I had two more questions I wanted to make sure we get to. One of them was sort of with that idea. We're talking about this idea of what should and should not be there in Scripture. If somebody was to ask the question of how can I trust that everything that's supposed to be in the Bible is in the Bible now, what in your field can we offer to give people confidence in that?

Wes Huff

Yeah. Well, I would say that the early church in one sense did not pick the books of the Bible. They did not vote on the books of the Bible. They did not choose the books of the Bible in that they already had the canon of the Old Testament going to the early Christian period, you know, you look at individuals like Milio Sardis and he's giving you an outline of what the Jewish canon is and those are the books that should be read. And then you look at Josephus, he likewise gives this number, you know, the books are not an infinite number, like the Greeks, we have a set list of books. Now, mind you, as Antirite says, that list was a story in search of a conclusion. So in one sense it was an open canon, right? In Jesus' day, they were expecting that there was going to be a new covenant, right? Jeremiah 31, 31. They'll be written on the hearts of God's people and God's covenants always are followed up by written texts.

Wes Huff

So it's sometimes said that the process of the canonization of the New Testament was in response to some early heretical groups that were themselves compiling less. I don't believe that at all. I think that it is an organic, natural reaction for early Christians who themselves were Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah, rightly, to say, "Okay, we already have a precedent for this. God gives us a covenant and it's followed up by written texts, whether that's the law or whether that's, you know, the prophets giving it a say at the Lord's statement and then writing it down on the scroll and describing it on a tablet like we see." And so they say, "Okay, Here's Jesus. We have a covenant meal in his blood. The apostles saw themselves as arbiters, keepers, communicators of the new covenant. Where are the books? Where's the graphite? Where's the writing? And so that was, I think, probably almost immediately the initiation. And I think there's good reason to assume that people like the gospel authors already thought they were writing scripture within that time period, that it wasn't just a, you know, I'm going to write a biography of Jesus. No, I think they felt the weight of this is the covenant

document that is going to go along with that. I think that very strongly. And so, when we see that what we see within the early church is both a tacit admission that these are the books that were handed to them by the apostles. That Jesus breathes on his many followers, right? He gives them the Holy Spirit in the upper room. And then at that point, the authority that Jesus has is given to these individuals. And that's why when I mentioned that earlier, that kind of apostolicity, does it come from someone who either knew Jesus or someone who knew someone who knew Jesus is so important.

Wes Huff

So it's Chuck Hill. I'm like, his book's up there. That's why I'm trying to search. Chuck Hill has this really great illustration where he says, if you were to go back in time and you were to ask those first Christians, say in the beginning of the second century, why did you choose Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? They could very well look back at you and say, why did you choose your parents? And the idea is, you exist by nature of your parents having already existed. We didn't choose Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We are a product of the Holy Scriptures speaking to us. So those were already, God knew what the Canon of Scripture would be because God is the author of the Canon of Scripture. And so there is no choosing, but at the exact same time, there is a, so I would say the word that we use is not choose, it's recognize.

Jeff Larid

Yeah.

Wes Huff

The early church recognized these books and the books that were recognized, some like I talked about earlier, needed some due diligence and homework to allow the dust to settle on them and them to have actually discerned and separated the wheat from the chaff. And I think that's exactly what they did, right? And it didn't take very long. Like I mentioned, by the middle of the second century, you have documents like the Miratorium Canon, you have individuals creating early Canon lists, And by the time you get to the fourth century, that list is basically agreed upon by everybody. When the Council of Nicaea happens in 325, the conversation is not what is scripture. They're already quoting scripture as if it has authority and nobody goes, "Well, really? First Corinthians?" You know, that's debated, right?

Jeff Laird

Yeah.

Wes Huff

Everybody agrees. You know, we're talking about how do we flesh out the language of the doctrine of the Trinity in light of someone who's saying something that we know is incorrect? Well, we use scripture. We use that as our authoritative source. So in that sense, the early church is recognizing

those books by nature of the authority that those books already hold. The church doesn't have the authority. The books have the authority and the church recognizes that authority.

Jeff Laird

Yeah, that makes sense. I think that helps to establish that idea, I mean, it's probably a really coarse analogy, but if I'm doing genealogy, I'm going back and looking at my family records, I'm not choosing to make somebody a grandparent, cousin, second relation. I'm discovering that they are, I'm just bowing to the weight of the evidence that's there. So instead of me saying, well, I'm just going to pick and choose the ones that I want to be my relatives, just saying, this is who they are. And I'm seeing things that tell me yes or no, one way or the other. So I like the idea of having that confidence that's there.

Jeff Laird

The other side of that coin then is to say, "Okay, so we know that the books are right. So we know that the texts supposedly are correct. What confidence do I have to know that the text, the words that I'm reading in my printed version of the Bible today are the same as what Peter, or Paul, or John were actually writing down. What's my reason to believe that those are still accurate to that?"

Wes Huff

Yeah, well, this is the process of the internal analysis of what's referred to as textual criticism. So textual criticism is a field, it's discipline, it's an art that looks at the handwritten copies that we have, the manuscripts, and it does things like comparative analysis. It does things like looking internally at the text and deciding, you know, does it make more sense for a scribe to take in a reading and add it or to remove it if we have two manuscripts that differ from one another? And the manuscript tradition for the New Testament is very vast and it's very robust. We have a lot of very reliable early copies, but this is done with everything from the ancient world because the fact is we have no original copies of anything. However, I would argue that we actually still have the original text. I think when you look at the early Christians, they're a lot less concerned and preoccupied with the leather or papyrus paper that John, or Peter, or Paul, or Matthew are writing on as they are with the text and the message and the meaning of what's being written. And so sometimes you'll see the word autograph being thrown around, the original autograph. And I think that's caused some confusion because people associate that the original autograph with like the actual leather that Paul might have written on and say, "Well, you don't have the original autograph." And I think what's missed there for us that do manuscript studies is that's not what we usually mean when we use that term.

Wes Huff

What we mean is the text. And I would say we actually do have the original autograph in that we have the original text and that we can look at copies from the second century throughout, you know, the last 2000 years. And we can see that Christians were very eager to get the Word of God out. And so they copied it quite a bit, spread it very far and quickly. The downside to that was that a lot of people, which is the result of copying anything by hand, made mistakes. But ironically, it's due to the mistakes that we can trace back the original. Because if you have copies, say, in Syria, that all of a sudden have slightly differing readings because of additions or emissions, then somewhere like North Africa, well, you can ask why? Why are different readings popping up in different geographical locations, and what are the timeframes of those? How are they related to other manuscripts? If we look internally, does an added phrase make sense grammatically, syntactically? Does it make sense for the context of the whole? Could this have been added? Subscribers were very intent on if they even thought that there was an addition, including the addition, just in case it was actually original.

Wes Huff

So we very rarely see things omitted. Far more we see things added. And because of that, sometimes I like to say we don't have 100 % of the text of the Bible, we have 110 % of the text. And it's not that hard to figure out where that 10 % of the text is. That doesn't mean that part of that 10 % is insignificant. Most of it is, some of it actually has some bearing on the meaning. But ultimately, we can trace that text back with such an incredible level of accuracy that I don't think anybody should have reasonable grounds to question their confidence on what they're reading, being what the original authors wrote.

Jeff Laird

Great. And I think it's a very good answer. I appreciate the concise way of approaching that. So I really appreciate you taking time to talk to us about this stuff. It's neat to see the way that we can look into this field. It's not a field that very many of us get a chance to dig into very often, but people do wonder about these things. So it's, it's fun to get in there.

Jeff Laird

So, Wes, again, thank you. This has been the Got Questions podcast with Wes Huff. He's the vice president of Apologetics Canada. And he's also working on a documentary series called Can I Trust the Bible, which I would encourage people to check out. So this has been the Got Questions podcast. Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.