

Discipleship and the History of the Bible

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On February 21-22, 2020, the Phoenix Seminary Text and Canon Institute (TCI) hosted its first church conference on the history of the Bible in Phoenix, Arizona.¹ The scriptures are the foundation to Christian discipleship, and early Christian bishops taught on them accordingly. In his fourth catechetical lecture “On Ten Points of Doctrine,” Cyril of Jerusalem included an entire section on the divine scriptures, instructing new converts on the identity of the canonical books of the Old and New Testament and warning them about other, apocryphal books. The great Augustine in his *On Christian Teaching* (2.8.12.24) also included a section on the identity of the canonical books as well as principles for the receiving of the scriptures as canon. There was a day when Christians did not know what books were in their canon and the bishops sought to teach them.² After exhausting research into the Bible’s manuscripts, early theologians like Origen explained that the church had her scriptures because divine Providence had preserved them for her. Though we might disagree with Origen’s conclusion that the scriptures in Greek

copies are what God preserved for the church, he leaves a sound example of a Christian scholar who leveraged his abilities to give an explanation for why Christians had received their spiritual books and the particular words contained in those books.

We live in a different day but with no fewer, difficult questions. Questions about the origins of the canon have multiplied as we learn more about the early history of the Hebrew canon and the reception of the Old and New Testament by different branches of Christianity (e.g., Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church). Contemporary analysis of the great manuscript and archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century like the Dead Sea Scrolls for the OT or the Nag Hammadi Library for the NT continue to scrutinize the Bible's history and authenticity. From the university lecture hall to the many popular news outlets like *Newsweek* and informational websites like *History*, the history of the Book—not its teachings per se—has become the chief issue. To be blunt: the main question is not whether the Bible is true but whether we even have the Bible in the first place. That is, do we have the correct books and correct wording in our scholarly editions? Are our translations of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek based on the most accurate manuscripts? And are the translations themselves accurate? Questions that used to be tied only to university life and scholarship have now spilled over into popular culture and the churches have not been insulated from the information swirling around.

Many pastors went to seminary years ago, before many of their professors even saw the first published editions of the Dead Sea Scrolls. How can they become informed when one of their sheep asks about the earliest Hebrew manuscripts? What can they do? The Text and Canon Institute was established partly in 2019 for this very need. In addition to advancing scholarship into these questions and guiding students through the maze, the TCI also aims to educate the church on the history of the Bible. The TCI plans to launch its new website with accessible and engaging articles on these questions by the end of 2021. But already in 2020, it had its first church conference, “Sacred Words.”

Of course, many excellent conferences on the Bible have convened to teach God's people about the Bible's inspiration, authority, sufficiency, inerrancy, and related theological issues. There have also been good apologetic conferences featuring apologists who have answered questions on the Bible's

history and reliability. Sometimes, however, apologists and pastors have been the source of misinformation on these important questions.³ But the evidence and arguments have become increasingly sophisticated, requiring more specialized analysis and treatment on the part of Christian scholars. Last year, the Text and Canon Institute hosted its “Sacred Words” conference and invited Christian scholars and churchmen in these specialized areas to speak to lay people about the history of the Bible. We assembled three plenary speakers: Daniel Wallace on how the wording of the NT text was transmitted, Peter Gentry on how the text of the OT was copied, and Stephen Dempster on how the Hebrew canon was formed. In addition to these three talks, we also organized four breakout presentations on different issues: (1) Darian Lockett presented on the Catholic Epistles, (2) Jeff Cate on textual variants in NT manuscripts and what they tell us, (3) Anthony Ferguson on what the Dead Sea Scrolls tell us about the history of the text, and (4) Tim Mitchell on relationship of inspiration to the autograph. Many of these talks have become articles in this current issue of *SBJT* and some of them were recorded and posted to the TCI’s YouTube channel.⁴ Of course, a conference is a helpful, though limited, way to teach on these issues because there is much more to say. The TCI plans to have a sustained flow of informed content on these questions posted to its website soon.

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- ¹ Directed by John Meade and Peter Gurry, the TCI exists to further academic research into the history of the Bible, mentor the next Christian scholars, and resource and teach the church about these matters. You can learn more about the TCI at www.textandcanon.org.
 - ² One can read these texts and the rest of the early Christian canon lists in Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
 - ³ For a description of past missteps and more informed ways forward on the New Testament side of the discussion, see the work edited by Elijah Hixson and Peter J. Gurry, *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).
 - ⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNsbnGwVpAR6ciaiiuUNVxGLt-RiNyTCn>.