

Greg Lanier has done the church a great service with this short but meaty read, helping the ordinary church member both to understand the process of how we got our Bibles, and to have well-founded confidence in the text of God's word before us. An edifying and enlightening book in an age of fake news and false assertions on this foundational subject.

Lee Gatiss

Church Historian at Union School of Theology, and Director
of Church Society (UK)

If you are looking for a readable, informed, and theologically-grounded explanation for where our Bibles came from, then this new volume by Greg Lanier is it. Finally, we have an accessible book on the biblical canon that is answering the kind of questions ordinary Christians are asking. I highly recommend it.

Michael J. Kruger

President and Professor of New Testament, Reformed
Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina

This book is tailor-made for people like me—people who would say that their life is built around the Bible, yet would find it difficult to explain how the Bible came together, or to defend challenges to the Bible's trustworthiness. Without being overly wordy or technical, this pocket guide provides clear and accessible explanations for why we can be confident that our Bibles are the Word of God.

Nancy Guthrie

Author and Bible Teacher

Carefully researched and easy to read, Greg Lanier has provided an excellent resource for both pastors and laypeople. Beginning with a definition of scripture as ‘the inspired deposit of writings received as divinely authoritative for the covenant community,’ Dr. Lanier takes his reader through the history and complexity of our Bible. This pocket guide answers difficult questions about the formation of the canon of scripture with clarity, precision, and a pastor’s heart.

Leigh Swanson
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A CHRISTIAN'S POCKET GUIDE TO

HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

GREG LANIER

Old and New Testament Canon and Text

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS

To my church family.
May you always trust in the very
words of the living God.

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- ⚠ Warning
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PREFACE

*'Wait, what do you mean by First Maccabees?
I've never heard of that.'*

'Pastor, where on earth is Acts 8:37?'

In recent weeks I was asked these questions by two long-time Christians who know their Bibles well and have spent time reading serious Christian literature. Yet their questions revealed a gap in knowledge that even mature Christians may have in terms of the formation of Scripture. What makes up the 'canon' and why? Why does my copy of the Bible not include certain verses that show up in others? Such questions, if handled poorly, can lead to a diminished confidence in Scripture. They are the stimulus for this book.

Without a doubt, dozens of books have been written on the topic of the origins and transmission of the Old

and New Testaments. Why write another? This short volume aims to fill a particular gap. Most available volumes are intimidatingly long and technical, even for specialists. Some that are pitched more at the popular level can be frustratingly out-of-date or do not deal fairly or robustly with the data—giving the impression of ‘hiding something.’ The vast majority cover *only* the OT or *only* the NT, but not both. And many of the best have focused only on one aspect of these key questions, such as ‘canon,’ and not others.

My aim, then, is to prepare a volume that, say, my aunt or uncle would enjoy reading but which engages rigorously with the data, covers both testaments, and cogently covers the central aspects of the question, ‘How did we get the Bible?’

The genesis of my interest in these issues goes back to my time as a layperson under the ministry of Dr. Michael Kruger, whom I’m now privileged to call a colleague at Reformed Theological Seminary. His influence and that of Dr. Charles Hill (another RTS colleague) loom large in the following pages, particularly for the New Testament. The materials and concepts that led to the present volume first took shape in seminars I have taught on the topic at Christ Church Cambridge (UK) and River Oaks Church (Florida), though the finer details have been worked out in my academic publications and courses on the Greek OT, Gospels, and Pauline Corpus.

The topics that will be covered are deemed, by some, to be rather dry. Haven’t we sorted this stuff out already? However, time and again I have been approached by

church members with insightful and probing questions about why their Bible mentions textual variants (are they hiding something from me?), or what to make of the apocrypha (is it dangerous?), or what to make of the latest *Time* article lambasting the trustworthiness of the Bible (is this stuff true?). For many Christians, the questions addressed by this volume are not just ‘ivory tower’ but very personal, for they want to know, at the end of the day, whether they can turn to their NIV or ESV or NKJV and trust that it is the Word of God.

Moreover, in recent decades both popular and academic writers have engaged in a sophisticated critique of the origins of the Bible, the nature of canon, and the reliability of the text we have today. Though such endeavors are by no means new, they are increasingly popularized on numerous fronts, from college religion courses to mainstream media to Islamic apologetics.

My goal, then, is not necessarily to win any big debates nor convince learned academicians to change their views. Rather, my hope in such a *Pocket Guide* is to provide the average interested Christian—using my own church as my theoretical audience—with a thoroughly Christian and academically sound (two things that do not often go together) resource, both for their own edification and for engaging with folks who might disagree with them on these matters. In the interest of full disclosure, I cannot help but offer a Protestant, and specifically Reformed, perspective on many of these issues, but my desire is that the volume be accessible and useful to the entire church catholic.

A DIVINE DEPOSIT

Few things are better suited for conspiracy theorists than the subject of the origins of the Bible.

Consider a few recent examples. Allegations of forged scrolls from Israel have brought suspicion on the 2017 opening of the Museum of the Bible in Washington D.C. The so-called ‘Gospel of Jesus’ Wife’—a papyrus fragment purporting to record Jesus’ words to his ‘wife’—brought intense international attention when published in 2012, only to be demonstrated a forgery in 2016. The *Gospel of Judas*, which offers a remix story of Judas Iscariot and Jesus, caused a media firestorm in 2006. And who can forget the salacious theories about repressed gospels and Constantine’s canon power-play in Dan Brown’s 2003 *The Da Vinci Code*.

Most everyone, it seems, loves a good conspiracy about Scripture, and questions raised about such important writings can be quite polarizing, if not emotional.

Are the Scriptures truly from God? If so, in what sense? If not, are they merely erroneous human devotional writings? Who picked which books are 'in' and 'out,' and how did *they* get to be the ones deciding? Was the canon foisted upon us by rabbis at Jamnia or bishops at Nicaea? And is it true, as many Muslims and academics claim, that the texts of these Scriptures are so polluted by errors that they are hopelessly corrupt?

These questions radiate from a central concern: *how did we get the Scriptures, and can I accept them as the Word of God?* I admit that the latter half of the question is not really the domain of human argumentation; it is an essential faith commitment. But we can perhaps make some headway on the former, helping the believer to develop a more well-articulated set of convictions, and the skeptic to take a fresh look at things.

GETTING OUR BEARINGS

We will break down our task into the three essential building blocks for understanding how the Scriptures got from their point of origin to today. First, we must ask the question, 'What exactly is Scripture in the first place?' Though this question often goes unasked, or receives a simplistic answer, it the foundational starting point and will be the topic of the rest of this chapter.

Second, 'Do we have the right *books*?' Since the two

testaments have different historical backgrounds, we will address them separately in chapters 2 and 4.

Third, ‘Do we have the right *words* of these books?’ Even if we are convinced we have the ‘right’ books, we also must spend time thinking through the complex process by which the words of those books were passed down both orally and via handwritten copies over a multi-century period before the printing press (and computers). Again we will address each testament individually, in chapters 3 and 5.

In sum, I will develop a brief case for *what Scripture is*, followed by a study on *canon* and *text* for the Old and New Testaments, respectively. Let us dig in.

WHAT IS SCRIPTURE?

Paul’s words, ‘when the old covenant is read’ (2 Cor 3:14), seem innocent enough. They did to me, at least, until I realized the shocking implications of what he was saying. Here a minister of the ‘new covenant’ (2 Cor 3:6) makes a stunning claim that the ‘old covenant’—referring to the relationship established by God by which he redeems a people unto himself in fulfillment of his promises—is *something to be read*. It is concretized in a book: a covenantal book. Here we have the seed of the answer to our question, ‘What is Scripture?’

We begin here because articulating what Scripture *is* feeds into the other issues we will face, not the other way around. When the early Jewish and Christian communities discussed these matters, they did not start

with agonizing decisions about ‘canonization’ to select books to be Scripture. They spoke of what they already deemed to be ‘covenant,’ ‘writings,’ ‘holy books,’ and ‘books that defile the hands’ (that is, sacred). They talked about what exactly it *is* that they had in front of them, and the answer to *that* question directed the downstream concerns about the shape of that *thing* and whether we have good copies of it. The food in a package determines what stats show up on the nutrition label and whether they are accurate, not the other way around. What the thing *is* anchors the rest of the discussion.

Attempting to define Scripture is, however, slightly terrifying and always debatable. That said, I propose that the most accurate and minimally sufficient way to define Scripture—biblically, theologically, and historically—is the following: it is *the inspired deposit of writings received as divinely authoritative for the covenant community*. Space does not permit going into extreme detail unpacking this, but I will do my best to elaborate briefly on what I mean for each element of the definition.

‘INSPIRED’

Scripture bears witness to its own dual authorship: God himself, by the Holy Spirit, and the human authors who give particular expression in human language. This is traditionally called ‘inspiration,’ taking a cue from Paul’s classic phrase in 2 Timothy 3:16a, ‘all Scripture is God-breathed’ (*theo* [God] + *pneustos* [breathed/inspired]). The OT is described as being inscribed by the ‘finger of

God' (Exod 31:8), given by the 'voice of God' (Deut 13:18), delivered to Moses 'face to face' (Exod 33:11), and stamped with God's own authority as 'the Word of the LORD' or 'Word of God' (over 300x). Both testaments bear witness that they were given directly by the Spirit of God yet *through* human instruments (1 Kgs 16:34; Zech 7:12; Luke 1:70; 1 Pet 1:10–12).

Judaism has always viewed the Hebrew Scriptures as word-for-word given directly by God from heaven (*b. Sanh.* 11a). The same is true for the early church. For example, Clement of Alexandria (d. 215 AD) attests that John was 'inspired by the Spirit' to compose his Gospel (Eusebius, *Hist.* 6.14.5–7). The *Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Luke* (ca. 150–250 AD) likewise describes Luke as 'moved by the Holy Spirit [to] write down the gospel.'

It is helpful to further refine this view of divine/human authorship by thinking of it as a three-legged stool. (i) *Verbal*. The historical orthodox church affirms that divine inspiration extends not just to the ideas contained in Scripture, but to the very words in the original languages (see Matt 5:18). (ii) *Plenary*. The church historically affirms that divine inspiration extends to *all the words*, including historical facts/figures, not just the words conveying 'spiritual' truths. (iii) *Organic*. Scripture is clear that the writers' minds/personalities, linguistic abilities, and cultural experiences were fully

The idea that scriptural writers were in a trance receiving divine dictation is more representative of a Muslim or Mormon view than the historical Christian teaching.

