

Chapter 7: THE LIMIT OF INSPIRATION

We discussed ••83•• the meaning of inspiration in Chapter 2. As we come to the end of this section dealing with Hebrew manuscripts, we must return to a related subject. In 237 selected instances, the New World Bible Translation Committee has given greater authority to 26 Hebrew versions than to the best extant Greek manuscripts. This forces us to re-evaluate what we will call the *limit* of inspiration. Because inspiration *includes* only certain writings as Scripture, it has consequently *excluded* all others.

The technical term for the *limit of inspiration* is *canon*.¹ The canon of Scripture identifies the 66 books comprising the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.² In this chapter we will use both terms. However, we will generally use the term *limit of inspiration* because it is more descriptive to those who are less familiar with the term *canon*.

The need to define the limit of inspiration was mandatory for the first century church.³ Early in the history of the church, the scope of the inspired writings was debated. Marcion (born about 100 C.E.) was the first to publish a definitive list of sacred writings. To accommodate his heretical teachings, he restricted his full acceptance of Scripture to Paul's Epistles. In so doing, he excluded all books of the Hebrew Scriptures and modified the Gospels to fit his own teaching.

••84•• At a later period, Gnostic Gospels (such as those found in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt) were circulated as authoritative guides for faith. (These writings are Coptic translations made about 1,500 years ago from Greek manuscripts of 350 to 400 C.E. The first Gnostic writings probably were known as early as 120 to 150 C.E.)

In more recent times, men like Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion, have proffered writings claimed to be latter revelations of inspired truth from God.

It is imperative, therefore, that each of us come to a firm understanding of the limit of inspiration. We must know what *is* inspired Scripture. We must also know what is *outside the limit* of inspired writing. On what basis do we reject the writings of Joseph Smith, the Gnostic Gospels, or even the early non-canonical writings of the Christian church as non-authoritative?

General considerations of canon

Scripture as a whole—including both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures—is identified by established prerequisites. An introductory lesson to the canon of Scripture in "*All Scripture Is Inspired of God and Beneficial*" says:⁴

What are some of the divine indications that have determined the canonicity of the sixty-six books of the Bible? First of all, the documents must deal with Jehovah's affairs in the earth, turning men to his worship and stimulating deep respect for his work and purposes in the earth. They must give evidence of inspiration, that is, be products of holy spirit. (2 Pet. 1:21) There must be no

¹ The word *canon* comes from the Latin word *kanon*, which refers to a measuring rod. The idea in English is the *rule* or *standard* by which something is measured. Specifically, the *Bible canon* came to denote the catalog of inspired books worthy of being used as a straightedge in measuring faith, doctrine, and conduct. (*Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 290). The canon, as used here, is the list of books accepted as inspired Scripture.

² Not all groups within Christendom recognize the same canon. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions add the books of the Apocrypha to their canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. However, a canon of the Christian Greek Scriptures comprised of the 27 books as they appear in the *New World Translation* is recognized by most Christian groups.

³ During the persecution of the church by Rome at the end of the first century, it was a serious crime to possess either the Hebrew or Greek Scriptures. (Possessing hidden scrolls could result in death.) As a result, it was important for late first century believers to determine which writings they were willing to risk their lives to protect. A ruse was occasionally used to elude Roman authorities. Early Christians would relinquish a scroll which was not viewed as Scripture (such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* or the *Epistle of Clement*) to the authorities for its destruction in order to protect an inspired Gospel or Epistle. Thus, early persecution contributed to the recognition of the canon.

⁴ From pages 299-300. The reader should review the entire chapter for a more complete account of the canon of Scripture. "*All Scripture Is Inspired of God and Beneficial*" Study Four—The Bible and Its Canon.

appeal to superstition or creature worship, but, rather, an appeal to love and service of God. There would have to be nothing in any of the individual writings that would conflict with the internal harmony of the whole, but, rather, each book must, by its unity with the others, support the one authorship, that of Jehovah God. We would also expect the writings to give evidence of accuracy down to the smallest detail.

Beyond these general considerations, however, the Christian Scriptures depend on somewhat different criteria for canonicity from those of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the case of the Hebrew Scriptures, the writings were produced over a protracted period of time from Moses to the post-exilic writers. Though dealing with God's program for Israel, these writings come from numerous contextual settings including wilderness wanderings, entering and conquering a new land, a stable ••85•• kingdom period under David and Solomon, the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and the time of exile and return. In contrast, the Christian Scriptures have a setting consisting of three distinct divisions. The first division is the ministry of Jesus to the Jewish nation (the Gospels). The second records the spread of the Kingdom message to the Gentile world. (This includes both the historical account in Acts and the resulting Epistles.) The final division consists of a future prophesy given in the book of Revelation. With the exception of the future scope of Revelation, the Christian Greek Scriptures are confined to a brief period of time. The entire 27 books were written between 41 C.E. (Matthew) and 98 C.E. (the Gospel of John) by authors who lived during Jesus' ministry. Consequently, the limit of inspiration of the Christian Greek Scriptures considers both the men who wrote and the date at which the Scriptures were complete.

The men who wrote

Fundamental to the canonicity of the books of the Christian Greek Scriptures are the credentials of the writers themselves. It is clearly understood that each writer was either a direct participant in the ministry of Jesus, or was, at the least, a contemporary of the events and in direct contact with those who were participants.

Matthew, John, James, Peter, and Jude were direct participants, though neither James nor Jude were among the 12 disciples. We are not certain of Mark's role, though it is often suggested that he was in the Garden during Jesus' arrest.

When Jesus was arrested at Gethsemane and the apostles fled, he was followed by "a certain young man wearing a fine linen garment over his naked body." When the crowd tried to seize him too, "he left his linen garment behind and got away naked." This young man is generally believed to be Mark. (*"All Scripture Is Inspired of God and Beneficial,"* p. 181.)

On the other hand, Luke undoubtedly did not witness Jesus' public ministry, as he was probably raised in Antioch. However, he was later in direct contact with individuals who closely followed Jesus. On page 187, *"All Scripture Is Inspired of God and Beneficial"* says,

Luke was not, of course, an eyewitness of all the events he records in his Gospel, not being one of the 12 and probably not even a believer until after Jesus' death. However, he was very closely associated with Paul in the missionary field.

Paul, of course, was a contemporary of the events, but was certainly not sympathetic during the early years of the church. Before his ••86•• conversion, Paul (Saul) was its most determined foe. However, Paul describes his apostleship at 1 Corinthians 15:8-9, "But last of all he appeared also to me as if to one born prematurely. For I am the least of the apostles, and I am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the congregation of God."

We thus understand that the period of time during which inspired Christian Scriptures were written was confined to the lifetimes of the Apostles. On page 410 of *Insight on the Scriptures, Volume 1*, the writers say,

The apostles clearly had divine accreditation and they spoke in attestation of such other writers as Luke and James, the half brother of Jesus. By holy spirit the apostles had "discernment of inspired utterances" as to whether such were of God or not. (1 Co 12:4) With the death of John, the last apostle, this reliable chain of divinely inspired men came to an end, and so with the Revelation, John's Gospel, and his epistles, the Bible canon closed.

The canon of Scripture is closed

In the last sentence of the material quoted above, we see another characteristic of the Christian Greek Scripture canon. The canon was closed when the last Apostle died. The Christian Scriptures do not include writings of devout men of the second century. On pages 409-410 of *Insight on the Scriptures*, Volume 1, the writers say,

By the end of the second century there was no question but that the canon of the Christian Greek Scriptures was closed.

The canon, including the list of books making up the Christian Greek Scriptures, was already settled [before the Council of Carthage in 397 C.E.], not by the decree of any council, but by the usage of Christian congregations throughout the ancient world.

(For a very complete discussion of the canon, see the article in *Aid to Bible Understanding* beginning on page 290. Particularly note the section under the heading CHRISTIAN GREEK SCRIPTURES. Also see the comparable material in *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol. 1, pp. 406-410.)

Therefore, our understanding of the limit of inspiration leads us to a single conclusion. No supplementary information can be *added* to the inspired revelation of the Christian Greek Scriptures beyond that which was written by the inspired Christian writers themselves. This is the reason why we categorically dismiss the writings of Joseph Smith, the Gnostic Gospels, or even the early non-canonical writings of the Christian church as being outside the limit of inspiration.⁵

••87•• We must be careful, therefore, that we do not unwittingly re-open the canon of Scripture by claiming that there are other inspired texts. We do not accept the later *revelations* of Gnostic Gospels or hidden writings on gold tablets as coming from God. We believe God has closed additions to Scripture since the apostolic authors' deaths. Therefore, *we must be careful that we do not give Hebrew translations of the 14th century and following the status of recent additions to the Christian Scripture canon.* We must accept the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of the Christian Greek Scriptures as being the best representation of the inspired Scripture which Jehovah gave to his early followers.⁶

The subject of canon deals with more than merely which *books* are to be included in the Bible. It also includes every part of the text, including the *words* themselves. The translators of the *New World Translation* reflect their understanding of this important truth when they deal with problematic Christian Greek Scripture texts such as the final chapter of Mark.⁷ They most certainly identified a spurious (false) addition to the *Textus Receptus* (King James Version) at 1 John 5:7b which says, "the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."⁸ The Westcott and Hort text does not include this final portion of the verse.

••88•• Equally, the canon must determine which *words* are to be included in a given passage. It is a question of the limit of inspiration (or canon) when Hebrew translations completed in the 14th century and later are granted a greater status of inspiration than the verifiable Greek texts of the second to fourth centuries C.E.⁹

⁵ There are many reasons we dismiss the writings of Joseph Smith and the Gnostic Gospels. Among these reasons is their lack of harmony (agreement) with the 66 canonical books. On the other hand, *The Gospel of Clement* is rejected as non-canonical even though the content is in agreement with Scripture as a whole.

⁶ We must allow, of course, for the careful scrutiny of textual evidence as described in the second chapter.

⁷ Look carefully at Mark 16 in the *New World Translation Reference Edition*, page 1239. The translators give the textual support for each of the endings. The reader can appreciate both the necessity and difficulty of dealing with these textual issues.

⁸ This addition gives an interesting illustration of *intentional* error in the Greek text. Though the error was introduced into the Greek text at a very late date (around 1520 C.E.), the change was so important to the proponents of this wording that a copyist reproduced *the entire Christian Scriptures* in order to *plant* this one error. Erasmus did not believe the text was correct, but as promised, he included the added words in his 1522 Greek Scripture edition. Nonetheless, he included a lengthy footnote expressing his reservation concerning its authenticity. After further research, Erasmus removed it from his subsequent edition of the Greek text. Today, the error is quite traceable to a particular family of Latin versions. It is only found in four Greek manuscripts and appears in no current English versions other than those in the King James tradition. (See Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 101. For confirmation also see "The Word" *Who is He? According to John*, p.9)

⁹ Generally speaking, both *passages* and *words* are the domain of textual criticism rather than canon. However, in

The search for the Greek Scriptures *Inspired of God*

It is our desire today to possess the most accurate reproduction possible of the original writings of the inspired Christian authors. We want each word in our Greek text to be exactly those words which the authors themselves used. Specifically, in each of the 237 instances in which the *New World Translation* uses *Jehovah* in its translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures, we want to know if the original authors wrote Κύριος or יהוה. However, since the original writings have long since been lost, we must resolve this question from *copies* of their writings.

Epistles and gospels from many authors were circulated among the growing first century churches. There were many more writings than the 27 in the canon of the Christian Greek Scriptures we accept today. Paul himself wrote a letter to Laodicea (Colossians 4:16) which is not included in the canon. However, among all the numerous writings of the first two centuries, it is only the 27 "books" found in the *New World Translation* Christian Greek Scriptures which have been acknowledged for two millennia as the written revelation of God.¹⁰

The limit of inspiration is the dividing line between the writings we will accept as inspired by Jehovah and writings which do not carry the weight of inspiration. Other early Christian writings may give insight into the words of the original writers. For example, *The First Epistle of Clement* may give valuable information regarding the wording of the *Septuagint* Scriptures. However, these extra-biblical sources can never have greater textual importance than the canonical writings themselves. Therefore, a Hebrew translation which uses the ••89•• Tetragrammaton (יהוה) cannot be used to alter the original Greek manuscript text. This is particularly true in that we can determine that the Tetragrammaton was not used in the Greek manuscript from which any given Hebrew version was translated.¹¹

Figure 5 indicates the process used by the New World Bible Translation Committee to bring the Tetragrammaton (יהוה) into the Christian Greek Scriptures. To do so, it cited 26 Hebrew translations from a considerably later era. By using this method, the reality of ••90•• inspired Scripture is seriously undermined by claiming that recent Hebrew versions are a better indication of the intent of the divine author than are the best preserved Greek manuscripts copied only a century after the original writings.

Bringing the issue into focus

We all share a deep commitment to God's inspired Scriptures wherein we fully accept the absolute reliability of the original writings of the inspired Christian authors. We must, then, be careful that we do not lose our focus. We give allegiance to the original writings, not mere translations of those writings.

The "J" reference Hebrew versions are not early apostolic texts. They are not even writings of the early Hebrew Christian church. They are late Hebrew translations; a Gospel of *Matthew* was available as early as 1385;¹² the remainder were published in 1537 and later from the Greek texts of Erasmus and the *Textus Receptus*.¹³

The Hebrew versions are not a canonical source of verification for the original inspired writings of the apostolic writers. They are merely late translations from a known Greek text.

this chapter we are identifying them as issues of canon because the question extends to which ancient *texts* should be acknowledged as inspired because of their unique use of the Tetragrammaton. The precedent of accepting isolated wording within Hebrew translations as being more authoritative than the Greek texts from which they were translated presents unique and complicated issues within both textual criticism and the canon of Scripture.

¹⁰ Of course, we include the Hebrew Scriptures within the writings we accept as canonical. However, this chapter is considering only the Christian Greek Scriptures.

¹¹ See Appendix E for the Greek text used in the early Hebrew translations.

¹² As noted in Chapter 5, this may be a recension of an earlier Gospel written by Matthew in Hebrew.

¹³ Erasmus' Greek text was generally favored at this time, however other similar texts reflecting Erasmus' editions were also available. In the above comments we are using both *Erasmus' Greek text* and the *Textus Receptus* as general terms rather than attempting to give precise source identifications.

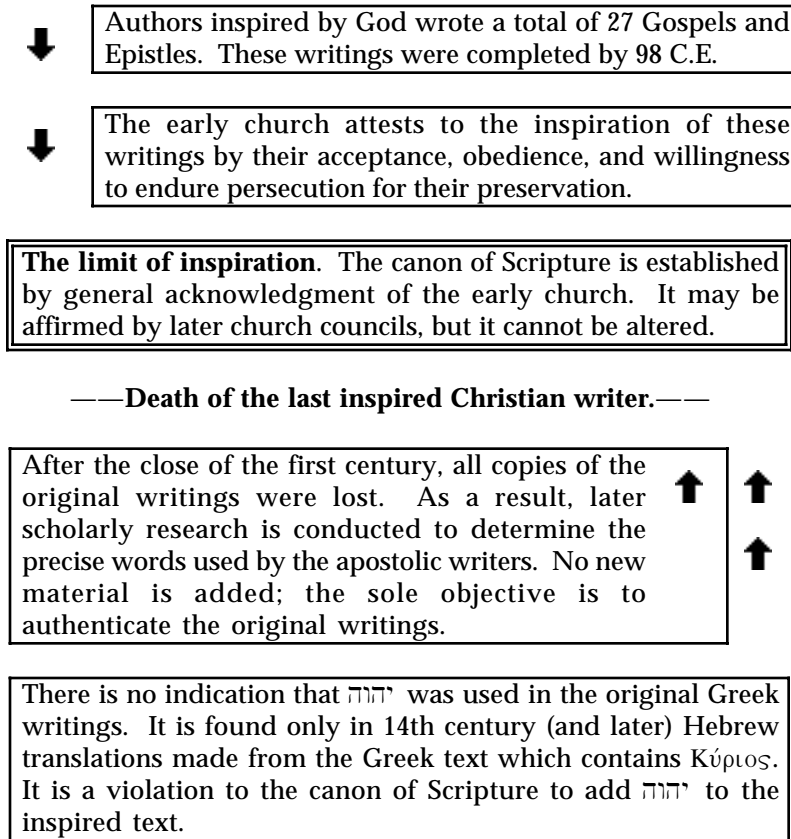


Figure 5. The canon of the Christian Greek Scriptures and its subsequent verification.

The weight of the evidence

Figure 5 is a summary of our prior discussion of the original Greek Scripture text, its transmission through two millennia, and our belief in its divine inspiration.

It is the objective of this book to look at the textual and historical evidence for the Tetragrammaton in the Christian Greek Scriptures. Insofar as it is humanly possible, each of us must step aside from our theological positions and return to a simple evaluation of the text itself. It must never be our objective to force Scripture to say what we want it to say. We must allow the divine author to say what *he* intended to say through the original, inspired writers.

We must objectively evaluate the evidence for the original Greek word in each of the 237 instances in which the *New World Translation* reads *Jehovah* in the Christian Greek Scriptures. *Our final conclusion must be based on the supporting evidence of textual and historical information.*

••91•• Clearly, the 26 "J" reference Hebrew versions contain the Tetragrammaton. However, we must then pursue the source of the Hebrew translators' original texts. With the possible exception of the Shem-Tob *Matthew* and the Hebrew versions derived from this source, we must accept the statement of the New World Bible Translation Committee that the remainder of the these Hebrew versions are translations of the Greek text itself.¹⁴

As we have seen earlier, the writers of *Jehovah's Witnesses Proclaimers of God's Kingdom*,¹⁵ view the Greek text of the *Kingdom Interlinear Translation* as a reliable reproduction of the written

¹⁴ On page 78 the Hebrew versions which were translated from a Greek text were identified.

¹⁵ See Chapter 27 entitled "Printing and Distributing God's Own Sacred Word" in *Jehovah's Witnesses Proclaimers of God's Kingdom*. For a description of the *Kingdom Interlinear Translation*, refer to page 610 in this same book.

Greek of the inspired writers. From this interlinear translation we see both the early evidences for the Greek word *Kyrios* and a complete body of information describing the Hebrew versions, their recent dates of publication, and their textual source in translation.

From this information, each of us must come to a personal conclusion regarding the place of the Tetragrammaton in the original Christian Greek Scripture writings. In light of our strong belief in the inspiration of Scripture, we must strongly object to any claim which alters Jehovah's Word merely because certain Hebrew versions use the Tetragrammaton when translating *Kyrios* from a known Greek text. *To accept late Hebrew translations as a higher authority than the best preserved Greek manuscripts from which they were translated violates our understanding of the canon of the Christian Greek Scriptures.*

In closing this chapter on the limit of inspiration, we are left with a startling question. With all of Jehovah's care in producing and preserving his inspired Scriptures, is it reasonable to think that he allowed the Tetragrammaton in the Christian Greek Scriptures—and the important truth it conveys—to be entirely lost from all extant Greek manuscripts? Was the presence of the Tetragrammaton lost so completely *that it is only found in Hebrew translations made since 1385?*



CHAPTER SUMMARY. The importance of Scripture is directly attributable to its affirmation as being inspired by God. We obey Scripture because it comes from God, not because of its literary or ••92•• historical quality. For inspiration to have any meaning in application, it must have a limit. This limit identifies those writings which are *inside* the boundaries of inspiration (and thus qualify as *God's Word*) as opposed to those writings which are *outside* these boundaries (and thus cannot be authoritatively claimed as inspired). Our use of the designation *limit of inspiration* is synonymous with the more technical term *canon*.

1. The limit of inspiration, more technically known as the canon of Scripture, is the dividing line between the writings we will accept as inspired by Jehovah and writings which do not carry the weight of inspiration.
2. The limit of inspiration includes only those writings which are directly attributable to the apostolic writers. Later *revelations* or manuscripts of any kind must be excluded.
3. The objective of each Christian reader of Scripture is to possess a reproduction of the Christian Greek Scriptures which is as faithful to the wording of the original writers as possible. Each reader needs to know if the original authors wrote *Kyrios* (Κύριος) or the Tetragrammaton (יהוה) in the 237 instances in which the *New World Translation* inserts the divine name *Jehovah*.
4. To accept late Hebrew translations as a higher authority than the best preserved Greek manuscripts from which they were translated violates our understanding of the canon of the Christian Greek Scriptures.