

# The Authority of Scripture

INT02



*British***Bible***School*

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# **The Authority of Scripture**

**INT02**

## **Introductory Module Two**

### **Unit Four**

**The Disputed Writings: What About All  
Those Other Books?**

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Module Two, Unit Four Checklist and Self Assessment Form (2 pages)

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Carefully read all Unit Notes

Complete **Gospel Analysis** Exercise

Read **Old Testament Apocrypha Readings** and identify features

Read and summarise passages for **Paul's Gospel** exercise

Write a **Letter to a Friend**

Fill in and sign **Self Assessment Form**.

## INT02 Unit Four Instructions

This Unit will require you to have access to a copy of the Apocrypha, but with access to the internet you should have no problem accessing the relevant passages online. There is no DVD presentation with this Unit, so you should proceed straight through the notes, revisiting the subject of canonicity in the first section:

### **Compilation and Acceptance of the Canon.**

You will find here the first of two **Digressions** within this Unit - the purpose of these is help us examine the subject of extra-biblical materials in the light of what the Bible actually says. **Unit Assignment 1** is in three parts: the first is a collection of data; the second is an analysis of that data; and the third is a consideration of the Gospel accounts and their writers.

The next section looks at **Four Groups of Writings**, introducing a number of works you may not have encountered before. **Unit Assignment 2** is an **Old Testament Apocrypha Reading Programme** and requires you to read a number of passages, noting various features. You might choose to do this in smaller groups of readings.

The final main section considers the more contemporary challenge **Of Dan Brown and Da Vinci** and includes another **Digression** involving **Unit Assignment 3** which requires you to discover **Paul's Gospel** through reading a number of selected short passages. The final **Unit Assignment 4** challenges you to make a missional application through writing **A Letter to a Friend**.

## Introduction

The question of which books belong in the canon of Scripture has been discussed from early times. The Bible refers to some books that are no longer available: *Book of Jashar* (Joshua 10:13); the *Book of the Wars of the Lord* (Numbers 21:14); a lost letter to Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:9); a letter to Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).

These may or may not have been God-breathed, either way they do not seem to have been preserved for us. There are, though, some commentators who believe that these lost letters may have been incorporated within other books still known to us. For example, there is a reasonable case to say that the "Lost Letter" that Paul sent to Corinth was later added to 2 Corinthians as what we now know as chapters 10 - 13, but this is a subject for a different module.

There are many religious writings from Old Testament and New Testament times, some claiming to be 'inspired,' but which have not been included in the canon. They were not recognised as being canonical.

## Compilation and Acceptance of the Canon

We need to remind ourselves that we are considering two canons: Hebrew and Christian or, to use the more familiar titles, Old and New Testaments.

### Old Testament canon

Different Jewish sects recognised different canons. The ultra-conservative Sadducees seem to have accepted the *Torah*, also known as the five *Books of Moses* (Genesis to Deuteronomy), and perhaps no more; the Samaritans (who considered themselves to be Jewish even if Judahite Jews did not) used their own version of the *Pentateuch / Torah*; and the Pharisees accepted a continuing revelation through to the time of Malachi and thus all of what we call the Old Testament and they called *Tanakh*, an acronym for *Torah* (Law), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). Jewish exiles in the Diaspora were willing to consider other texts as well, some of which are found in the Apocrypha (see below).

After the Fall of Jerusalem and the Destruction of the Temple (AD 70) the survivors met in a great Council at Jamnia (thirteen miles south of Joppa and also known as Jabneh) to discuss the future of Judaism. As the Sadducees and priests had been annihilated by the Romans, the council was dominated by the Pharisees and so their view of the canon prevailed. However this was an acceptance of a collection that already existed and had existed for hundreds of years rather than a creative process bringing something out of nothing.

Christians tend to short-circuit the debate and look to the New Testament to define the Old. Several times in the New Testament the older Hebrew Scriptures were referred to as “The Law and the Prophets” (e.g., Matthew 5:17; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; Romans 3:21) and in Luke 24:44 the risen Jesus said that “Everything must be fulfilled that is written of me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” This is the traditional Hebrew three-fold division of their scriptures, if we take “Psalms” to refer to the *Ketuvim / Writings* and thus equates exactly with our Old Testament although in a different order (and see INT01 to remind yourself if you have forgotten any of the details).

### New Testament canon

Like the Old Testament canon, the New Testament took time to come together but, unlike the Old, not very long. The first documents written were almost certainly Paul’s letters and, according to Marcion (died c. 160), there was a fixed collection of these letters in place by the middle years of the second century. Other Christian writers would quote (or paraphrase) Paul with an appeal to his apostolic authority so we can be certain that the early church recognised these letters

as Scripture although Hebrews presented a problem. It is not so obviously a letter as the others but by AD 200 Egyptian Christians were using it and, eventually, the Western church agreed. Both the content and presentation of Hebrews are unique so perhaps we should not be surprised that the early Christians treated it with caution, particularly when we remember that after AD 70 the Church was essentially a Gentile movement and so the appeal in Hebrews to the Jewish roots of Christianity was less compelling.

The letters were written to believers to strengthen their faith and deal with issues that had arisen as the Church became established. As time passed the number of witnesses who remembered what Jesus had said and done (always a limited number) started to decline and so it became imperative to record for all time at least some of this Good News (but see John 20:30-31). There are many legends as to who wrote what and where and it is possible - although still only hypothetical - to construct a collection of sayings of Jesus that may have existed before the gospels were written and to which, perhaps, Matthew and Luke had access. This is the mysterious "Q", which stands for *Quelle* or Source in German which you may come across in your reading. We mention *Q* at this point because later in this unit we will look at a similar collection of sayings purportedly by Jesus, called the Gospel of Thomas.

The four canonical Gospels are, of course, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All tell one story (for there is, of course, only one Gospel) but all with different emphases. This seems to reflect the interests of the writers which, in turn, probably reflects the needs and concerns of their original readers.

## Digression: Gospel Analysis

### ***UNIT ASSIGNMENT 1A - GOSPEL ANALYSIS EXERCISE***

To do this exercise relatively quickly you will need a Bible with sub-headings. The translation does not matter as you will only be skimming the text but any Study Bible should work. Count up the approximate number of chapters that each of the four Gospel writers allocates to the following material and then display in a table. If you think that we have missed an important category by all means add it in and if you are feeling mathematical you may like to convert your totals into percentages:



- The ancestry of Jesus
- Birth and infancy stories
- John the Baptist material
- The Temptation of Jesus
- General preaching and teaching

- Miracles
- The Last Week (from the “Triumphal Entry” to the betrayal)
- The Passion (from the arrest to the burial)
- Resurrection and Ascension.

This exercise is not intended to be totally accurate so if all you do is count chapters (rather than verses) you will still obtain a sufficiently accurate picture for our purposes. However, if you have the time or the software to allow you to work at a more detailed verse-counting level please go ahead and do so.

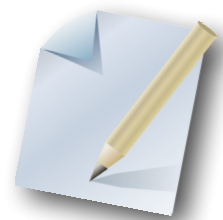
***UNIT ASSIGNMENT 1B - GOSPEL ANALYSIS EXERCISE***

Having prepared your analysis, can you make any conclusions? What is of interest to all four Evangelists? Is there any material that is unique to just one Gospel? This is primary data and should be unambiguous. Then speculate, briefly, on why the Gospels are different. Do you think this matters?



***UNIT ASSIGNMENT 1C - GOSPEL ANALYSIS EXERCISE***

Now you need to work from the Gospels so turn to your preferred study Bible and read the following passages:



- Matthew 1:1-18
- Mark 1:1-8
- Luke 1:1-4; 2:1-7; 3:1-6 (and see also Acts 1:1-5)
- John 1:1-5; 20:30-31; 21:24-25.

What do these brief extracts tell us about the men who wrote the Gospels and do they give us any indication as to how and why their accounts are going to be different?

# Four Groups of Writings

The writings / books which claim to be from God can be divided into four groups:

- Those books generally accepted and recognised as ‘inspired’ by virtually everyone – *Homologoumena* (‘one word’, ‘agreement’).
- Those books that at some point in time have been disputed, but have since been recognised as belonging in the canon – *Antilegomena* (‘spoken against’).
- Those books that were rejected by virtually everyone – *Pseudepigrapha* (‘false writings’, ‘spurious’).
- Those books that were accepted by some – *Apocrypha* (‘hidden’, ‘secret’)

## Homologoumena

These are the books that once recognised and accepted into the canon were not subsequently questioned or disputed. They have held a continuous canonical status through all generations. 34 of the 39 books of the Old Testament fit into this category and 20 of the 27 books of the New Testament.

## Antilegomena

These are the books that were originally recognised as canonical, but were later doubted or disputed before being finally accepted.

### ***Disputed books of the Old Testament***

- *The Song of Solomon* – was disputed because of its sensual nature.
- *Esther* – disputed because it does not mention the name of God and appears to have no spiritual content. How can it be the word of God when it does not even mention God?
- *Ecclesiastes* – disputed because of its sceptical view of life.
- *Ezekiel* – disputed because of apparent contradictions with the law of Moses.
- *Proverbs* – disputed because of apparent contradictions within it, e.g. Proverbs 26:4-5.

The reasons for dispute or doubt over these books have more to do with the interpretation of the books and a misunderstanding of the purpose of the books rather than any failure in the books themselves. Although at some point disputed or doubted, all of these books were eventually recognised and confirmed as being part of the canon.



## ***Disputed books of the New Testament***

There were seven books of the New Testament that did not possess universal recognition by the early church and were therefore disputed at some point in time.

- *Hebrews* – disputed because its author was unknown. In the east, where Paul was regarded as the author, it was more readily accepted. In the fourth century, through the influence of Jerome and Augustine, the letter was also accepted in the west.
- *James* – disputed because of its supposed conflict with Paul on the matter of faith and works. Martin Luther had doubts about the letter and placed it at the end of his translation of the New Testament.
- *2 Peter* – disputed because of questions over its authorship and apparent difference in style to 1 Peter. 2 Peter has probably been the one book of the New Testament that has been subject to most questioning and doubt. Questions over the authorship, difference in style to 1 Peter and date of writing have now been answered and the letter's place in the canon is recognised.
- *2 and 3 John* – the authorship of these letters was questioned. The author describes himself as “the elder” rather than “the apostle.” The private nature of the letters meant that they would not have been widely circulated and therefore not as readily accepted.
- *Jude* – was questioned over its authenticity because of its quotations from the pseudepigraphal books of Enoch and the Assumption of Moses (v.14-15, 9).
- *Revelation* – the authenticity of Revelation was questioned, as well as its doctrinal content. Here the dispute arose more over interpretation rather than inspiration.

With all of these books, once the question of genuineness was settled they were recognised as canonical.

## **Pseudepigrapha**

These are the books that have been rejected by all. Some are intended frauds, written under assumed names to gain acceptance. There is a vast number of these writings from the Old and New Testament periods, written from c. 200 BC – AD 200.

Some of the better known ones from the Old Testament period include the Book of Jubilees, the Assumption of Moses, 3 and 4 Maccabees, Psalms of Solomon, and Psalm 151. The type of literature contained in these books is legendary, apocalyptic, poetical, and historical.

From the New Testament period there are at least 280 of these writings including the Gospel of Thomas (containing supposed stories of Jesus' childhood), the Acts of Peter (contains the tradition that Peter was crucified upside down), Paul's lost letters to the

Corinthians and the Laodiceans. Many of these writings contain the false teachings of Gnosticism and Docetism and so are of interest from an historical point of view. None of these books were recognised as canonical by the early church although some were used by fringe groups on the margins of orthodox Christianity.

## **Apocrypha**

The books of the apocrypha are those writings that have been accepted as canonical by some. The word apocrypha means 'hidden' or 'hard to understand.' There is an Old Testament Apocrypha and a New Testament Apocrypha.

### ***The Old Testament Apocrypha***

There are 14 or 15 books of the Old Testament apocrypha written from c. 200 BC. These books may be divided as follows:

- Historical books - 1 and 2 Maccabees, 1 Esdras.
- Religious fiction – Tobit, Judith.
- Wisdom literature – The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus.
- Prophetic books – Baruch, the letter of Jeremiah, 2 Esdras
- Legendary – additions to Esther, additions to Daniel (Prayer of Azariah, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon), the Prayer of Manasseh.

The Hebrew Old Testament scriptures were complete by 400 BC. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was made by scholars in Alexandria, Egypt (called the *Septuagint* or *LXX* because it was believed there were seventy scholars involved in the translation). Copies of this Greek translation contained many of the apocryphal books, interspersed amongst the books of the Hebrew Old Testament, as did the Old Latin version.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD the Latin scholar Jerome produced a new Latin translation of the Scriptures that was called the Vulgate. This became the dominant version used in Western Europe until the time of the Reformation (16<sup>th</sup> century). Although Jerome himself did not think the books of the Apocrypha belonged in the canon of Scripture, they were eventually included in the Vulgate after his death and were taken from the Old Latin. At the time of the Reformation questions were raised about the canonicity of the books of the Apocrypha. In response the Council of Trent (1546) issued the first official pronouncement by the Roman Catholic Church accepting the canonicity of the Apocrypha (it did not accept 1[3] and 2[4] Esdras, and the prayer of Manasseh).

Before the Council of Trent the Apocryphal books appeared in some Protestant Bibles but in a section on their own as they were not considered to be of equal authority, although they were regarded as useful for general edification but not for establishing doctrine.

Coverdale's Bible (1535) was the first translation to separate the Apocryphal books from the canonical books of the Old Testament. The Apocrypha was placed in a section on its own, after Malachi. The first English Bible to omit the Apocrypha altogether was a copy of the Geneva Bible (1599). In this case the binder had made the decision to leave it out. The King James Version (1611) included the Apocrypha. In 1615 Archbishop Abbot forbade any stationer to issue the Bible without the Apocrypha on pain of one year's imprisonment. In 1640 the Geneva Bible omitted the Apocrypha by deliberate intent. In 1644 Parliament ordered that only the canonical books should be read publicly in church.

There is a difference between the Protestant view and Roman Catholic view of the Apocrypha. Protestant translations tend to exclude the Apocrypha, or if they do include it, it is in a section on its own between the Old and the New Testaments. Roman Catholic translations, such as the Jerusalem Bible, (which are based on the Latin Vulgate) include the books of the Apocrypha dispersed within the Old Testament, thus indicating the acceptance of these books as part of the Old Testament canon of Scripture. However, the Jews never accepted these apocryphal books as part of their canon of Scripture. Neither Jesus nor the apostles quoted from or referred to any of the books of the Apocrypha. The books themselves do not claim to be 'inspired.' Josephus writes:

It is true our history has been written since Artaxerxes (c. 400 BC) ... but has not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there has not been an exact succession of prophets.<sup>1</sup>

The Talmud states: "After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel." Although the books should be rejected as canonical, the Apocrypha does provide a valuable source of information about the history and religious life of the Jews during the intertestamental period.

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:8

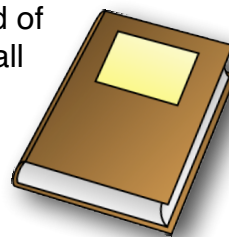
## ***The books of the Old Testament Apocrypha***

<b>Title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Style</b>	<b>Summary of Contents</b>
1 Esdras (3 Esdras)	150 BC	Historical	Return of Jews after exile in Babylon. Covers material found in Ezra & Nehemiah
2 Esdras (4 Esdras)	AD 100	Apocalyptic	Seven visions revealing the future supposedly made to Ezra in Babylon
Tobit	200 BC	Religious fiction	The story of Tobit, an Israelite carried into captivity by the Assyrians. Emphasises the importance of observing the law and alms giving.
Judith	150 BC	Religious fiction	Judith, Jewish widow, saves Israelite city from Assyrians.
Additions to Esther	100 BC	Religious fiction	Prayers attributed to Esther and Mordecai to compensate for the absence of God's name from that book.
Wisdom of Solomon	AD 40	Wisdom / Ethical	Wise sayings to keep the Jews from materialism and idolatry.
Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach)	180 BC	Wisdom / Ethical	Similar to Proverbs. Practical advice. Man is to be remembered for his virtues.
Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah	AD 100	Wisdom / Ethical	Claims to be written by Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch. Urges the Jews not to rebel. The letter of Jeremiah addressed to Jews in Egypt, warning against idolatry.
The Song of the Three Holy Children (Prayer of Azariah)	100 BC	Religious fiction	Inserted between Daniel 3:23 and 3:24. Claims to be prayers and praise of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego whilst they were in the furnace.
History of Susanna	100 BC	Religious fiction	Added after Daniel 12. Story of Susanna, a Jewish woman falsely accused and saved from death by Daniel.
Bel and the Dragon	100 BC	Religious fiction	Daniel exposes the folly of idolatry to King Cyrus.
The Prayer of Manasses	200 BC	Wisdom / Ethical	Claims to be the prayer of the wicked King Manasseh mentioned in 2 Chronicles 33:19.
1 Maccabees	100 BC	Historical	History of Israel during the intertestamental period.
2 Maccabees	100 BC	Historical	A parallel account of 1 Maccabees, covering the victories of Judas Maccabees.

### ***UNIT ASSIGNMENT 2 - OLD TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA READING PROGRAMME***

To enable you to start to get a “feel” for the writings of the Old Testament Apocrypha we have prepared a selection of fifteen

readings for you. You could do this now or at the end of the Unit and, of course, you are not obliged to read all in one go. See pages 138-141 below.



### ***The New Testament Apocrypha***

The terms 'New Testament Apocrypha' or 'The Apostolic Fathers' refer to a collection of writings made by the earliest Christian writers but not included in the New Testament. These writings date from c. AD 70 – c. AD 200. Some of these books were quoted as Scripture and regarded by some as 'inspired.' They include such writings as the Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas (similar to Hebrews) and quoted as scripture by Origen and Clement of Alexandria. The book is old (1<sup>st</sup> century AD) but its apostolic authorship is doubted. Other writings in this category include the Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians (c.96 AD), the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians. Some of these writings were read publicly and are included in some of the older manuscripts. Unlike the pseudepigraphal books these books are genuine writings, not intentional frauds. Some were written by men who were associated with some of the apostles, e.g., Clement and Hermas are said to be associated with Paul, and Polycarp with John.

Unlike the Old Testament Apocrypha, there is no agreed list of the writings that make up the New Testament Apocrypha.

#### *The value of these writings:*

- They provide early documentation of some of the books of the New Testament by quoting from those writings and referring to them as scripture.
- They reveal the general teaching and practices of the early church in the period immediately after the age of the apostles.
- They form a bridge between the writings of the apostles in the New Testament and the writings of the "early church fathers" of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.
- They provide early signs of later false teachings.
- They are of historical value as they show us conditions in the early church, addressing problems affecting the church at that time.

#### *How these writings should be regarded:*

- Although some of these writings are found in some of the ancient manuscripts and canons, none of the writings received anything more than local or temporary recognition of canonicity.
- Most of these writings never had anything more than semi-canonical status, appended to various manuscripts or mentioned in tables of contents.

- No major canon or church council included them amongst the 'inspired' books of the New Testament.

***The New Testament Apocrypha - some of the more important writings***

<b>Title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Style</b>	<b>Summary of Contents</b>
Epistle of 'Barnabas'	AD 70-79	Letter	An anonymous letter traditionally ascribed to Paul's companion, Barnabas. Similar to NT letter to the Hebrews, warning Christians of the dangers of going back to Judaism.
1 <sup>st</sup> Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians	AD 75-110	Letter	Sent from church in Rome to church in Corinth. Traditionally ascribed to Clement An appeal for unity in the church at Corinth. Quotes from Paul's 1 <sup>st</sup> letter to Corinth and Hebrews.
2 <sup>nd</sup> Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians	AD 120-140	Sermon style	Not by Clement. Also called "Ancient Homily." Emphasis on deity of Christ and resurrection of the flesh.
The Shepherd of Hermas	AD 115-140	Series of visions	Concerned with practical questions of righteousness and forgiveness.
The Didache (Teaching of the Twelve)	AD 100-120	Manual	A manual of Christian conduct Practical instructions for the church on baptism, worship, role of bishops and deacons.
Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians	AD 110	Letter of exhortation	Polycarp studied under John and taught Irenaeus. Writes to instruct the Philippians in living the Christian life, and to submit to their leaders. Quotes from NT writings.
Seven Letters of Ignatius	AD 110	Letters	Letters from Ignatius to churches in Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, Smyrna, and letter to Polycarp Letters written by Ignatius when he was on his way to Rome where he was killed by wild beasts in the amphitheatre. Emphasis on the deity of Christ.

## Apocrypha Reading Programme



The Apocrypha is not essential for our salvation but it is a useful guide to the development of Judaism after the Old Testament closed. Of course no Jew would call the Jewish Scriptures “Old Testament” as they do not recognise a New Testament and while the Apocrypha was being written there was no awareness that the books were not going to be accepted into the canon. We read the Bible knowing how it is going to end but those living through the events that the Bible describes did not.

What follows is a selection of fifteen passages from within the Apocrypha for you to start to get a feel for them. Often you will see a close resemblance to genres within the Old Testament and sometimes you will be left wondering what on earth is happening. Perhaps some of the extracts will interest you enough that you want to read on; please do so if you have time. For each passage we want you to identify the following features, perhaps in the form of a table or by just writing a paragraph that gives the information:

- Passage
- Genre
- Principal character(s)
- Similarities to any Biblical passage(s)
- Issues raised or any other points of interest

It is easy to find the Apocrypha on-line although often the translations on offer are old and can be difficult to read. For the purposes of this exercise you do not need a scholarly translation (e.g., *New Jerusalem Bible* or *New Revised Standard Version*) but rather something that is clear and that enables you to read quickly and fluently (e.g., *Good News Bible / Today's English Version* or Ronald Knox's *The Holy Bible: A Translation From the Latin Vulgate in the Light of the Hebrew and Greek Originals*). Do not forget that some translations do not have an Apocrypha as a matter of policy so do not waste time looking for them (e.g., *English Standard Version* or *New International Version*).

**Tobit** is a good and pious Jew living in Nineveh but he has gone blind and is facing a life of poverty. Living in Ecbatana is a relative of Tobit named Raguel who has a daughter named Sarah. She has been married seven times but on every wedding night her husband has been killed by the demon Asmodeus. Both Tobit and Sarah have given up hope and ask to die but God has other plans ([READ TOBIT 3](#)). He sends the angel Raphael to take Tobit's son Tobias on a long journey to Ecbatana where he helps Tobias to defeat the demon, marry the girl and return home to his father with a cure for his blindness and everyone is happy. Except the demon ([READ TOBIT 12](#)).



**Judith** is the story of a victory won by God's people over an evil oppressor, General Holofernes, thanks to the unlikely intervention of a woman. The Jewish army is besieged at Bethulia and at the point of surrender when Judith comes to their rescue ([READ JUDITH 11-13](#)).

The Greek Version of **Esther** follows the same outline as the Hebrew story with which you are familiar. The six new passages provide a different introduction and conclusion, refer to official documents in more detail, and show how God heard and answered prayers.

The **Wisdom of Solomon** was written in Greek by an unknown Jewish writer who knew his scriptures and was also aware of more recent trends in Greek philosophy. The overall message is that God blesses those who are faithful to Him ([READ WISDOM OF SOLOMON 15:1-6](#)).

The **Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach** is also known as **Ecclesiasticus** ("of the church" and not to be confused with Ecclesiastes "The Preacher"). The book was written in Hebrew by a man named Joshua ("Jesus" in Greek) and was later translated into Greek by his grandson. Wisdom is praised and many examples are given to show how the wise should live ([READ SIRACH 14:20 - 15:10](#)). The most famous passage in the Apocrypha praises famous men throughout Jewish history ([READ SIRACH 44](#)), building up to the great Simon son of Onias in chapter 50. The book concludes with a hymn of thanksgiving ([READ SIRACH 51:1-12](#)).

The Book of **Baruch** is a collection of four short messages from Baruch, the secretary of the prophet Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 32:12; 36:4). Baruch explains why the Jews have had to suffer but offers hope for the future. ([READ BARUCH 4:5-29](#)).

The **Letter of Jeremiah** is sometimes included as the final chapter of Baruch. It is a strong condemnation of idolatry.

Some of the **Additions to Daniel** can be slotted into the Old Testament book while others illustrate his wisdom and holiness without having a specific context. **The Prayer of Azariah** (better known by his Hebrew name Abednego) and **The Song of the Three Young Men** fit between Daniel 2: 23 and 3: 24. **The Book of Susanna** tells how the beautiful and virtuous Susanna is falsely accused by two lecherous elders but saved by the wisdom and courage of Daniel in what has been described as one of the world's first detective stories ([READ SUSANNA](#)). **Bel and the Dragon** (or **Serpent**) are two stories that tell how Daniel reveals the falseness of the idol Bel and then destroys a dragon (or serpent) that was worshipped by the Babylonians.

**First Maccabees** tells of the Jewish revolt against the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes and the re-establishment of an independent



Jewish state under the sons of Mattathias of the family of Hashmon (the Hasmoneans) including Judas Maccabee.

Antiochus hated the Jews ([READ 1 MACCABEES 1:20-64](#)) but there were some who were prepared to stand against him, including the priest Mattathias ([READ 1 MACCABEES 2](#)). After Mattathias died one of his sons, Judas, took up the fight. It was Judas who made contact with Rome ([READ 1 MACCABEES 8](#)). Judas was succeeded by his brother Jonathan (1 Maccabees 9) who confirmed the alliance with Rome and also the Greek state of Sparta (1 Maccabees 12: 1-23). Another brother, Simon, follows Jonathan (1 Maccabees 13 - 16) but he was assassinated and one of his sons, John, becomes the next leader (1 Maccabees 16).

**Second Maccabees** is a summary of a much later work by Jason of Cyrene. The passages included within 2 Maccabees are more detailed retellings of material found early in 1 Maccabees with special emphasis on the Temple and also on the importance of keeping the faith even when facing persecution ([READ 2 MACCABEES 7](#)). There is also a promise of an eternal reward for those who keep the faith ([READ 2 MACCABEES 12:38-45](#)).

**Third Maccabees** is set some fifty years before 1 Maccabees. Ptolemy IV Philopater, the Greek king of Egypt, has defeated Antiochus III, the Greek king of Syria, and is making a tour of his domains. He wants to inspect the Temple in Jerusalem but is prevented by a miracle. In revenge he orders a persecution of the Jewish community in Alexandria in Egypt. The Jews are rounded up and five hundred elephants are sent in to crush them but another miracle takes place and it is the Egyptians who get killed not the Jews. Ptolemy realises that he is wrong and frees the Jews in his kingdom.

**Fourth Maccabees** looks at how total obedience to God's Law leads to a virtuous life on earth as well as the promise of an eternal reward. The martyrdoms of 2 Maccabees are used as examples of how faith leads to salvation.

**First Esdras** parallels material from 2 Chronicles 35 - 36, Ezra, and Nehemiah 6 - 8 although there are additions, omissions and other changes.

**Second Esdras** is an apocalypse with seven visions being given to Shealtiel (who may be Ezra) with some very strange teaching on the end of the world.

The **Prayer of Manasseh** is a beautiful prayer of repentance made by the wicked king of Israel (see 2 Chronicles 33:12-20). If it is truly genuine then it shows that anyone, no matter how evil, can repent. If it has been made up as an exercise in wishful thinking it is still a lovely prayer ([READ THE PRAYER OF MANASSEH](#)).

**Psalm 151** was supposedly composed by David after his defeat of Goliath (1 Samuel 17). If not by David (and it almost certainly is not) this song was written to encourage Jews facing overwhelming odds and reminding them that, with God, all things are possible.

***Summary of Passages for Comment:***

- Tobit 3
- Tobit 12
- Judith 11-13
- Wisdom of Solomon 15:1-6
- Sirach 14:20 - 15:10
- Sirach 44
- Sirach 51:1-12
- Baruch 4:5-29
- Susanna
- 1 Maccabees 1:20-64
- 1 Maccabees 2
- 1 Maccabees 8
- 2 Maccabees 7
- 2 Maccabees 12:38-45
- The Prayer of Manasseh

## Of Dan Brown and Da Vinci

Perhaps this is an appropriate point to comment on the religious conspiracy genre of popular fiction typified by Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*.<sup>2</sup> Brown is the latest and, to date, most commercially successful in a long line of conspiracy novels concerning Christian origins. Typically, this genre picks up on ancient legends of the Holy Grail with links to King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, the mysterious Knights Templar, the Turin Shroud, secret gospels and alternative ways of understanding the Bible. Most of this is beyond the scope of this unit but when the Dead Sea Scrolls and apocryphal gospels get added to the mix we ought to be able to respond and even use this to our advantage evangelistically.

N. T. Wright believes that there are five elements behind the “modern myth” of *The Da Vinci Code* and other similar fantasies. We will reproduce his list (from *Decoding Da Vinci*, pages 9-10) and then unpack some of the detail below:

1. There were originally many more than four gospels and other documents about Jesus. Some of these have now come to light, for example at Nag Hammadi. It is these books that focus on Jesus the great religious teacher rather than the canonical gospels which paint a picture of the Son of God which give us the real truth.
2. The four canonical gospels were written later than the other “suppressed” gospels to portray the humble Galilean teacher as the miracle-working Son of God and then promoted by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century to secure his hold on power through the church.
3. The Jesus of the “hidden gospels” was a human teacher, nothing more. He had no intention of founding a new religion and did not see himself as divine and, in some versions, he was married with children - just like a typical first century rabbi. The canonical gospels give a distorted view of who Jesus was and what He did; He did not claim to be the Son of God and did not know that He was going to die. And as for the Resurrection. . . .
4. Christianity is therefore built on uncertain foundations and shaped by power-hungry men who used the church to promote their own political agendas. Sadly, we have to concede that there is an element of truth in this: church history is littered with examples of those who have abused positions of authority within the church for their own ends.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, *Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); film release directed by Ron Howard, 2006

5. Therefore modern readers need to be prepared to abandon the false picture of Jesus and Christian origins that the church has promoted for so long as it is historically wrong, theologically wrong, and the consequences are spiritually and socially harmful. By abandoning traditional Christianity we can return to the purer and simpler teaching that Jesus actually gave, based on metaphor rather than literal truth and resulting in an inner faith based on feelings rather than supposed fact.

### ***Dead Sea Scrolls***

We have mentioned the Dead Sea Scrolls above and Brown and other writers of the genre of theological conspiracy make reference to them although without any historical justification. It is true that after the scrolls were discovered in 1947 there seemed to be an inordinate delay in publication and translation which conspiracy theorists latched on to as they claimed that there was a cover up. With hindsight we can see that the sheer quantity of material and the incredibly fragile state of many of the scrolls meant that the publication was bound to be slow. In fact, the scrolls were made available as quickly as or even quicker than most comparable discoveries and all of the readable fragments were in the public domain before the end of the twentieth century. While it is true that the Dead Sea Scrolls were copied and compiled when Jesus was living in Judaea there is absolutely no evidence to connect Him with the scrolls or the community that produced them. This community had some similarities to early Christianity - for example a belief that they were in a special relationship with God - but in many other ways they were very different. The Dead Sea Scroll community believed very strongly that salvation was only for Jews whereas the church was open to Jew and Gentile alike. Above all, the early church preached Christ's Resurrection, a fact that the scroll community knew nothing about. Joel Green, in *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (pages 80-81), compares Leviticus 21 with Luke. Leviticus 21:16-24 describes those defects that prevented a man serving as a priest which the Dead Sea community applied to all who wished to join them. So if you were maimed in some way, or lame, blind, deaf, or dumb you could neither serve as a priest in Jerusalem nor join the Qumran community. Luke lists these defects (4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22) and explains that these are precisely those who are welcome in the kingdom. Rather than seeing the Dead Sea community as in some way linked to the Church in this respect it would be safer to see them as opposite reactions to the problems and challenges as living as the Chosen People in a hostile world: the Dead Sea community retreated into the wilderness and the Church reached out to the ends of the earth.

### ***Nag Hammadi***

Another collection of ancient texts that is sometimes said to reveal hidden secrets about Jesus which "the Church" (usually meaning the Roman Catholic Church) would rather we did not know about was

found at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in December 1945. The most significant “codices” (a codex was an early form of the book with sheets bound together rather than the scroll, which has a single connected sheet round around a central rod) were collections of sayings which were claimed to be from Jesus. They are sometimes called gospels (such as “The Gospel of Philip”, “The Gospel of Thomas”, and “The Gospel of Truth”) although they are very different from the canonical gospels in having little or no narrative. These texts come from the fringe of orthodox Christianity being what is generally described as “Gnostic”. Gnosticism is a rather amorphous world-view that is difficult to define accurately and succinctly. The word itself comes from the Greek *gnosis* (γνῶσις), which is the root of our English word knowledge but within Gnosticism this knowledge is always a secret that has been revealed only to the initiates on the inside and not understood by the masses on the outside. Usually this secret knowledge is said to have been passed on by Jesus to a special disciple with instructions to share this hidden wisdom only with those worthy of it.

A key issue when considering the Nag Hammadi finds is their date. For too long the academic consensus has been to drive the dates of the New Testament documents back into the second century and thus beyond the lifespan of eyewitnesses. Most conservative scholars have repudiated this view and even some liberals - most famously the Bishop of Woolwich, J. A. T. Robinson (1919-1983) in *Redating the New Testament* - have argued for a first century date of composition. Those that follow the later dates of the liberals face a problem when they reach Nag Hammadi as they are going to be viewed as just as old as the canonical New Testament and are therefore going to be considered as equally reliable when it comes to discovering the authentic Jesus. This is neither the time nor the place to defend the traditional dating of the New Testament but it can be done and once we have the right dates for the New Testament the challenge of the Gnostics can be met. At its heart, Gnosticism was an attempt to make Christianity easier and less demanding and whether we find Gnosticism at Nag Hammadi or in the *Da Vinci Code* it remains a counterfeit Gospel. The form of the Nag Hammadi “gospels” is different to the canonical ones being, as they are, little more than collections of sayings of Jesus. Without the canonical Gospels it would be impossible to make sense of the Gnostic gospels and, indeed, we are left wondering why anyone went to the trouble of recording these sayings. A Jesus without any miracles and without a Resurrection hardly seems worth remembering. The Gnostic gospels are much better understood as a supplement or even a correction to the canonical Gospels (“correction” here being understood to mean correcting the canonical Gospels to fit in with Gnostic teaching).

Theology is the key. What do the Gnostic gospels teach and how do we respond in the light of the true Gospel? The conspiracy theorists contend that the Nag Hammadi gospels came first and thus give a more authentic portrait of Jesus than the later “official” Gospels that

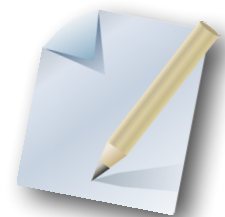
were written to support Constantine's imperial ambitions. According to this view, the simple peasant-teacher Jesus was turned into the authoritarian Christ by powerful figures within the establishment. Is this really what happened? We can approach this question in three ways:

1. The Nag Hammadi gospels are strong on sayings but lack a narrative framework. They purport to tell us what Jesus said but give little by way of context and less of His works. Without the canonical Gospel framework we would struggle to make sense of the Gnostic gospel sayings and without the evidence of the miraculous life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus we wonder why anyone would bother to collect His sayings anyway.
2. The Jewish background is almost totally missing from Nag Hammadi and, in places, the Gnostics are almost anti-Semitic. In the Gospel of Thomas, for example, we read that Jesus was going to destroy the Temple and no-one will be able to rebuild it (Gospel of Thomas 71; c.f., Matthew 24 / Mark 13 / Luke 21). The canonical accounts of the prediction concerning the Destruction of Jerusalem are clearly prophetic and Jesus regrets that it is to happen; the Gnostic accounts are equally clearly written after the event (AD 70) and suggest that Jesus was pleased about it, reflecting the hostility of second century Christians towards the remaining Jews.
3. In the above we have claimed that the canonical Gospels are earlier than the Gnostic gospels. However we should not forget that before the Gospels were written there were other Christian documents in circulation: the letters of Paul. We need to make a short excursion to examine this evidence.

## **Digression: Paul's Gospel**

### ***UNIT ASSIGNMENT 3 - PAUL'S GOSPEL***

Read the following passages and write down a brief summary of what they say. This will give you a thirteen-point "creed" which distils Paul's belief about who Jesus is. (Note: where a reference is given twice look for two different items rather than saying the same thing again!)



- Romans 1:3; Galatians 4:4
- Romans 1:3; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Galatians 3:16
- Romans 15:8
- 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19
- 2 Corinthians 10:1
- 1 Corinthians 11:23



- 1 Corinthians 11:23
- Romans 15: 3;1 Timothy 6:13
- 1 Corinthians 2:2, 8; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 2:8
- 1 Corinthians 15:3
- 1 Corinthians 15:4 (c.f., Acts 13:29)
- 1 Corinthians 15:5
- Romans 10:6; Ephesians 4: 9

If you can think of any additions to this list, please give them.

Do you think that this is a reasonable summary of the Gospel? What is missing from “The Gospel According to Paul”? Does it make a significant difference to our salvation?

Once you have finished writing your answers we can return from our digression to our examination of the Gnostic gospels:

The Gospel that Paul taught and that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recorded is a message of salvation. The Son of God entered into His own world to confront sin and defeat death and those who believe in Him will not perish but enjoy everlasting life. Truly, this is not just good news it is the greatest and best news ever! And this element of good news that saves us from sin is missing from Nag Hammadi. In Bishop Wright’s words:

For the Nag Hammadi texts, Jesus was simply the teacher, not of good news about something that had happened, but of good *advice* about how one might re-order one’s private spirituality. Actually, as will become apparent, I do not regard the ‘advice’ given by the ‘Jesus’ of Nag Hammadi as that good; but the key thing is the difference between ‘news’ and ‘advice,’ and the fact that the original message was the former and that of Nag Hammadi the latter. That colours everything. And that distinction, significantly, is one totally lost on Dan Brown and his muddled characters.<sup>3</sup>

Another recurring theme in the conspiracy theories is the belief that Mary of Magdala married Jesus and had his children, thus producing the Sang Real (“Royal Blood” rather than the *San Grail* or “Holy Grail” of Arthurian legend). Brown claims that there are “countless” references to this union (*Da Vinci Code*, page 333) but a more careful reading finds just three in the Nag Hammadi texts. The “Gospel of Mary” is an account of a Platonic vision which praises the spiritual above the physical - a typically Gnostic doctrine expressed in a way that is totally alien to first century Judaism. In the “Gospel of

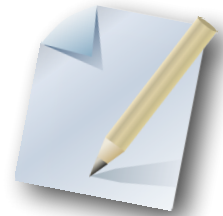
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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Decoding Da Vinci*, 2006: 16

Philip” we read how Jesus kissed Mary on the lips but this falls a long way short of them marrying and starting a family. The third reference to Mary from Nag Hammadi is in the “Gospel of Thomas” where Jesus tells Mary that she will be saved “if she makes herself male, because every female who makes herself male will become fit for the kingdom of God”. An odd thing to say to the woman you intend to marry but not at all out of place in the strange world of second century Gnosticism.

#### **UNIT ASSIGNMENT 4 - A LETTER TO A FRIEND**

Your assignment is to write a letter to a friend who is being troubled by some of the contemporary attacks on Christianity as typified by Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*. What will you say to build confidence in the reliability of the Bible while critiquing the sceptical position taken by those hostile to the Gospel message? Try not to be too technical (although in a real situation you may offer to respond to technical matters in your next letter) and do not be too long-winded. Allow yourself no more than three sides so get to the point and make this something realistic and helpful. If you have had to try and help a friend who has specific issues about, say, whether Jesus was married to Mary of Magdala you could write a specific and detailed response. Or if this is not an issue that has been raised in your Christian life you can make a more general response. Try to make this something relevant to your interests and contacts.





## Conclusion

For many of us the arguments above are irrelevant. We believe in a loving God who has graciously communicated with us, His children, by sending His Son and inspiring His chosen followers to record all we need to know in order to be saved. We accept that our predecessors in the faith knew what they were doing when they accepted certain books into the canon of scripture and rejected others for good reasons so that what we read in our Bibles is what God wants us to have. We acknowledge that other ancient books may shed light on some of the gaps in the record but believe that nothing they say makes any significant difference to the one true faith. It has not been our intention to raise unanswerable questions in this Unit but we do need to be aware that there are some people who are confused by the misinformation that is being passed off as fact by storytellers such as Dan Brown or scholars who should know better but who want to make names for themselves by promoting the next fashionable theory and thus the next best-selling book.

You will find much to build your faith in many of the books listed in the bibliography, although we appreciate that it may not be possible for you to find and read them just now. However, if any of what you have studied in this Unit is troubling you it would be worth asking for help in answering your questions so speak to a wise member of your congregation or contact your tutor.

# Unit Four Checklist

**Please ensure that you have done all of the following:**

- Read and understood all Unit notes.
- Compiled data table for **Unit Assignment 1 - Gospel Analysis Exercise**, analysed data, then read and commented on passages.
- Read each passage for **Unit Assignment 2 - Old Testament Apocrypha Reading Programme** and made relevant observations as requested.
- Read the passages for **Unit Assignment 3 - Paul's Gospel** and compiled a thirteen point "creed" based on those passages.
- Understood the implications in the section **Of Dan Brown and Da Vinci** and written **A Letter to a Friend** for **Unit Assignment 4**.
- Completed the **Self assessment form** and returned for marking.

**Please return the following for marking from Unit Four:**

- All answers, comments, observations, lists, tables, etc. for all **Unit Four Assignments**.
- Completed **Self Assessment Form**.

# Self Assessment Form - Unit Four

**Please complete separate form as supplied and retain this copy for your records**

I promise that the answers I give below are true and accurate:

Signed: ..... Date: .....

## **Please circle your answer:**

1. Have you read and understood the notes for INT02, Unit Four?

YES / NO

2. Have you read all the Bible and other passages included within the notes for this Unit?

YES / NO