

The Bible: How It Came To Us

The word Bible¹ is the English form of the Greek name *biblia*, meaning "books," the name which in the fifth century began to be given to the entire collection of sacred books, the "Library of Divine Revelation." The name Bible was adopted by Wycliffe, and came gradually into use in our English language. The Bible consists of sixty-six different books, composed by many different writers, in three different languages, under different circumstances; writers of almost every social rank, statesmen and peasants, kings, herdsmen, fishermen, priests, tax-gatherers, tentmakers; educated and uneducated, Jews and Gentiles; most of them unknown to each other, and writing at various periods during the space of about 1600 years: and yet, after all, it is only one book dealing with only one subject in its numberless aspects and relations, the subject of mankind's redemption. It is divided into the Old Testament, containing thirty-nine books, and the New Testament, containing twenty-seven books. There is a break of 400 years between the Old Testament and the New.

The division of the Bible into chapters and verses was designed to facilitate reference to it. The ancient Jews divided the Old Testament into certain sections for use in the synagogue service, and then at a later period, in the ninth century A.D., into verses. Our modern system of chapters for all the books of the Bible was introduced by Cardinal Hugo about the middle of the thirteenth century (he died 1263) The system of verses for the New Testament was introduced by Stephenus in 1551 and generally adopted. The division is not always wisely made, yet it is very useful.

What is the Canon? This word is derived from a Hebrew and Greek word denoting a reed or cane. Hence it means something straight, or something to keep straight; and hence also a rule, or something ruled or measured. It came to be applied to the Scriptures, to denote that they contained the authoritative rule of faith and practice, the standard of doctrine and duty. A book is said to be of canonical authority when it has a right to take a place with the other books which contain a revelation of the Divine will. Such a right does not arise from any ecclesiastical authority, but from the evidence of the inspired authorship of the book.² (**See footnote #2, below.**) The New Testament Canon was formed gradually under divine guidance. The different books as they were written came into the possession of the Christian associations which began to be formed soon after the day of Pentecost. Historical evidence shows that from about the middle of the second century this New Testament collection was substantially such as we now possess.³

Canon of the Old Testament. Authoritative legal and prophetic literature grew up by degrees and was carefully preserved. Eventually the books of the Hebrew Bible came to be regarded as 24 in number, arranged in three divisions - the Law (Torah), the Prophets, and the Writings. In the centuries just preceding the Christian era, Greek became the language of business and diplomacy. As the number of Greek speaking Jews increased, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was written - The Septuagint (abbreviated: LXX). This translation included several books not included in the Hebrew Scriptures. These texts were widely used in the early church and eventually were translated into Latin, becoming part of the Old Testament as received by the Roman Catholic Church.⁴ (See Apocrypha below.)

¹ *Easton Bible Dictionary*

² **No Church leader or council decided which books were to be called authoritative and then the Church began using them, rather just the opposite. Those books which were self-authenticating came to be revered and used by churches. Those books were copied and passed on to other churches. Those that were of little value or of dubious authority became obscure and were not considered worthy to be included in the canon.**

³ *Easton Bible Dictionary*

⁴ In Protestant Bibles these books, if they are included at all, are gathered and placed between the OT and NT in a section called Apocrypha. They are not considered part of the Protestant canon.

Reasons that led the [Protestant] Reformers to adopt the Hebrew canon of the Scriptures rather than the expanded canon of books in the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate included the following considerations: (1) Neither Jesus nor any of the writers of the New Testament make any direct quotations from any of these books. (2) Some of the Apocrypha contain texts that support purgatory and the efficacy of almsgiving in covering sins.⁵

Canon of the New Testament. Besides the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures, the oldest Christian communities accepted another authority, the words of Jesus as these were handed down, first orally and later in the written Gospel. There also circulated copies of letters from the apostles explaining the significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ for the lives of believers. At first a local church would have copies of only one or two Gospels. In the collections that were gradually formed, place was found for two other kinds of books - the Acts of the Apostles and the Apocalypse of John. Thus, side by side with the old Jewish canon, and without in any way displacing it, there sprang up a new Christian canon. (See footnote #2, above.)

The church had the task not only of collecting, but also of sifting and rejecting - other gospels, acts, letters, and apocalypses also circulated in the second, third and succeeding centuries. In the following centuries there were minor fluctuations in the canon as books of local or temporary authority came and went, but the canon as we know it today was basically established by the end of the fourth century.

The **criterion of canonicity** of books of the New Testament appears to have been 1) apostolic authorship or near-apostolic status, 2) antiquity, 3) orthodoxy [*i.e. consistent with Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles*], and 4) usage throughout the churches. In the most basic sense, neither individuals nor councils created the canon; instead, they came to perceive and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church.⁶ In other words, councils subsequently only ratified what the churches had already accepted. Not until A.D. 367 does one encounter a canon identical to the modern one (in a "Festal Letter" of Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria), and even thereafter the status of several books (e.g., Hebrews, Revelation, and 1 Clement) continued uncertain for some time. To the present day there is no universal agreement on the boundary of the Christian canon of Scripture; the Apocrypha which Roman Catholics include is excluded by Protestants.⁷

The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) are divided into three parts:

1. The Law (Torah), consisting of the Pentateuch, or five books of Moses.
2. The Prophets, consisting of:
 - a. "Former prophets" - Joshua, Judges, the Books of Samuel, and the Books of Kings;
 - b. "Latter prophets" - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve (or "minor" prophets.)
3. The Hagiographa, or "holy writings", including the rest of the books. These were ranked in three divisions:
 - a. The Psalms, Proverbs, and Job.
 - b. Canticles, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther; called the five rolls, as being written for the synagogue use on five separate rolls.
 - c. Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

The New Testament consists of:

1. Five "historical" books - the four Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles.
2. Twenty-one epistles, or letters - Romans through Jude.
3. One book of prophecy, the Revelation of John.

⁵ *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*

⁶ *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*

⁷ *Harper's Bible Dictionary*

The Apocrypha, (meaning *hidden* or *concealed*) is divided into two parts.

The Old Testament Apocrypha consists of those books not found in the Jewish Scriptures, but which were included in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Works so treated usually include:

1, 2 Esdras	Tobit	Judith
The Wisdom of Solomon	Ecclesiasticus	Baruch
A Letter of Jeremiah	Additions to Daniel	The Prayer of Manasseh
1, 2 Maccabees	Bel and the Dragon	Song of the Three Children

The books of the Old Testament Apocrypha are largely of Jewish origin, produced for the most part between 200 B.C. and 70 A.D. (some 200 years after the last book of the canonical Old Testament and before the destruction of the Temple.) There is no universal agreement as to the inclusion of these books. While the Protestant Reformers generally accepted only the Jewish canon as its Old Testament, the Roman Catholic Church includes these books in its Old Testament.

The New Testament Apocrypha is a vast body of literature that, generally refers to extracanonical Christian writings that claim to preserve memories of Jesus and the apostles. Most of this literature was written from the second to the ninth centuries. They tell us little that is reliable about Christian origins, but it does help us understand the spirituality of early Christians and life in the church of late antiquity. None of these writings are included in the canon of any Christian church. A sampling of the dozens of writings includes:

Gospel of Thomas	Gospel of the Egyptians	Gospel of Mary
The Acts of John	The Acts of Peter	The Acts of Thaddaeus
Martyrdom of Matthew	Third Corinthians	Letter to the Laodiceans
Apocalypse of Peter	Apocalypse of Paul	