

BIBLE, FORMATION AND CANON OF

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The term “Bible” derives from the Greek term for “books” and refers to the collection of 66 books known as the Old Testament and the New Testament. The 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books form the “canon” of Holy Scripture. The word “canon”, which originally meant a “reed”, came to signify a ruler or measuring stick. In this sense the Bible is called the “rule” for Christian faith and practice, for it serves as the standard and authority within the Christian community. The books of our Bible were written and then, at a later date, became accepted as “canonical” by the Jewish people (OT) and the early Christians (NT). The concept of “canon” and “canonization” refers to when the books gained the status of “Holy Scripture” in the sense of being authoritative standards for faith and practice within the communities.

The Organization of the Bible

The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew, with some portions of Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel written in Aramaic. The Hebrew Old Testament is divided into three major sections: the Law or Torah, which includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; the Prophets, which are divided into the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve, comprised of Hosea through Malachi); and the Writings. The Writings fall into three groupings: Poetic Books (Job, Psalms, Proverbs), the Festival Scrolls (Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations), and the Historical Books (1-2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah,

and Daniel). Our current order of the Old Testament books is based upon the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that dominated in the early church.

The New Testament, written in Greek, is organized with the narrative books (the four Gospels and Acts) followed by the epistles (Pauline Epistles and General Epistles) and concluding with the apocalyptic Book of Revelation. In many of the Greek manuscripts of our New Testament, the General Epistles (James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude) precede the Pauline Epistles (Romans through Hebrews), likely due to the more direct links between Jesus and James, Peter, John, and Jude (with Paul being an apostle “birthed at an unnatural time” 1 Cor. 15:8).

The Development of the Old Testament Canon

What has become the traditional view of the process that led to the Hebrew Old Testament canon lacks enough evidence for certainty, but still seems to be the most likely scenario. In this view, the Law (the Pentateuch or first five books of the Bible), which was “rediscovered during Josiah’s reforms, had gained a place of recognized community authority at least during the time of Ezra. The Samaritans had accepted the Torah apparently before they split with the Jews just after the exile, for they retained the Torah as their sacred Scriptures. That would seem to demand a date not long after the return from the exile for the canonization of the Torah, with about 450 B.C. being the latest feasible date.

Determining the time of the canonization of the Prophets is more problematic than for the Law. Even during the New Testament period the Sadducees refused to accept fully the authority of the Prophets as a doctrinal basis. But at least by the middle of the second century B.C., the Prophets had been consolidated as a group and accepted as authoritative scripture by some segments of Judaism. Near 132 B.C. the grandson of Jesus Ben Sirach wrote a prologue to his grandfather’s work (*Ecclesiasticus* or the *Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach*) and mentioned the Law and the Prophets and the other books, thereby showing that the Prophets were an accepted and known collection by that date. Also, portions of all of the books of the Prophets have been

found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, demonstrating their use in that setting. Likely the time of canonization of the Prophets can be pushed back earlier, possibly to the middle of the third century B.C., but the data is not sufficient enough to allow for certainty. In the New Testament, the designation “the Law and the Prophets” refers to these first two divisions of the Hebrew Old Testament and highlights the authoritative nature in which these two sections of the Old Testament were held.

The final stages of the canonization of the Writings section of the Hebrew Old Testament were not completed until near the end of the first century or perhaps even a bit later. The process had obviously begun earlier, as the mention of “other books” by the grandson of Jesus Ben Sirach indicates. Also, Lk. 24:45 mentions “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms,” a clear reference to the first two divisions of the Old Testament along with the longest book of the Writings (and the first book of the Writings). While some lack of definition seems to have existed regarding the exact limits of the Writings in the first century (A.D.), that a third section of the Old Testament Canon was in the process of being defined is beyond doubt. Most if not all of the books contained in the Writings section of the Old Testament were probably accepted during the first century by the majority of the Jewish population, with only a few questions about certain books persisting. Near the end of the first century in the aftermath of the Jewish defeat during the Jewish-Roman war of A.D. 66-73, the school of rabbis at Jamnia debated the extent of the Hebrew canon and apparently affirmed the 39 books that comprise the current Hebrew Old Testament. Nevertheless, further discussions among the rabbis about the extent of the canon are found even in the fourth century, but these debates did not change nor seriously challenge the earlier consensus regarding the extent of the Hebrew Old Testament canon.

The Development of the New Testament Canon

The canonization process for the New Testament books is easier to trace, even though numerous questions cannot be fully answered due to a lack of evidence. The Pauline Epistles

were collected and considered authoritative at least during the first half of the second century, as evidenced by Marcion's canon of 10 Pauline Epistles and the Gospel of Luke. The four Gospels were galvanized into a canonical unit during the second half of the second century, with Irenaeus (180 A.D.) defending the four-fold Gospel canon. By the end of the second century, the core of the New Testament canon was fixed, with the 4 Gospels, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, and 13 Pauline Epistles all accepted as authoritative texts by the leading churches of the Roman Empire. The Book of Revelation enjoyed early acceptance as well, but later near the middle of the third century began to be questioned based upon both content and authorship. Hebrews was likewise debated due to authorship doubts. James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, and Jude came to be accepted by many churches during the late third century, but they were not fully included into the New Testament canon until the fourth century. The first mention of a 27 book New Testament canon was made by Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, who in 367 wrote his "Easter" letter advising the churches of the exact date for the celebration of Easter. In that letter, he instructed the churches about the contents of the New Testament, listing exactly the 27 books that we now have in our New Testaments. Even at that point in the fourth century, however, some groups such as certain of the Syriac churches remained with a 22-book New Testament canon (lacking 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, and Revelation) or with a 26-book canon (lacking Revelation). But over time, the 27-book New Testament canon prevailed in virtually all of the churches.

The early church's task of ascertaining God's will regarding the New Testament canon was not an easy undertaking by any means. Early in the process during the first half of the second century, Marcion promoted a very limited canon in Rome (see above) that represented an extreme reaction against Judaism. He rejected the Old Testament as well as New Testament writings that were "too Jewish" in their outlook, keeping only Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, and Luke, likely the only Gentile to write part of the New Testament. In reaction, the church defended the Old Testament and began defining its own New Testament canon, one that would be broader than Marcion's list and that would include various viewpoints and voices from the early church.

In the late second century, a movement called Montanism flourished and promoted the on-going “prophetic” voice in the church. This possibility of new revelation seems to have caused the church to become more restrictive in defining the canon. The church began to limit the books to those that could be traced to the apostolic age and to apostolic authorship or influence.

As the task of discerning the contours of the New Testament canon continued in the early church, the Spirit-led process was guided by certain concepts. For a book to be considered holy scripture on the canonical level, it had to enjoy widespread acceptance among the churches. If a book was only accepted in one region, it did not enter into the New Testament canon. Also, since others in the second century and later were writing books, criteria needed to be applied that would separate these works from the ones that came from the first century: the book needed to date to the time of the apostles. And the book should be connected to an apostle, whether due to authorship by an apostle or association with an apostle (for example, Mark and Luke were associated with Peter and Paul, respectively). Of course, the books also needed to minister to the people in the churches who were hearing them read. This spiritual dimension was likely paramount. Our New Testament books were included in the canon because they spoke so strongly to people that they could not be kept out of the canon. Lastly, the books needed to be deemed suitable for public reading in the church. Since illiteracy was widespread, the reading of the text in the worship service was the primary contact with the text for most of the people. If a text was considered suitable for reading to the church people in the worship service, those people would hear it as an authoritative word from God due to the context in which it was being read. And such a text was then on the path to being considered authoritative for the life of the church members.

A further stage in the defining of the canon occurred during the Reformation period. The reformers, echoing a position promoted earlier by Jerome, held that the Jewish Old Testament canon should be determinative for the church as well, and so they accepted only the 39 books of the Hebrew Old Testament instead of the expanded Old Testament often found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The additional books in the Greek Old Testament

had also been incorporated into the Latin Vulgate, the primary Bible of the Western Church for over one thousand years prior to the reformation. These additional books are called the Apocrypha (see *APOCRYPHA*). Bibles for both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches generally include these additional books, but since Vatican II they have been considered to be on a lesser level of canonicity, being called Deutero-canonicals. Protestants, while not denying that these books are helpful for historical background and insights, do not accept these books as authoritative for matters of faith and practice.