

## WHO DECIDED WHICH BOOKS SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE BIBLE?

The process by which books were included or excluded from the Bible has come to be known by the term “canonization.” The word canonization is derived from the Greek word *kanon* whose basic meaning is that of a “rule.” Sometimes the books included in our Bible are, therefore, called “canonical books.” While canonization has to do with a specific list of books, it deals with more than a mere list of books.

Canonization is really a question about the reasons for which certain books came to be regarded as sacred and authoritative in the early Christian communities. The question is important because the answer to it indicates whether the Bible, as we have it, came into being as a result of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the early church or whether political forces in the time of Constantine were responsible, as some people claim. Since the Bible consists of the Old and New Testaments, the question will be answered in two parts.

### The Old Testament Canon

The thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Old Testament are arranged in three major divisions: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. In response to the question as to who decided which books should be included in the Old Testament, we have to acknowledge that due to the lack of historical sources we cannot give a definitive answer. The same applies to the question regarding what time the decision was made. Historical-critical scholars believe the Bible gained its authority progressively. They suggest that the three parts of the Hebrew Bible indicate a three-step development in the canonization of the Hebrew Old Testament. According to this view, the Law—meaning the books of Moses, also called the Pentateuch—was canonized by about 400 BC, then the Prophets during the first century BC, and the Writings during the first century AD<sup>1</sup>

**A conservative perspective** – From a conservative perspective, the story is quite different. There is little doubt that the book of the Law (the Pentateuch) was regarded as the word of God from its earliest existence.

Several biblical passages point to the self-authenticating authority of the law from the very beginning. Moses at the foot of Mount Sinai “took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!’” (Exod 24:7). Centuries later, after the Babylonian Exile, Ezra read from the “book of the law of Moses” and the people adopted it as the constitution of their restored commonwealth (Neh 8:1-8). The reverence shown by the Jews for the books of Moses, variously called “the Law of Moses” (Neh 8:1), “the Book of the Law” (v. 3), and “the Law of God” (v. 8), points to the honored status of the books of Moses.

Ezra and Nehemiah may have been involved with the collection of the books comprising the Old Testament canon, but it was not one person, or

<b>The Hebrew Canon</b>		
<b>Law</b>	<b>Prophets</b>	<b>Writings</b>
Genesis	Joshua	Psalms
Exodus	Judges	Proverbs
Leviticus	1–2 Samuel	Job
Numbers	1–2 Kings	Song of Songs
Deuteronomy	Isaiah	Ruth
	Jeremiah	Lamentations
	Ezekiel	Ecclesiastes
	The twelve Prophets (Hosea – Malachi)	Esther
		Daniel
		Ezra
		Nehemiah
		1–2 Chronicles

even several, who decided which books should be included in the Old Testament. The story of Israel shows that throughout its history there were individuals who were recognized as prophets of God, and what these people said and wrote was considered the Word of God. The writers did not have to wait for their work to pass the test of time for their authority to be acknowledged. Their work was received as Scripture because what they said and wrote was believed to be from God.

**When did the Hebrew canon come into being?** – According to Jewish tradition the greater part of the Hebrew canon came into being with Ezra and Nehemiah. The non-canonical book 2 Maccabees refers to records and memoirs of Nehemiah, as well as to his library with books about the kings, prophets, and the writings of David (2 Macc 2:13). The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus argues that unlike the Greeks, who had an innumerable multitude of books, the Hebrews had only twenty-two books;<sup>2</sup> he noted that these books

contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death . . . but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life.<sup>3</sup>

Josephus clearly implies that the “prophets” were in place as a body of writings by the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. His subsequent remarks also point to the status of this literature as Scripture. He notes, “It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of the prophets since that time.”<sup>4</sup> No doubt, the prophetic books like the Pentateuch were considered authoritative from the moment they were written.

Internal evidence indicates that by the time of Daniel and Zechariah the Law and the earlier prophets (Joshua–Kings) were regarded as Scripture. For example, Zechariah 7:12 (c. 518 BC) mentions the hardness of the hearts of the people “so that they could not hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets.” And Daniel considered the book of Jeremiah as well as the law of Moses as authoritative (Dan 9:2, 11).

The third division of the Hebrew Bible, the “Writings,” as a complete collection, dates somewhat later than the “Prophets.” The prologue to the Greek translation of *Ecclesiasticus* (an apocryphal book from the second century BC) refers repeatedly to the three sections of the Old Testament, indicating that the third section of the Old Testament was already recognized as canonical at that time.

## The New Testament Canon

The Christian church began with the Old Testament as its Bible. This was in accordance with the practice of Jesus who regarded the Old Testament as authoritative (Matt 5:17-19; 21:42; 22:29; Mark 10:6-9; 12:29-31). Along with the Old Testament, the early church revered the words of Jesus with equal authority (1 Cor 9:14; 1 Thess 4:15). It could not have been otherwise since Jesus was perceived not only as a prophet but also as the Messiah, the Son of God. With the death and resurrection of Jesus, the apostles

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came to occupy a unique position in spreading and bearing witness to the words of Jesus. Indeed Christ had said of them that because they had been with Him from the beginning they would be His witnesses

(John 15:27). As the church grew, and as the apostles became conscious of the prospect of their own death, obviously the need was felt for the words of Jesus to be recorded (2 Pet 1:12-15). The apostles as witnesses of the salvation of God in Jesus Christ were keen to preserve and communicate authoritatively what had happened. Thus, the stage was set for the development of books that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, would in time become the New Testament canon.

For about two decades after the cross, the message of Jesus was proclaimed orally. Then, from the mid-first century on, Paul's letters began to appear. Somewhat later the three synoptic Gospels and the book of Acts were written and by the end of the first century, when John wrote the book of Revelation, all the books of the New Testament were completed. Throughout the New Testament the focus is on what God had done in Christ (1 Cor 15:1-3; Luke 1:1-3).

**The New Testament books acknowledged as Scripture** – As was the case with the books of the Old Testament prophets, the writings of Paul and the other apostles were immediately accepted as authoritative because the authors were known to be authentic spokesmen for God. And they themselves were conscious of the fact that they were proclaiming God's message, not merely their own opinions. Paul in 1 Timothy 5:18 follows up the formula "Scripture says" with a quote from Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7, thereby placing the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament Gospels on the same level of authority; and in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 Paul

commends the Christians in Thessalonica for accepting his words as “the word of God.” Peter in 2 Peter 3:15, 16 also considered Paul’s writings as Scripture.

During the second century most churches came to possess and acknowledge a collection of inspired books that included the four Gospels, the book of Acts, thirteen of Paul’s letters, 1 Peter, and 1 John. The other seven books (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation) took longer to win general acceptance. The early Church Fathers—e.g., Clement of Rome (flourished c. 100), Polycarp (c. 70-155), and Ignatius (died c. 115)—quoted from most of the New Testament books (only Mark, 2 and 3 John, and 2 Peter are not attested) in a manner indicating that they accepted these books as authoritative. Quite clearly, the authority that the books of the New Testament had was not subsequently attributed to them but inherently present in them from the beginning.

**Reasons for the New Testament canon** – The period during which the New Testament canon took shape (specifically defining the list of books) occupied four centuries and involved a number of factors. While the primary reason for the inclusion of the New Testament books in the canon was the self-authenticating nature of the books, i.e., their inspiration, other issues contributed to it.

The second century witnessed the development of several heretical movements in Christianity. When the prominent heretic Marcion broke with the church around AD 140, he drew up his own list of Christian books that would provide a canon for faith and worship. Marcion, however, accepted only a modified version of Luke’s Gospel and ten of the Pauline Epistles as inspired. At the same time, a growing number of Christian writings appeared that claimed to

relate unknown details about Christ and the apostles. Many of these books were written by individuals who belonged to a heretical movement called Gnosticism. The Gnostics

stressed salvation through secret knowledge (Gr. *gnosis*). A number of “infancy” gospels supplied details from the hidden years of Christ’s life. Numerous apocryphal books of Acts related the deeds of Peter, Paul, John, and most of the other apostles, and several apocalypses described accounts of personally conducted tours of heaven and hell by the apostles. Today, these writings are known collectively as the New Testament Apocrypha.

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This period also saw the publication of lists of books known to have been written by the apostles or their associates. Among these lists were the Muratorian Canon, dated towards the end of the second century, the list of Eusebius of Caesarea from the early part of the fourth century, and the list of Athanasius of Alexandria from the middle of the fourth century. The first two lists were still incomplete, listing only about twenty of the twenty-seven New Testament books. The complete New Testament canon is set out in detail in Athanasius' Easter Letter of 367 which contains the twenty-seven New Testament books to the exclusion of all others. During the fourth century several church synods, such as the councils of Rome (382), Hippo (393), and Carthage (397), accepted all 27 books of the New Testament as canonical.

While heretical movements and church councils played a certain role in the formation of the canon, the desire to preserve faithfully the events of what God had done through Christ, already evident in the New Testament,

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means that the driving force behind the history of the New Testament canon was the faith of the church. In fact "much of what became the core of the New Testament canon . . . had already been unofficially and generally recognized as Scripture as the church began to consider making and approving a list that

would set the limits of Christian Scripture."<sup>5</sup> In reference to the New Testament canon Bruce Metzger correctly says of the Synod of Laodicea, "The decree adopted at this gathering merely recognized the fact that there are already in existence certain books, generally recognized as suitable to be read in public worship of the churches, which are known as the 'canonical' books."<sup>6</sup>

**Summary** – Who decided which books should be included in the Bible? Our brief discussion has shown that for both Testaments the books that came to be part of the biblical canon had their own self-authenticating authority. The Old Testament books carried their own authoritative credentials by virtue of the writers who unequivocally declared that what they said and wrote was from God. The New Testament books by and large had immediate authority as faithfully witnessing to the events and meaning of God's action through Christ.

The Old Testament canon was, for the most part settled within Judaism by the second century BC, though discussions concerning it continued for several centuries. From history we know that the final shape of the New Testament canon existed by the fourth century AD. Although heretical movements and church councils played a role in the actual formation of the New Testament canon, it was not the church that decided which books should be included in the canon. The church recognized and acknowledged the inspiration and self-authenticating authority of the 27 New Testament books and limited the canon to these books.

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### References

<sup>1</sup>James A. Sanders, "Canon," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:843.

<sup>2</sup>Among the Jews the twelve Minor Prophets were counted as one book, as were 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Josephus may have counted Ruth as part of Judges and Lamentations as part of Jeremiah, but we do not really know how Josephus divided or grouped the books of the Old Testament to arrive at twenty-two.

<sup>3</sup>Josephus *Against Apion* 1.38-40.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.41.

<sup>5</sup>Steven M. Sheeley, "From 'Scripture' to 'Canon': The Development of the New Testament Canon," *Review and Expositor* 95 (1998): 518.

<sup>6</sup>Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 210.

*The Bible needs fewer defenses  
and more practice.*

*Anonymous*

