

The writers of Scripture wrote, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—He “breathed out” through their writings.



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They carefully wrote—whether narrative, wisdom, prophecy, epistles, poetry...and God has preserved those writings over the centuries.



But why are the 66 books of the Bible the 66 books we should have there? For example, who decided the book of Isaiah (the scroll of Isaiah found among the Dead Sea scrolls, below) should be in the Bible? And why? And will there be any more?



Jude wrote to exhort his readers to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”
Once for all. Once. For all. So we’re going to take a little side trip today, and talk about...



The canon of Scripture...

Not this:



This:



First, this: what does the word *canon* mean?

“The word comes from the Gk *kanon*. It means, in the first place, a reed or rod; then a measuring-rod; hence a rule or standard. In the second place, it means an authoritative decision of a church council; and in the third place, as applied to the Bible, it means those books which have been measured, found satisfactory, and approved as inspired by God.” – Henry Thiessen

Which raises a few questions:

- Who came up with the standards?
- Who measured the books? And how? And why?
- And when did all this happen?

Let's start with some basics...

The Bible is a collection of writings, written by some 40 (or so) authors over a span of around 1500 years.

- That's a *seriously long time*—clearly, starting with the very earliest of the Biblical writings, there were those who recognized and affirmed their value, and collected and preserved them.
- We don't have time, but the whole subject of the preservation of the Scriptures (in the case of the earliest OT writings, for *thousands* of years) and the reliability of OT and NT manuscripts are fascinating studies themselves. But that's for another day.

Let's start with some basics...

The Bible is a collection of writings, written by some 40 (or so) authors over a span of around 1500 years.

- As those writings were collected and preserved over the years, other writings were evaluated.
- Some were recognized as being authoritative, or from God, and they were added to the collection.
- Others were questioned or outright rejected, and were not added to the collection of recognized authoritative writings.

So—let's see if we can figure out just what that process looked like. Because it matters.

How all the writings were evaluated...

First—take a shot at this: What do you think the criteria for evaluating all of these writings was? On what basis were some accepted and others rejected?

Over the centuries three widely accepted principles crystallized and were used in this evaluation process:

1. The writing had to have been authored by a recognized prophet or apostle, or by someone associated with one.
- For example, as in the cases of the books of Mark, Luke, Hebrews, James, and Jude.

How all the writings were evaluated...

Over the centuries three widely accepted principles crystallized and were used in this evaluation process:

2. The writing could not disagree with or contradict any previous Scripture.
3. The church had to display a general consensus that a writing was an inspired book.

Until the latter part of the 4th century AD, Christians simply referred to the OT & NT as the *Holy Scriptures*, and assumed unquestioningly that what the Bible contained were the right books, the truly God-breathed collection of sacred writings.

So what happened in the 4th century?

How all the writings were evaluated...

Jesus and the very early Christians inherited the complete OT from the earlier Jews. No problem—they all spoke Hebrew.

But then a bunch of Gentiles started getting saved, so they began using a Latin translation (Vulgate) of the Septuagint, which itself was a Greek translation of the OT completed about 132 BC.

Because they had no knowledge of Hebrew, or of Jewish traditions or culture, it became more difficult to distinguish between truly Biblical books, and popular religious literature that was floating around.

How all the writings were evaluated...

And that all led to questions about the collection of books called the Bible—were they the right ones?

Church leaders recognized they had a potentially very big (and very divisive) problem looming over their heads, and sought a way to settle the issue.

- This all resulted in a long process of debate (some of which was, well, rather *heated*).

Athanasius first applied the term *canon* to Scripture around 350, in the *Decrees of the Council of Nicea*. In it he referred to a book titled “The Shepherd of Hermas” as not bring part of the canon, or the genuine words of God.

How all the writings were evaluated...

A little later, the Council of Laodicea (363-364) used the words *canonical* and *noncanonical* to refer to individual books—either accepted as authoritative and biblical, or rejected as not inspired by God.

One thing to clarify: who determines which books are inspired and authoritative?

God does. The church simply recognizes the inherent authority in the writings.

- The Catholic church differs on this: they hold that it is the church that determines authority: the authority is in the church, and it decides which books are in the Bible.

How'd we get our Old Testament?

Question: If God's revelation was going to be preserved, how was that going to happen?

Answer: It had to be written down (Ex. 17:14; Deut. 31:24-26; Isaiah 30:8).

- First: there is way more that could be said on this, but this is a short summary of a summary.
- The two stone tablets containing the 10 commandments were preserved (Deut. 10:5).
- There was a later Book of the Covenant (Ex. 24:7; Josh. 24:26; 2 Kings 23:2).
- The written book of Deuteronomy was to be kept in the tabernacle/temple (Deut. 31:24-26).

How'd we get our Old Testament?

- In the 3rd century BC, a calendar from the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch was followed by the residents of Qumran, so that they could make sure that anything required of them in the written Scriptures would never fall on the Sabbath. According to this calendar, at least 10 (and probably more) of the present OT books were known by the Jews as canonical.
- By 180 BC, another Jewish writing (Sirach) raises the number to 16 OT books affirmed.
- Judas Maccabeus in 165 BC made what is seen as the final collection of OT books, after a time of severe persecution of the Jews.

How'd we get our Old Testament? A summary...

It was written over a period of about 1000 years; the OT canon was established by four principles:

1. A book was written by inspiration, often affirmed by the author (2 Sam. 23:1-2; Is. 1:1; Jer. 1:1-2).
2. The writer's contemporaries often recognized the book (Ex. 24:3; Josh. 1:8; Jer. 26:18; Dan. 9:2).
3. Contemporaries determined to preserve the writing as part of God's revealed Word (Deut. 31:26; 1 Sam. 10:25; Prov. 25:1; 2 Kings 23:24; Dan. 9:2).
4. Jewish leaders compared any new revelation with the existing recognized Scriptures (Deut. 12:32, 13:1-5).

How'd we get our New Testament?

With the NT canon, there was a time of revelation, of circulation, of collection, and lastly of recognition.

The period of revelation –

- The NT was written over approx. 50 years, by 8 or 9 authors, beginning with the book of James in approx. 45, ending with Revelation in approx. 95.
- Peter attested to Paul's letters as being Scripture (2 Pet. 3:14-16).
- Paul quotes from both Deut. and Luke in 1 Tim. 5:18, affirming both as Scripture.
- The NT books were canonical at the time of writing—they were all inspired (2 Tim. 3:16).

How'd we get our New Testament?

The period of circulation ~

- It appears that the NT writings were recognized as authoritative by the early churches almost immediately.
- Again, Peter recognized Paul's letters as on par with the OT (2 Pet. 3:14-16).
- Paul's letters were read publicly in the churches, pointing to the recognized authority of his letters (Col. 4:16).
- This circulation resulted in a largely church-wide awareness of most of the 27 NT books by early in the 2nd century.

How'd we get our New Testament?

The period of collection ~

- By early in the 2nd century, churches were using collections of copies of the NT writings, rather than just the individual books.
- The first controversy over the NT canon arose in the mid-2nd century when a heretic named Marcion published his own list of what he considered to be authoritative books.
- Controversy compelled early church fathers to come to some consensus—they initially published what is called the Muratorian Canon (170), which contains 22 of the 27 NT books. Those missing included Hebrews, James, and 1 & 2 Peter.

How'd we get our New Testament?

The period of recognition ~

- By the beginning of the 4th century, widespread persecution of Christians had largely ended. Roman emperor Diocletian (245-311) called for the deliberate burning of as many copies of the NT as possible in his edict dated 303.
- When Constantine became emperor, he legalized Christianity in 313, and commissioned Eusebius to oversee production of 50 copies of the NT.
- Eusebius divided early church writings into 3 categories: acknowledged books, disputed books, and heretical books.

How'd we get our New Testament?

The period of recognition ~

- In his list of acknowledged books he listed all of the current NT books except for James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and Jude.
- After a period of discussion all 27 of the NT books were included and affirmed.
- Finalization of the NT canon was largely completed by Athanasius, as recorded in his Festal Letter of 365. He strictly forbade any other books as canonical—including the *Didache* and *The Shepherd of Hermas*, which were debated. These decisions were ratified by the Council of Hippo in 393.

Interesting question # 1: Are there any books in the canon of Scripture that *should not* be there?

Answer: No. "We can rest our confidence in this fact in the faithfulness of God our Father, who would not lead all His people for nearly 2000 years to trust as His Word something that is not. And we find our confidence repeatedly confirmed both by historical investigation and by the work of the Holy Spirit in enabling us to hear God's voice in a unique way as we read from every one of the 66 books in our present canon of Scripture." ~ Wayne Grudem

Interesting question #2: What if one of Paul's lost letters shows up? What do we do then?

A little longer answer from Grudem: "...if a great majority of believers were convinced that this was indeed an authentic Pauline epistle, written in the course of Paul's fulfillment of his apostolic office, then the nature of Paul's apostolic authority would guarantee that the writing would be God's very words, and that its teachings would be consistent with the rest of Scripture. But the fact that it was not preserved as part of the canon would indicate that it was not among the writings the apostles wanted the church to preserve as part of Scripture...It is exceptionally difficult to imagine what kind of historical data might be discovered

Interesting question #2: What if one of Paul's lost letters shows up? What do we do then?

that could convincingly demonstrate to the church as a whole that a letter lost for over 1900 years was genuinely authored by Paul, and it is more difficult to understand how our sovereign God could have faithfully cared for His people for over 1900 years and still allowed them to be continually deprived of something He intended them to have as part of His final revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ. These considerations make it so highly improbable that any such manuscript would be discovered at some time in the future, that such a hypothetical question really does not merit further serious consideration." Well said, sir!

Interesting question #3: Are there any books that *should* have been included in Scripture, but weren't?

“In all known literature there are no candidates that even come close to Scripture when consideration is given both to their doctrinal consistency with the rest of Scripture and to the type of authority they claim for themselves. Once again, God’s faithfulness to His people convinces us that there is nothing missing from Scripture that God thinks we need to know for obeying Him and trusting Him fully. The canon of Scripture today is exactly what God wanted it to be, and it will stay that way until Christ returns.” - Grudem

We can say it like this: Relax. The canon is closed.