

The “CANON” of Scripture - How did we get the Bible?

The word Bible means “book”. The word holy means “*set apart*”. Unlike any book in the world the Holy Bible is a truly set apart book. The Holy Bible was written by about forty authors over the period of 1600 years; written by men that lived in different centuries, on different continents, that had no way of comparing notes or collaborating. Yet, the Bible is unified in theme, and without contradiction. This is only possible if the Bible were divinely inspired, meaning that the text had been provided by God. This happens when the Lord delivers a message to be written by an individual. The author who is selected by the Lord is free to write using his own distinct personality and cultural context, but the doctrine or central message of the text remains firm and unchanged. An example might be, “*Hey, mom says it’s time to eat!*” versus, “*Mother has asked me to tell you that we’re ready for dinner.*” In both cases the central message is the same, but the messenger can use his own style and personality to deliver it.

The Bible is a compilation of 66 smaller books; 39 Old Testament (OT) books and 27 New Testament (NT) books. These 66 books are comprised of various types of writings such as historical recounts, prophecies, letters, poems, and songs. These 66 books make up what’s called the “canon” of Scripture. The English word canon comes from the Greek κανών kanōn, meaning “rule” or “*measuring stick*”, and in this case canon is defined as the books which are officially accepted as Holy Scripture, or God’s Word. So, how and when did these various writings become compiled into the canon/Bible that we have today?

Christians believe that God directed the process by which the books of the Bible were to be selected. In other words, it was God who decided which books would be included in the Bible. Beginning with the OT, these 39 books (Genesis through Malachi) were identified as divinely inspired by rabbis and scholars living among the ancient Israelites. The first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah, believed to be written by Moses (Genesis 31:24-26) around 1400 B.C., were generally accepted as divinely inspired even before 960 B.C. when Solomon built the temple and placed these writings inside. Eventually the temple becomes “shut” by wicked kings of Israel, and this “book of the law that was kept in the house of the Lord” is rediscovered in 2 Kings 22 (about 640 B.C.).

Much of the OT is comprised of what we call the major and minor prophets; accounts of prophets who lived and prophesied from roughly 810-397 B.C. Their accounts were canonized as Scripture by the end of the second century B.C. Writings of David, Solomon, and others of that time period (comprising books like Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) were also recognized by Jewish scholars as divine. Jewish scholars followed strict guidelines when considering writings to be a part of the OT Biblical canon: books must have conformed to the Torah, and had to have been written in Palestine, in Hebrew, and not after the time of Ezra (about 400 BC).

The OT had been compiled before the time of Jesus. In Jesus’ life and ministry it is never debated as to whether or not the OT used by Jesus and the Jews was or wasn’t considered divinely inspired. Even historians of that period, Josephus and Philo, reference the OT and seem to confirm that the canon of the OT seemed quite settled. It’s important to note that Jesus and NT authors frequently quote from the OT. In fact, in the OT we find some OT books quoting from other OT books. Likewise in the NT, we find some NT books quoting other NT books. These inner-Biblical quotes add validity to the Biblical canon. However, there are other quotes found in the Bible that are not from the other recognized Biblical books, and therefore these quotes are not considered God’s Word. In other words, the Bible may cite or quote non-Biblical sources, but these quotes don’t imply that those non-Biblical sources are divinely inspired. Here are several examples. In

Matthew 5:43 Jesus quotes an oral law from the Pharisees, *“hate your enemy”*. In Acts 17:28, Paul quotes a Greek poet, *“For we also are His children.”* In Titus 1:12, Paul quotes a prophet from Crete, *“Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.”* In Jude 14-15, Jude quotes a prophecy of Enoch. This prophecy of Enoch’s doesn’t come from any known writing, but comes either from Jewish tradition, or simply given by divine revelation to Jude at the time of this writing. The Jews have a writing that they call The Book of Enoch (not a canonical book), and this writing does not include the prophecy which Jude refers to. Ultimately, these examples above are quotes found in the Bible, but are not direct quotes from other Biblical books and not considered God’s Word. A common example of a non-canonical writing that is often mistaken as a true Biblical text is the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha is a collection of pre-New Testament Jewish writings and should not be considered Scripture because these books bear none of the marks of authority within them. The vast majority of Hebrew scholars considered them to be good historical and religious documents, but not on the same level as the inspired Hebrew Scriptures.

Regarding the NT, the process for recognizing and collecting the books of the NT began in the first century, only years after the events themselves took place. For example, the Apostle Paul, author of 13 NT books (possibly 14 as Hebrews’ authorship is debated), considered Luke’s gospel writing to be authoritative scripture (see 1 Timothy 5:18). The Apostle Peter refers to Paul’s letters as “Scripture” (2 Pet. 3:16). First and second century figures such as Clement of Rome mentioned at least eight NT books (AD 95). Ignatius of Antioch acknowledged seven books (AD 115). Polycarp, a disciple of John the apostle, acknowledged fifteen books (AD 108). Later, Irenaeus mentioned twenty-one books (AD 185). Hippolytus twenty-two books (AD 170-235).

The first NT canon was the Muratorian Canon, compiled in AD 170, which included 24 of the 27 of the NT books (not yet included were Hebrews, James, and 3 John). The Council of Laodicea (AD 363) concluded that the 39 OT books and the now 27 books of the NT were to be read in the churches. Later, the Councils of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397) reaffirmed the same 27 NT books as authoritative.

The principles used by the councils to determine whether a NT book was truly inspired by the Holy Spirit were fourfold. First, OT authorship referred to the authority of the person writing it. Were they a lawgiver, a prophet, or a leader in Israel? In the NT, the authority came from the person either being an apostle or someone who was backed by or closely connected to an apostle. Second, the book must have been accepted by the body of Christ at large, meaning that the writing was accredited as authoritative by those who first received them. Third, the book had to contain consistency of doctrine and orthodox teaching. Finally, the book had to bear evidence of high moral and spiritual values that would reflect a work of the Holy Spirit as the divine Author. In other words, if God is genuinely the one who stands behind these books, then we would expect these books to share God’s own qualities. Of course, non-Christians will object to the idea of divine qualities in Scripture because they don’t personally see such qualities. But we must remember that humans are corrupted by the fall and darkened by sin. In order to see these qualities rightly, they need what is referred to as the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. For those in Christ, the Spirit opens our eyes to see the divine qualities in these books that are objectively present.

2 Timothy 3:16-17, *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

Matthew 5:18, *“For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”*