

HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

Luke 24:25–27, 44–45 • Brian Brodersen

Introduction: “Who decided which material should be included in the Bible as a holy book with religious authority, and why should we take their word for it? Hundreds of years after the events, didn’t a group of men get together to decide what should and shouldn’t be in the Bible? Isn’t it the case that men in positions of power selected what books would be included in the Bible based on their prejudices?” (AOE paraphrase)

This myth is commonly believed today. Its current popularity owes much to Dan Brown’s book, *The DaVinci Code*, and the Internet’s ability to disseminate false information.

Spoiler alert! The books we call Scripture were not at all determined by any council of men or by the church institutionally. The 4th century councils that are often pointed to as the places where it was determined what books should be included in the Bible were not that at all. Renowned Scholar, F. F. Bruce of the University of Manchester, England, wrote this: “When at last a Church council—the Synod of Hippo in AD 393—listed the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity.”

I. The Canon of Scripture

- A. The Greek word *kanon* referred to a reed that was used as a measuring stick—a ruler or yard stick. The word came to mean standard or rule.
- B. The Canon of Scripture is a list of all the books that belong in the Bible.

II. The Old Testament Canon

- A. The Jews received as the Word of God the writings that had come to them through those recognized as Prophets; they referred to them as Scripture—Holy Writ.
- B. The New Testament writers made some 200 references to the Scriptures.

Jesus said to the Jewish leaders of his day: “You search the *Scriptures* diligently for in them you think you have eternal life. These are they which testify about me.” John 5:39

Josephus, the Jewish historian, born in AD 37 wrote this in his *History of the Jews*: “We have not 10,000 books among us disagreeing with and contradicting one another, but only *twenty-two books*, which contain the records of all time, and are justly believed to be divine. Five of these are by Moses and contain his laws and traditions of the origin of mankind until his death ... From the death of Moses until the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia ... the prophets who succeeded Moses wrote down what happened in their times in thirteen books; and the remaining four books contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.”

Artaxerxes’ reign 464–424; Malachi wrote mid-400s BC.

The twenty-two books mentioned by Josephus and found in the Hebrew Bible today are the same as our thirty-nine books of the Old Testament; Samuel, Kings, Chronicles become one book instead of two.

Jesus describes the Scriptures as the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Luke 24:44

The Old Testament Scriptures came through prophets, priest, or kings—those recognized as having prophetic authority. There is no record whatsoever of any council between the time of Malachi and Christ establishing which books were Scripture. The proof of divine inspiration was in their authority. They were received on that basis.

- C. The Apocrypha: a quick word. Maccabees, Esdras, Baruch, etc. Septuagint Vulgate included but didn't see them as equal to Scripture.

III. The New Testament Canon

From the very beginning, the writings of the apostles or their close associates were considered Scripture, Holy Writings just like those of Moses and the Prophets.

Paul to the Corinthians: "What I am writing to you is the Lord's command." 1 Corinthians 14:37

Paul to Timothy: "For Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain (Deut. 25:4), and 'The worker is worthy of his wages.'" Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18

Peter says concerning Paul's writings: "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."

The church's way of understanding what was the divinely inspired Word of God that would now complete the revelation that began with Moses was essentially the same as it was for Israel.

- A. Written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle.
- B. Authentic and authoritative—the ring of truth.
- C. Consistent with previous revelation.
- D. Generally accepted by God's people.

Again, F. F. Bruce: "Long before the apostolic letters were recognized as elements in a canonical collection, they were recognized as authoritative by most of those for whom they were written; as we said before, authority is the necessary precedent of canonicity."

If it wasn't powerful men in church councils that decided what books would qualify as the Word of God and be considered Scripture, how did we end up with the books we have in our Bibles?

IV. Heresy and the Canon

This came about because of false teachers who began denying the authenticity and authority of the writings that had been passed down from the apostles and their associates (Mark, Luke, James, Jude).

Most notoriously, Marcion in 144 BC. He rejected the God of Israel and the Old Testament and drew up a canon to take its place. "This canon consisted of two sections—The Gospel and the Apostle. His gospel consisted of a truncated edition of Luke, which he probably regarded as the least Jewish of the Gospels, as its author was a Gentile; his Apostle consisted of Pauline letters (excluding those to Timothy and Titus)." Even the books which he did accept as canonical Scripture were edited in accordance with what he believed to be pure Christian doctrine ... Anything in Paul's epistles which seemed to recognize the God of Israel or to identify Him with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ was cut out; it could not, on Marcion's premises, be genuine.

All Old Testament references were likewise excised. And in accordance with his belief that Jesus was a supernatural being who appeared suddenly among men in the mere semblance of humanity, his Gospel began with the words: "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, in the time of Pontius Pilate, Jesus came to Capernaum. A city of Galilee. And taught in the synagogue."

"He deliberately omits Luke's birth-narrative, the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, His genealogy (according to Marcion, He had no human descent), and his temptation ... The church leaders saw the need of defining the canon of the New Testament Scripture more explicitly by way of countering Marcion's canon." Bruce

The earliest list to be discovered is known as the Muratorian Fragment, perhaps pre-dating Marcion. It includes an indirect reference to Matthew and Mark (calling Luke the 3rd gospel), John, Acts, 13 letters of Paul, Jude, two letters of John and Revelation. Missing is Hebrews, James, First and Second Peter and Third John.

V. The Canon Complete

In the 4th century, all these matters are pretty well brought to a conclusion. In the mid 4th century, Eusebius, the church historian, distinguishes three categories of books: (1) those universally accepted, (2) those that are disputed, and (3) those rejected.

The accepted books are: Four Gospels, Acts, fourteen letters of Paul, First John, First Peter, and Revelation. Disputed: James, Jude, Second Peter, Second and Third John, but these are recognized by the majority. The rejected books, among others, are the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Teaching of the Apostles.

In A.D. 367, Athanasius Bishop of Alexandria published a list of twenty-seven books of the New Testament that were accepted in his time, and these are the same twenty-seven that are recognized today.

"When talking about the Canon, the important concept to remember is that the church did not choose the canon; rather, it officially recognized the inspiration of certain books. As we have seen, the inspiration of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament was already organically and generally accepted in the early church. When the councils of church leaders met in Rome in AD 382, in Hippo in 393 and again in 397 in Carthage, it was to confirm this acceptance and to counteract early heresies and persecution, rather than to accord any special status to the writing that the church did not already have." Amy Orr-Ewing

Close

Immediately after his list of books, Athanasius adds: These are the springs of salvation ... Let no one add anything to them or take away anything from them."

"These are they which testify of Me."—Jesus