

# Formation of the Bible

The word *Bible* derives from the Greek term *books* and refers to the Old Testament and the New Testament. The 39 Old Testament books and the 27 New Testament books form the canon of Holy Scripture. *Canon* originally meant *reed* and came to signify a ruler or measuring stick. In this sense the Bible is the rule or standard of authority for Christians. The concept of canon and the process of canonization refer to the time when the individual books gained the status of Holy Scripture, authoritative standards for faith and practice.

## Organization of the Bible

The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew, with some portions of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel in Aramaic. The Hebrew Old Testament is divided into three sections:

1. The Law, or Torah (Gen., Ex., Lev., Num., Deut.)
2. The Prophets, divided into Former Prophets (Josh., Judg., 1–2 Sam., 1–2 Kings) and Latter Prophets (Isa., Jer., Ezek., the book of the Twelve: Hos.–Mal.)
3. The Writings, which fall into three groups: Poetic Books (Job, Ps., Prov.); the Festival Scrolls, or Megilloth (Ruth, Esth., Eccl., Song of Songs, Lam.); and the Historical Books (1–2 Chron., Ezra, Neh., Dan.)

Our current order of Old Testament books is based on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

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 Revelation. In many Greek New Testament manuscripts the General Epistles (James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude) precede the Pauline Epistles (Romans–James, plus Hebrews), likely due to the more direct links between Jesus and James, Peter, John, and Jude.

## Development of the Old Testament Canon

The common critical view, which may be traced to Hebert E. Ryle (1892, rev. 1895), is that the threefold designation of the Old Testament books—Law (Torah), Prophets (Neviim), and Writings (Kethubim)—is based on the gradual acceptance of each of these three collections as canon. This view is based largely on the premises that Moses could not have authored the Pentateuch and that the Old Testament historical books would have been compiled after the reign of King Josiah (Judah, 640–609 B.C.). Recognition of the Torah (Law) by the fifth century B.C. is based on the fact that the Samaritans, whose canon comprised only the Torah, split from the Jews just after the exile. The Prophets is thought to have been closed by 200 B.C., explaining why the prophet Daniel was not included (his book is in the Writings in the Hebrew canon). Critical scholars date his book in the second century B.C. The Writings are usually said to have been set at a meeting of rabbis at Jamnia (Jabneh) sometime between A.D. 70 and 135.

Roger Beckwith (1985), benefiting from the work of Jack P. Lewis (1964), S. Z. Leiman (1976), and others, addressed and refuted many issues raised by the liberal-critical school and concluded that the Old Testament collection could have been settled as early as the fourth century B.C., although it was more probably settled by the second century B.C. For example, the Samaritans' acknowledgment of only the Torah may not be a clue to the canon's history but rather involved a rejection of the previously recognized prophets. Second, the rabbis at Jamnia were concerned not with canonization but with interpretation. Finally, although the designation of Law, Prophets, and Writings was known and important (as noted in the prologue to Ecclesiasticus; Luke 24:44; Josephus, *Against Apion* I:8; Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts; and the writings of Philo), Beckwith proved this is not a credible guide to the process of canonization.

When God chose to reveal Himself to His people and to establish a permanent relationship with them, He used the principle of the covenant, a concept familiar from ancient Near Eastern culture. The formation of a covenant commonly involved the creation of a covenant document. Furthermore, the history of the covenant would naturally be reflected in updating that covenant document. Therefore, with the Mosaic covenant came the Mosaic document, and as each book of the Old Testament was written, its authority as the revealed Word of God evoked the immediate embracing of it as sacred and binding on the emerging Israelite community. Moses, as the covenant mediator, wrote the Torah under divine leadership. The remainder of Scripture—the early and latter prophets, the poetry and wisdom literature, and the postexilic books—were likewise accepted immediately as each one was delivered and received into the Israelite community. The closure of this process would have come as the last book was accepted as authoritative and binding (referred to as “defiling the hands”). This may have been Malachi (usually acknowledged as the last prophet) or Chronicles (the last book in the Hebrew canonical order). In any case, what Protestants attest as the 39 books of the Old Testament canon (same as the 22 or 24 books in the Jewish community [for example, minor prophets were counted as one book; Jer. and Lam. as one; Ezra and Neh. as one, and so on]) was settled very close to the time of the last book's writing (Chronicles, 450 B.C.; Malachi, 450 or 420 B.C.).

## **Development of the New Testament Canon**

The canonization process for the New Testament is easier to trace, even though some questions cannot be fully answered. The Pauline Epistles were collected and considered authoritative at least during the first half of the second century, as evidenced by Marcion's canon (c. A.D. 140) of 10 Pauline Epistles and Luke. The four Gospels became a canonical unit during the second half of the second century, with Irenaeus (A.D. 180) defending the fourfold Gospel canon. By the end of the second century, the core of the New Testament canon was fixed, with the four Gospels, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, and 13 Pauline Epistles all accepted as authoritative texts by the leading churches. Revelation enjoyed early acceptance as well but later, near the middle of the third century, began to be questioned both on content and authorship. Hebrews was debated likewise 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 canonical until the fourth century. The first mention of a 27-book New Testament canon was made by Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, who in his Easter letter of 367, instructed

the churches about the New Testament, exactly listing the 27 books we have. Even at that point, however, some groups, such as Syriac churches, used a 22-book New Testament canon (lacking 2 Pet., 2–3 John, Jude, and Rev.) or a 26-book canon (lacking Rev.). However, 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 easy. Marcion promoted a very limited canon in Rome (c. A.D. 140) that represented an extreme reaction against Judaism. He rejected the Old Testament as well as New Testament writings that were "too Jewish," keeping only Paul and Luke (the only Gentile New Testament writer). In reaction the church defended the Old Testament and began defining its own New Testament canon, much broader than Marcion's.

In the late second century Montanism promoted an ongoing prophetic voice in the church. This assertion of new revelation caused the church to become more restrictive in defining the canon, limiting the New Testament to books that could be traced to apostolic authorship or influence.

As the task continued, the Spirit-led process was guided by certain standards.

- For a book to be considered Holy Scripture (canonical), it had to enjoy widespread acceptance among the churches. Regional acceptance was not adequate.
- Criteria were needed to separate later works from those of the first century. Books must date to the apostolic era and must be connected to an apostle, whether by authorship or direct association (for example, Mark and Luke were associated with Peter and Paul, respectively).
- The books had to prove beneficial to the churches that heard 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.
- The books had to be deemed suitable for public reading in the church. Because illiteracy was widespread, the reading of the text in worship was the primary contact with the text for most of the people. Those texts read in worship were heard as the authoritative Word of God. Such texts were on the path of full canonization.

A further stage of canonization occurred during the Reformation. The reformers, echoing Jerome, held that the Jewish Old Testament canon should be followed, so they accepted only the 39 books of the Hebrew Old Testament instead of the expanded Old Testament often found in the Septuagint. These additional books (the Apocrypha) were also in the Latin Vulgate, the primary Bible of the Western church for more than one thousand years prior to the Reformation. Bibles for both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches still generally include the Apocrypha, but since Vatican II they have a lesser level of canonicity, being called deuterocanonical. Protestants, while not denying these books are helpful, do not accept them as canonical holy Scripture.

Adapted from Bill Warren and Archie W. England, "Bible Formation and Canon," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [online, cited 1 September 2010]. Available from the Internet: [www.mystudybible.com](http://www.mystudybible.com).