

Why trust the selection of which writings are in the Bible?

Over the last 150 years many books and even movies have been produced that challenge the selection writings that are in the Bible. Some claim that other books should be included. Others claim that books in the Bible should not be included.

What is the canon of the Bible?

The list books in the Bible is called the “Canon.” The origin of the word can be traced to a Semitic (Hebrew or Arab) word for “reed,” that was used as a measuring rod or ruler. The English word refers to a standard used to measure, like a ruler or yard stick²¹. When the word is applied to the Old Testament Canon and the New Testament Canon it refers to the list of books recognized by believers as containing God’s Word.

The Canon of the Protestant Christian Bible

If you look at the Table of Contents at the beginning of most Bibles used by Protestant Christians you will find the books divided in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Sometimes you will find the books of the Bible grouped together. The list just to the right gives one way the books of the Bible are grouped together.

This is the arrangement of the books of the Bible that is most familiar to most of us. What may not be clear is that each of these books was written separately and at a different time. Instead of thinking of the Bible as one very large, very long book, it is more accurate to think of the Bible as a collection of many short books.

Christian Old Testament					
Five Books of Moses					
Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus	Numbers	Deuteronomy	
Histories					
Joshua	Judges	Ruth	Samuel (1&2)	Kings (1&2)	
Chronicles (1&2)	Ezra	Nehemiah	Esther		
Books of Wisdom					
Job	Psalms	Proverbs	Ecclesiastes	Song of Songs	
Prophetic					
Major Prophets					
Isaiah	Jeremiah	Lamentations	Ezekiel	Daniel	
Twelve Minor Prophets					
Hosea	Joel	Amos	Obadiah	Jonah	Micah
Naum	Habakkuk	Zephaniah	Haggai	Zechariah	Malachi
Christian New Testament					
Four Gospels					
Matthew	Mark	Luke	John		
History					
Acts					
Letters					
Letters of Paul					
Romans	Corinthians (1&2)	Galatians	Ephesians	Philippians	
Colossians	Thessalonians (1&2)	Timothy (1&2)	Titus	Philemon	
General Letters					
Hebrews	James	Peter (1&2)	John (1, 2, &3)	Jude	
Prophetic					
Revelation					

Before there was a Christian canon of the books of the Bible, there was a Jewish Canon of the Hebrew scriptures. This Jewish canon was used by Jesus and the apostles.

How does the arrangement of the Jewish canon hold itself together?

The theme of “Creation” signifies the beginning of each of the three sections of the Tanakh, or the scriptures that were used in Jesus’ day. Note the chart below showing how the Jewish people of Jesus’ time arranged the books of the Old Testament:

Jewish										
AD 1008										
Torah (Law)										
Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus	Numbers	Deuteronomy						
Nevi'im (Prophets)										
Joshua	Judges	Samuel (1&2)	Kings (1&2)	Isaiah	Jeremiah	Ezekiel	The Twelve			
Ketuvim (Writings)										
Sifrei Emet (Books of Truth)										
Psalms	Proverbs	Job	The Twelve							
Hamesh Migillot (Five Scrolls)										
Song of Songs	Ruth	Lamentations	Ecclesiastes	Esther						
More Writings										
Daniel	Ezra / Nehemiah	Chronicles (1&2)								

²¹ Dunbar, D. G. (2005). [The Biblical Canon](#). In D. A. Carson & J. D. Woodbridge (Eds.), *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (p. 300). Wipf & Stock Publishers.

At the beginning of each of the three sections, the Torah, the Nevi'im and the Ketuvim, Creation is mentioned. Two key ideas are used to signify creation: "God's Word" and, "day and night."

This pattern begins right at the very start, at the beginning of the Torah. In Genesis 1:3-5 we read:

³ And **God said**, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light **Day**, and the darkness he called **Night**. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. Genesis 1:3-5, ESV

This is the first time the theme of creation appears in the scripture. The first humans, Adam and Eve, are placed in the Garden of Eden, where they organize their lives "around the word of God"²² (Genesis 2:4-25).

The second division of the Tanakh begins with the book of Joshua, also known as the Nevi'im, or the Prophets. In Joshua 1:8-9, we read:

⁸ This Book of **the Law** shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it **day and night**, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:8-9, ESV

The Law is the Word of God. The Law contains the rules established by God's Word is that the people of Israel might organize their daily activities around the Word of God.

The third division of the Tanakh is the "Ketuvim". The book of Psalms begins this section. In Psalm 1:2-3 we read:

² but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his **law** he **meditates day and night**. ³ He is like **a tree planted by streams of water** that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. Psalm 1:2-3, ESV

Again, as in Joshua 1:8, the word of God is defined as His law. And, also again, believers are commanded to meditate on it day and night.

Jesus accepted the Old Testament canon

In Matthew 23:35 Jesus refers to the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah:

³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Matthew 23:34-35 (ESV)

The blood of Zechariah is very likely referring to 2 Chronicles 24:20&22. In the arrangement of the Old Testament used at that time 2 Chronicles was the last book in the Bible (see the chart of the Jewish canon). So, Jesus was referring to Abel who was mentioned at the beginning of the Old Testament and Zechariah who was mentioned at the end of the Jewish arrangement of the Old Testament. Jesus referring to the canon of the Old Testament used by Jewish people at that time. He refers to be beginning, "the blood of Abel", and the end "the blood of Zechariah". Jesus considered the entire canon of the Old Testament to be scripture.

Ancient Jewish people accepted the Old Testament canon

According to the book of Maccabees Jewish people believed that prophecy had ceased and that the Old Testament canon was complete: "After the death of Judas ... there was great distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time that prophets had ceased to appear among them" (1 Maccabees 9:23-27).²³

²² Dempster, S. G. (2003). [*Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*](#) (D. A. Carson, Ed.; Vol. 15, p. 33). Apollos; Inter Varsity Press.

²³ Dunbar, D. G. (2005). [*The Biblical Canon*](#). In D. A. Carson & J. D. Woodbridge (Eds.), *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (p. 313). Wipf & Stock Publishers.

Paul accepted the Old Testament canon

When Paul refers to the Old Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:14) he probably means the entire Old Testament canon.

When did the Old Testament canon close?

The Old Testament canon was established before the New Testament canon. The Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37-100) wrote about the list of Old Testament books recognized as God’s Word. He listed twenty-two books, which corresponds to the list of books recognized by the Talmud, commentaries of the Old Testament. The books are numbered differently and arranged differently than the Christian arrangement, but they are the same books (see the chart of the Jewish Canon). The Jewish arrangement groups these books into three sections: Torah, Nevi’im, and Ketuvim. Luke 24:44 refers to the three-part division of the Old Testament as “the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms.”²⁴

Has the list of books in the New Testament always been recognized by all Christians at all times?

The very first time a list of books for the New Testament was put together, the majority of Christians rejected it. They didn’t reject the books included as much as they rejected what was left out. Marcion cut out all the books of the Old Testament, included only Luke’s gospel, and only some of Paul’s writings. Nothing else was included. Marcion was a heretic because he denied that the God of the Old Testament was the same God revealed in the New Testament. That was why he didn’t accept any of the books of the Old Testament. It was clear that Marcion was not upholding the Gospel that Jesus preached.

Just to give you an idea of how different Marcion’s canon of the New Testament was from what we use today, you can see it here:

Marcion of Sinope		AD 144										
Torah (Law)		Rejected										
		Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus	Numbers	Deuteronomy						
Nevi'im (Prophets)												
		Joshua	Judges	Samuel (1&2)	Kings (1&2)	Isaiah	Jeremiah	Ezekiel	The Twelve			
Ketuvim (Writings)												
Sifrei Emet (Books of Truth)												
		Psalms			Proverbs	Job	Hosea	Joel	Amos	Obadiah	Jonah	Micah
		Nahum			Habakkuk	Zephaniah	Haggai	Zechariah	Malachi			
Hanesh Migillot (Five Scrolls)												
		Song of Songs		Ruth	Lamentations	Ecclesiastes	Esther					
More Writings												
		Daniel		Ezra / Nehemiah	Chronicles (1&2)							
Recognized as Holy Scripture												
Marcion's Antitheses												
Gospel												
Luke												
Apostles												
		Galatians	Corinthians (1&2)	Thessalonians (1&2)	Laodiceans	Colossians	Philippians	Philemon				

You can see that Marcion accepted the Old Testament canon that Christians use today. However, he only allowed one of the four Gospels, Luke. And, the truth is, he only accepted a version of Luke that he personally edited, leaving out the parts he didn’t like. He didn’t accept all of the letters of Paul, although he accepted most of them. He didn’t accept any letters other than those written by Paul. He didn’t accept the book of Acts, or the book of Revelation.

Marcion’s version of the New Testament caused problems for the majority of Christians at the time. No one other than Marcion had put together a list of what books should be considered as part of the New Testament before

²⁴ Dunbar, D. G. (2005). [The Biblical Canon](#). In D. A. Carson & J. D. Woodbridge (Eds.), *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (p. 305). Wipf & Stock Publishers.

Marcion. He was the first person to do it. But he left out several books that Christians had already accepted as part of God’s Word. It is important to understand that people didn’t declare these books to be God’s Word. They understood that they were God’s Word, and they were only pointing out the obvious.

There were a few different configurations of the New Testament after Marcion. Below I’ve included the canon of Eusebius who wrote an early history of Christianity, and the canon of Cyril of Jerusalem.

Eusebius of Caesarea		AD 325	
Generally Accepted			
Books of Moses			
Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus	Numbers Deuteronomy
Gospels			
Matthew	Mark	Luke	John Acts
Pauline Epistles			
Romans	1 Corinthians	2 Corinthians	Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 2 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians
1 Timothy	2 Timothy	Titus	Philemon Hebrews
Other Epistles			
1 John	1 Peter		
Disputed but "Reocgnized by Many"			
James	Jude	2 Peter	2 John 3 John Revelation
Non-Canonical (Disputed)			
Acts of Paul	Shepherd of Hermas	Revelation of Peter	Epistles of Barnabas Didache
Not Canonical (Heretical)			
Gospel of Hebrews	Gospel of peter	Gospel of Thomas	Gospel of Mstthias Acts of Andrew Acts of John

Cyril of Jerusalem		AD 350	
Law			
Genesis	Exodus	Leviticus	Numbers Deuteronomy
History			
Joshua Nave	Judges-Ruth	1&2 Kings	3&4 Kings 1&2 Chronicles Esdras Esther
Wisdom			
Job	Psalms	Propverbs	Ecclesiastes Song of Songs
Prophets			
The Twelve	Isaiah	Jeremiah	Ezekiel Daniel
NEW TESTAMENT			
Gospels			
Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Acts			
Acts			
Seven Catholic Epistles			
James	1 Peter	2 Peter	1 John 2 John 3 John Jude
Fourteen Pauline Epistles			
Romans	1 Corinthians	2 Corinthians	Galatians Ephesians Philippians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy
Titus	Philemon	Hebrews	

You might think that this shows that there was disagreement between even the majority of Christians about what should be in the New Testament. What it really shows, however, is that it took some time for everyone to reach a point of agreement. People needed time. These people who put together this list of books in the New Testament were leaders of the Christians. They prayed. They studied. They talked things over.

If you look closely at the books Eusebius considered to be God’s Word, you will notice that he left out a lot of the Old Testament. He was more cautious, and less eager to decide that something belonged in the Bible. Cyril, on the other hand, produced the list of what we use today.

How does the development of the New Testament canon compare to the Old Testament canon?

In the Old Testament prophets were called directly by God. The New Testament counterpart to a prophet was an Apostle, a person who directly received a call from Jesus Christ to be an Apostle. Jesus said to His Apostles: “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me” (Matthew 10:40, ESV).

The Reformers, or the group of Christians that broke away from the Catholic Church, like Martin Luther, believed that the Bible was the ultimate authority because it was God’s Word. You might ask, “How did they know which books should be considered to be part of God’s Word?” They believed that God “established the canon; the role of the church was merely to witness to what God had already established”. At the beginning of this lesson, we said that Christians received the books in the canon as God’s Word. They had no intention of creating a list of what was a matter of their own opinion. They followed rules and principles that assured them that the books in the canon were God’s Word. Here they are:

- “The first mark or test used to verify a book’s authority was its Apostolic origin.”²⁵
- “The second mark for acceptance into the canon was reception by the” first people who believed in Jesus Christ.²⁶
- “The third mark of canonicity ... compatibility of the doctrine and teaching of these books with the core books.”²⁷

“According to the Protestants, each book found in the Bible is an infallible book, but the process undertaken by the church as to which books to include was not infallible. We believe that the church was providentially guided by the mercy of God in the process of determining the canon and thereby made the right decisions, so that every book that should be in the Bible is in the Bible. However, we do not believe that the church was inherently infallible, then or now.”²⁸

²⁵ Sproul, R. C. (2017). [Can I Trust the Bible?](#) (Vol. 2, p. 41). Reformation Trust: A Division of Ligonier Ministries.

²⁶ Sproul, R. C. Vol. 2, p. 42).

²⁷ Sproul, R. C. (2017). [Can I Trust the Bible?](#) (Vol. 2, p. 43). Reformation Trust: A Division of Ligonier Ministries.

²⁸ Sproul, R. C. (2017). [Can I Trust the Bible?](#) (Vol. 2, p. 44). Reformation Trust: A Division of Ligonier Ministries.