

Canons and Their Development

The biblical canon is the set of books Christians hold as divinely inspired and thus make up the Sacred Scriptures. The process of creating or choosing the canon is divinely inspired. However, the process of determining the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Bibles has resulted in different Old Testament canons. This is partly because the Old Testament and the New Testament canons have different histories.

Development of the Old Testament Canon

For practical purposes the Old Testament has the same books as the Jewish Bible. For the Jewish people, the development of their scriptures has a long history. The books went through centuries of oral storytelling, then periods when various traditions telling the stories of the patriarchs and kings were written, then periods when those traditions were edited and combined, and then periods when alternative versions of those traditions (Deuteronomy and Chronicles, for example) developed. While all this was happening, the sayings of the prophets were also written and collected, and the various forms of wisdom literature developed.

By the time of Jesus, this work was complete. All Jews accepted the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) as sacred Scripture. Many Jews (but not, for example, the Sadducees) also held another collection of books called the Prophets to be sacred. This collection contained the historical books of Joshua through Second Kings (not including Ruth) as well as the books we more typically consider to be the writings of the prophets (Isaiah through Malachi). Many also considered a third collection called the Writings to be sacred. The Writings contained the books of Ruth, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and First and Second Chronicles.

However, after Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East, Greek became the official language of the area, and for most Jews, Greek became their primary tongue. Thus, in the three centuries before Christ, new sacred books were written in Greek, not in Hebrew. And during this time, the sacred books originally written in Hebrew were translated into Greek. Thus, by the first century AD, there was an entirely Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures called the Septuagint. This version included the books written originally in Hebrew plus seven books written only in Greek (Tobit, Judith, First and Second Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch) and Greek additions to the Books of Esther and Daniel. Jews of Jesus' time disagreed about whether these Greek books should be part of their sacred Scriptures.

Because most of the early Christians spoke Greek, including Jews such as Paul, the Septuagint was adopted by the Church as its Sacred Scriptures, which would become the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70, leading rabbis reorganized Jewish worship. They reviewed the existing collections of their sacred writings and developed an official list of twenty-four books. They rejected the books that were not originally written in Hebrew. Many centuries later, leaders of the Protestant Reformation, such as Martin Luther and others, decided to use this Jewish canon as the Old Testament of the Protestant Bible. He placed the seven additional books in a separate section, calling them the Apocrypha (from the Greek for "hidden"). Part of the reason for the Apocrypha is that the reformers rejected these books because they supported Christian traditions such as Purgatory and praying for the dead—traditions the Protestant reformers rejected. The Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches continue to use the Septuagint version as their Old Testament, as the Christian Church has done since the first centuries. Many Orthodox Bibles include even more Old Testament books first written in Greek.



Canons of Scripture			
Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures)			
JEWISH	ROMAN CATHOLIC	ORTHODOX	PROTESTANT
<p>Torah (Law) Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy</p> <p>Nevi'im (Prophets) Early Prophets: Joshua Judges 1 and 2 Samuel 1 and 2 Kings Later Prophets: Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p> <p>Kethuvim (Writings) Psalms Proverbs Job Song of Solomon Ruth Lamentations Ecclesiastes Esther Daniel Ezra Nehemiah 1 and 2 Chronicles</p> <p>35–39 Books (Some collections unite Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles)</p>	<p>Pentateuch Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy</p> <p>Historical Books Joshua Judges Ruth 1 and 2 Samuel 1 and 2 Kings 1 and 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah *Tobit *Judith Esther (*parts) *1 and 2 Maccabees</p> <p>Wisdom Books Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon (Songs) *Wisdom *Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)</p> <p>Prophets Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations *Baruch Ezekiel Daniel (*parts) Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p> <p>46 Books ♦ (Septuagint canon includes seven books not in the Hebrew canon)</p>	<p>Pentateuch Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy</p> <p>Historical Books Joshua Judges Ruth 1 and 2 Samuel 1 and 2 Kings 1 and 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah *Tobit *Judith Esther (*parts) *1, 2 and 3 Maccabees *4 Maccabees (as an appendix) *1 and 2 Esdras</p> <p>Wisdom Books Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon *Wisdom *Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) *Prayer of Manasseh *Psalm 151</p> <p>Prophets Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations *Baruch Ezekiel Daniel (*parts) Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p> <p>51 Books (Orthodox canon follows an expanded Septuagint canon that includes five or six additional books)</p>	<p>Pentateuch Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy</p> <p>Historical Books Joshua Judges Ruth 1 and 2 Samuel 1 and 2 Kings 1 and 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther</p> <p>Wisdom Books Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon</p> <p>Prophets Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p> <p>39 Books (Protestant canon follows the Hebrew canon established in the first century CE)</p>



The Protestant and Catholic Old Testaments are then, for the most part, identical with the Hebrew Bible (also called the Tanak). The differences between the Hebrew Bible and the Protestant Old Testament are minor, dealing only with the arrangement and number of the books. For example, although the Hebrew Bible considers Kings to be a unified text, the Protestant Old Testament divides it into two books. Similarly, Ezra and Nehemiah are considered to be one book in the Hebrew Bible. Many editions of the Hebrew Bible also group the writings of the twelve minor prophets into one book. For these reasons the Protestant Old Testament has thirty-nine books whereas the Hebrew Bible has twenty-four to thirty-five books, but they are the same books. Because Catholic Bibles include the seven additional books also found in the Septuagint, the Catholic Old Testament has forty-six books.

Development of the New Testament Canon

The development of the New Testament canon was, like that of the Old Testament, a gradual process, although this process occurred over two or three hundred years rather than over more than a thousand years. The first writings of the New Testament were the letters of Paul. The Pauline epistles were circulating in collected form by the end of the first century AD. See Second Peter 3:15–16, which mentions Paul's letters as if they were common knowledge.

The four canonical Gospels were also recognized as holy and authoritative texts by the end of the second century. Justin Martyr, in the early second century, mentions the “memoirs of the apostles,” which Christians called gospels. A four-gospel canon (the *Tetramorph*) was asserted by Irenaeus (an early Church Father credited for developing the first rationale for a Christian Bible) around AD 160. By the early 200s, Origen of Alexandria (one of the Church's first great biblical scholars) appears to have used the twenty-seven books found in modern New Testaments, though at this time there were still disagreements over the canonicity of the books of Hebrews, James, Second Peter, Second and Third John, and Revelation. Thus, though the early Church debated the New Testament canon, the twenty-seven books and letters of the modern Bible were accepted by almost all Christians by the middle of the third century.

More could be said about the debates around the canonical books of the New Testament. But for all practical intents and purposes, by the fourth century, the Western Church agreed about the twenty-seven books and letters that made up the New Testament canon (as it is today). The Eastern churches struggled with the canonicity of the Book of Revelation, but by the fifth century, they, with a few exceptions, had come into harmony with the Western Church. However, the official declarations describing the various Christian canons (which differ on which books are in the Old Testament but not in the New Testament) were not made until much later: the Council of Trent of 1546 for Roman Catholicism, the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563 for the Church of England, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 for Calvinism, and the Synod of Jerusalem of 1672 for Greek Orthodox.



New Testament (Christian Scriptures)

Criteria for the Christian canon:

- Written by an Apostle or the scribe of an Apostle
- Agrees with the teachings and theology of the Apostle Tradition
- Widely known and used in the Christian
- Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants all have the same twenty-seven books within the canon of the New Testament

ROMAN CATHOLIC	ORTHODOX	PROTESTANT
<p>Gospels Matthew Mark Luke John</p> <p>Acts of the Apostles</p> <p>Epistles (Letters) Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians +Ephesians +Colossians Philippians 1 Thessalonians +2 Thessalonians +1 Timothy +2 Timothy +Titus Philemon</p> <p>Catholic Epistles Hebrews James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude</p> <p>Apocalyptic Revelation</p> <p>27 Books</p>	<p>Gospels Matthew Mark Luke John</p> <p>Acts of the Apostles</p> <p>Epistles (Letters) Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians +Ephesians +Colossians Philippians 1 Thessalonians +2 Thessalonians +1 Timothy +2 Timothy +Titus Philemon</p> <p>Church Epistles Hebrews James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude</p> <p>Apocalyptic Revelation</p> <p>27 Books</p>	<p>Gospels Matthew Mark Luke John</p> <p>Acts of the Apostles</p> <p>Epistles (Letters) Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians +Ephesians +Colossians Philippians 1 Thessalonians +2 Thessalonians +1 Timothy +2 Timothy +Titus Philemon</p> <p>Church Epistles Hebrews James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude</p> <p>Apocalyptic Revelation</p> <p>27 Books</p>

♦ **Septuagint Canon:**

The Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures includes seven books (Deuterocanonical) not listed in the Hebrew or Protestant canons. The Septuagint (meaning seventy) was translated by the rabbis of Alexandria in 300–280 BCE. The Septuagint canon was affirmed at the Synods of Hippo (393 CE) and Carthage (397 CE) and adopted as the official list of Old Testament Books for the Roman Catholic canon at the Council of Trent in 1545 CE. Three hundred of the three hundred and fifty Old Testament references in the New Testament quote the Septuagint.

* **Deuterocanonical Books:**

After the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans (70 CE) the Deuterocanonical works were removed from the Hebrew canon after the Jamnia Decision (100 CE). The Roman Catholic canon includes the Deuterocanonical books and considers them inspired text. During the Reformation (1517–70 CE) the books were removed from the Protestant canon and considered apocrypha (false writings). The Dead Sea scrolls, dating from 168 BCE–68 CE, include the Deuterocanonical books.

+ **Indicates Deutero-Pauline Epistles:**

Letters attributed to Paul but probably written by his followers.



Criteria for Canonicity

Along with the twenty-seven books and letters that make up the New Testament canon, many other gospels and letters were written in the first centuries of the Church. So what were the criteria for deciding which books and letters made it into the Bible? For the Old Testament, the criteria for the early Church Fathers were pretty straightforward. They were guided by this question: Which books did Jesus and the Apostles consider as sacred? There was common agreement among the Church Fathers that the Apostles accepted the Septuagint as their Scriptures, and so those books became the Catholic Old Testament.

For the New Testament books, it is difficult to find any standard criteria that were actually written. But the common criteria assumed by the Church Fathers were these:

- Was the book or letter written by an Apostle or a disciple of an Apostle?
- Does the teaching and theology in the book or letter agree with the teaching and theology of the Apostolic Tradition?
- Was the book or letter widely known and used in the early Christian community?

Although these criteria seem direct and straightforward, the actual decisions were not without controversy. In fact, the creation of the New Testament canon was in many ways a response to challenges presented by people such as Marcion. Marcion lived in the early second century, and he proposed a canon composed only of the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's letters (edited by himself). Marcion believed that the God revealed by Jesus Christ was completely different from the God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, and thus, he rejected the Old Testament completely. Marcion's views were rejected as heretical, and as a result, the formation of the official Christian canon was accelerated.

(The charts in this article are from *Saint Mary's Press*[®] *College Study Bible* (2006), pages c4 and c5.)

