

HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

1. How the Bible Books Came Together

The Two Testaments

The word “testament,” as used in “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” means “covenant” (solemn agreement or contract).

The **Old Testament** (the name the Christian church has given to the **Hebrew Bible**) is about the covenant God made with Abraham (Genesis 15). God promised Abraham that

He would become a great nation

The land of Canaan would belong to his descendants (Israel)

Through the nation of Israel the world would be blessed

The **New Testament** is about the new covenant God made with all people through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Abraham’s greatest descendant. The new covenant is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that he would be a blessing to the whole world.

Since the New Testament had not yet been written, the Hebrew Bible was the Bible of Jesus and the apostles. Thus, when Jesus and the apostles refer to Scripture, they have in mind the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, “It is written in the Law” has the same force as our “the Bible says.”

How Did We End Up with the 66 Books in the Bible?

How did the Bible as we have it—66 books, written over a period of more than 1,500 years—come together?

The 66 books that are included in all Bibles are called the **canon** of the Bible (the books are therefore referred to as the **canonical** books). “Canon” means “rule or standard,” and the

canonical books are those that have been formally accepted by the church as part of the inspired Word of God.

Most Protestant Bibles contain only the 66 canonical books, but some Protestant Bibles as well as Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles also include books that are not part of the canon but are considered “good to read.” These are the **Apocrypha**, or **apocryphal books** (from a Greek word meaning “obscure, secret”). For more on the Apocrypha, see *The Apocrypha* in the chapter How We Got the Bible.

The Old Testament Canon

It is not clear exactly when it was decided that the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) should be limited to the 39 books it contains now, which are considered the Old Testament canon. It is likely that the Old Testament canon achieved its final form in the centuries immediately before Christ. In Jesus’ day this book was referred to as “the

Scriptures” and was taught regularly and read publicly in synagogues. It was regarded among the people as the “Word of God.” Jesus Himself repeatedly called it the “Word of God.”

The books in the Hebrew Bible were (and are) arranged differently, however. There are three divisions:

The Law (or the five books of Moses): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy

The Prophets: Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings (the Former Prophets) and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the 12 Minor Prophets (the Latter Prophets)

The Writings: Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and 1–2 Chronicles

The Hebrew names for these divisions are *Torah, Nebiim, Ketubim*. The first letters of these—T, N, K—are used to form the name for the whole Hebrew Bible: the **Tanakh**.

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that was made in about 250 B.C., the order of the books was changed to the order we now have in our Bible: historical (Genesis–Deuteronomy), poetic (Job–Song of Songs), and prophetic (Isaiah–Malachi) books.

The Septuagint became the basis for the Old Testament of the Latin Bible, the Vulgate. After the Reformation in the 16th century, the Protestant churches decided to use the Hebrew Bible rather than the Septuagint for the translation of the Old Testament (since it had become clear that the Septuagint was in many places a rather poor translation of the Hebrew original), but they kept the order of the books found in the Septuagint rather than the order of the Tanakh.

The New Testament Canon

New Testament Beginnings of the Canon

We know a great deal more about how the canon of the New Testament was formed. There are hints in the New Testament itself that, while the apostles were yet living, and under their own supervision, collections of their writings began to be made for the churches and placed with the Old Testament as the Word of God.

Paul claimed for his teaching the inspiration of God (1 Corinthians 2:7–13; 14:37; 1 Thessalonians 2:13).

So did John for the book of Revelation (Revelation 1:2).

Paul intended that his epistles should be read in the churches (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27; 2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Peter wrote that “these things” might remain

in the churches “after my departure” (2 Peter 1:15; 3:1–2).

Paul quoted as Scripture “The laborer is worthy of his reward” (1 Timothy 5:18 KJV). This sentence is found nowhere in the Bible except Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7—evidence that Matthew or Luke was then in existence and was regarded as Scripture.

Peter classified Paul’s epistles with “other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15–16).

The apostles, it seems, wrote many letters with the immediate needs of the churches in mind. As to which of those letters were to be preserved for future ages, we believe that God Himself watched over the matter and made His own choice.

Where the Various New Testament Books First Appeared

Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome were far apart. The books of the Old Testament had originated mostly within one small country, but the New Testament books were written in widely separated countries.

Palestine: Matthew, James, and Hebrews (uncertain)

Asia Minor: John, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Philemon, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation

Greece: 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Luke (uncertain)

Crete: Titus

Rome: Mark, Acts, and Romans

The Earliest Collections

The New Testament books were written in a world in which communication had become easier than ever before. Yet, by our standards, communication was still slow and travel could be dangerous. What is now a trip of a few hours would then have required weeks or months. Printing was unknown,

and books and letters had to be copied by hand—a slow and laborious process.

Moreover, beginning with Emperor Nero in A.D. 64, it was an age of persecution, when precious Christian writings had to be kept hidden. And there were as yet no church councils or conferences, where Christians from distant parts could come together and compare notes on what writings they had, until the days of Emperor Constantine (A.D. 306–37). So, naturally, the earliest collections of New Testament books would vary in different regions; and the process of reaching unanimity as to what books properly belonged in the New Testament was slow.

Besides the books that would ultimately be accepted as canonical New Testament books, there were many others that ranged from good to silly to fraudulent. Some of these were so fine and valuable that they were for a while, in some areas, regarded as Scripture. Ultimately, the one criterion by which a book was judged before acceptance into the canon was whether it was of genuine apostolic origin, written either by an apostle (e.g., John's Gospel) or under the auspices of an apostle (e.g., Mark's Gospel, which is based on the preaching of the apostle Peter). It was not always easy to determine this, especially in the case of lesser-known books from a distant region.

Early Testimony to New Testament Books

Because of the perishable nature of the writing material and because it was a period of persecution in which Christian writings were destroyed, we have few writings of Christians whose lives overlapped the lives of the apostles.

But though few in number, they bear unimpeachable testimony to the existence, in their day, of a group of authoritative writings which Christians regarded as Scripture, either by direct statement or, more often, by quoting from or referring to specific Christian writings as “Scripture”—writings that

would later become part of the official New Testament canon. For example,

Clement of Rome, in his Epistle to the Corinthians (A.D. 95), quotes from, or refers to, Matthew, Luke, Romans, Corinthians, Hebrews, 1 Timothy, 1 Peter.

Polycarp, in his Letter to the Philippians (about A.D. 110), quotes Philippians and reproduces phrases from nine other of Paul's epistles and 1 Peter.

Ignatius, in his seven letters written about A.D. 110 during his journey from Antioch to Rome for his martyrdom, quotes from Matthew, 1 Peter, and 1 John and cites nine of Paul's epistles; his letters also bear the imprint of the other three Gospels.

Papias (A.D. 70–155), a pupil of the apostle John, wrote *An Explanation of the Lord's Discourses*, in which he quotes from John and records traditions about the origin of Matthew and Mark.

The Didache, written between A.D. 80 and 120, contains 22 quotations from Matthew, has references to Luke, John, Acts, Romans, Thessalonians, and 1 Peter, and speaks of "the Gospel" as a written document.

The Epistle of Barnabas, written between A.D. 90 and 120, quotes from Matthew, John, Acts, and 2 Peter and uses the expression "it is written," a formula commonly applied only to Scripture.

There are many more, similar examples. Together they cover all books of the New Testament, although a number of books remained "doubtful" in some areas until the 4th century, when Emperor Constantine issued his Edict of Toleration.

Eusebius's List of New Testament Books

Eusebius (A.D. 264–340) was bishop of Caesarea. He was the first great church historian, and we

owe to him much of our knowledge of what happened during the first centuries of the Christian church. Eusebius lived through, and was imprisoned during, Diocletian's persecution of

Christians, which was Rome's final effort to blot out Christianity. One of Diocletian's special objects was the destruction of all Christian Scriptures. For 10 years, Bibles were hunted by the agents of Rome and burned in public marketplaces. To Christians, the question of just what books composed their Scriptures was no idle matter!

Eusebius lived into the reign of Emperor Constantine, who accepted Christianity. Eusebius became Constantine's chief religious adviser. One of Constantine's first acts upon ascending the throne was to order 50 Bibles for the churches of Constantinople, to be prepared by skillful copyists under the direction of Eusebius, on the finest of vellum, and to be delivered by royal carriages from Caesarea to Constantinople.

What books constituted the New Testament of Eusebius? Exactly the same ones that we have now

in our New Testament. Eusebius, by extensive research, informed himself as to what books had been generally accepted by the churches. In his *Church History* he speaks of four classes of books:

The universally accepted books

The "disputed" books: James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude, which, though included in his own Bibles, were doubted by some

The "spurious" books, among which he mentions the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Didache

The "forgeries of heretics": the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Matthias, the Acts of Andrew, and the Acts of John

The Canon Adopted by the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397)

In A.D. 397, the Council of Carthage formally established the New Testament canon by ratifying the 27 books of the New Testament as we know them, expressing what had already become the unanimous judgment of the churches, and

accepted the Book that was destined to become humanity's most precious heritage.

2. How the Text of the Bible Was Preserved

The Text of the Old Testament

The Old Testament was written primarily in **Hebrew**, the language of the Israelites. But in the millennium before Christ, **Aramaic**, a language related to Hebrew, became the language of international commerce and communication throughout the Ancient Near East; it even became the official language of the Persian Empire (ca. 600–540 B.C.).

Thus it is interesting that three sections of the Old Testament are written in Aramaic. Official correspondence between local officials and the Persian kings Artaxerxes and Darius concerning

the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple (Ezra 4:8–6:18) as well as a letter of authorization from King Artaxerxes to Ezra (Ezra 7:12–26) are included in their original Aramaic form rather than in a Hebrew translation. A major portion of the book of Daniel is also in Aramaic (2:4b–7:28), which was the language in use in Babylonia.

All copies had to be made by hand, and not all copyists were equally careful. Sometimes notes or comments written in the margins of the text were erroneously incorporated in the text as it was being copied. Already well before the time of Christ, a concerted effort was made to standardize the Hebrew text and to arrive at the most reliable text possible. This was complicated by the fact that the Hebrew script in which the Old Testament was written was different from the Aramaic script that was adopted later (the square letters still used in modern written Hebrew). Also, only consonants were written, while vowels were omitted (although later on, letters were used to indicate long vowels). And finally, by the 8th century B.C., the habit of separating words by putting small dots

or strokes between them disappeared, so that all letters were simply run together. An English

parallel might be CMPTRNTWRK, which could be read either as “Computer network” or as “Came Peter in to work?”

The “Masoretic Text”

The Hebrew text, without vowels or accents, was more or less fixed by the end of the 1st century A.D., although exactly how this was accomplished is not clear. By the 6th century A.D., the so-called Masoretes (from the Hebrew for “tradition”) had added a system of small dots and lines below and above the consonants, which ensured that the text would be read correctly. (There were originally three separate systems—the Babylonian, Palestinian, and Tiberian; the Tiberian system of “vowel pointing” is the one still in use.)

There were also instances in which the written text was difficult to understand. In those cases the Masoretes would mark the word(s) in the written text, indicating that this is how the text is to be written, and add another word or form in the

margin, indicating that this is what was to be read. This minimized the possibility that a copyist would look at the text that did not make complete sense and would make his own corrections, either intentionally or without thinking.

The Masoretes had such respect for the text that they left in all the peculiarities of the various books of the Bible, including archaic words, idiomatic expressions, and differences in dialect and spelling. In a number of instances a more modern name is added to explain a name that was no longer recognized—for example, in Genesis 14:2, where it is explained that Bela is the same city they know as Zoar (see also Genesis 14:3, 7; 15:15, 52, 60; etc.).

The Text of the New Testament

The New Testament was written in Greek, the language of the majority of the earliest Christians. The original manuscripts of all the New Testament books, as far as we know, have been lost. From the very first, copies of these precious

writings began to be made for distribution to other churches, and

then copies of copies, and copies of copies of copies, generation after generation, as the older ones wore out.

Writing materials

From Papyrus to Vellum

The writing material in common use was papyrus, made of slices of the papyrus reed, a water plant that grew in Egypt. Horizontal and vertical slices were pressed together and polished. Ink was made of charcoal, gum, and water.

Papyrus had a problem: it was not very durable. It became brittle with age, or rotted with dampness, and soon wore out—except in Egypt, where the dry climate and shifting sands have preserved for discovery in modern times an amazing collection of ancient documents.

In the 4th century A.D., papyrus was replaced by vellum as the main writing material. Vellum is prepared from fine-grained calfskin or lambskin and is much more durable.

Until the recent discovery of the Egyptian papyri (see below), all known manuscripts of the Bible in existence were on vellum.

From Scroll to Codex

For short compositions such as letters, single sheets of papyrus were used. For longer letters and books, sheets were glued side to side to form rolls, usually called scrolls. A scroll was usually about 30 feet long and 9 or 10 inches high.

The drawback of the scroll was that it was not practical to make it longer than about 30 feet, since it then became too large to handle easily. Thus, in the 2nd century A.D., the scroll began to be replaced by what was called the codex, which has essentially the same form as our modern book—all pages are glued on one side. Many more pages could be put into a codex than could practically be

glued together in a scroll, and thus the entire New Testament could be put into a single codex.

Besides, the codex made it possible to use vellum instead of papyrus, since vellum scrolls would have been impossible to work with.

The making of manuscript Bibles ceased with the invention of printing in the 15th century.

The Manuscripts of the Bible

There are now about 4000 known manuscripts of the Bible or parts of the Bible, made between the 2nd and 15th centuries A.D. This seems few to us, but it is far more than we have of any other ancient writings. For example, there is no complete known copy of Homer earlier than A.D. 1300, nor of Herodotus earlier than A.D. 1000.

The manuscripts of the New Testament are divided into two groups, based on the type of Greek letters they use: *uncials* and *cursives*. The uncials were written in large, capital letters. There are about 160 of them, made between the 4th and 10th centuries. The cursives were written in small, running letters, often linked together, and were made between the 10th and 15th centuries. The uncials are far more valuable, since they are much older.

The three oldest, most complete, best-known, and most valuable manuscripts of the New Testament are the Codex Sinaiticus, the Codex Vaticanus, and the Codex Alexandrinus, which were originally complete Bibles.

The Codex Sinaiticus

The discovery of the Codex Sinaiticus, or Sinaitic codex, is one of the more interesting stories in archaeology. It was found in 1844 by a German scholar named L. F. K. von Tischendorf, in the Monastery of St. Catherine at the foot of Mount Sinai. During a visit to the monastery in 1844 he noticed, in a wastebasket of leaves set aside to be burned, vellum pages with Greek writing. On closer examination they proved to be parts of an ancient manuscript of the Septuagint

Old Testament. There were 43 leaves. He searched and searched, but could find no more.

In 1853 he returned to the monastery to continue the search, but found nothing. He returned again in 1859. As he talked with the steward about the Septuagint, the steward remarked that he had an ancient copy of it and brought it to Tischendorf wrapped in a paper napkin. It was the rest of the manuscript of which Tischendorf had seen the 43 leaves 15 years before. As he looked through its pages, he realized that he held in his hand the most precious writing in existence. It contained 199

leaves of the Old Testament, the entire New Testament, plus the noncanonical Epistle of Barnabas and part of the Shepherd of Hermas, on 148 leaves, making 347 leaves in all. They were written in a beautiful hand, on the finest of vellum leaves measuring 15 by 13 1/2 inches. It was made in the first half of the 4th century. It is the only ancient manuscript that contains the entire New Testament.

The 43 leaves which Tischendorf secured on his first visit are in the University Library at Leipzig. The rest of the manuscript was secured, after long international negotiations, for the Imperial Library in St. Petersburg, where it remained until 1933, when it was sold to the British Museum for half a million dollars.

The Codex Vaticanus

The Vatican codex was made in the 4th century and has been in the Vatican Library since 1481, hence its name. Some fragments of the New Testament are missing.

The monastery of St. Catherine, at the foot of Mount Sinai. Here Friedrich von Tischendorf found and rescued what is known as the Codex Sinaiticus, one of the oldest and most important manuscripts of the Bible.

The Codex Alexandrinus

The Alexandrian codex was made in the 5th century in Alexandria, Egypt. It contains the entire Bible, with some fragments missing, as well as

the noncanonical Epistles of Clement and the Psalms

of Solomon. It has been in the British Museum since 1627.

The Papyri

Sir Flinders Petrie, a renowned Egyptologist, noticed during excavations in central Egypt old sheets of papyrus appearing in rubbish heaps that had been buried beneath the sand, and he suggested that they might be valuable. In 1895, two of his students, Grenfell and Hunt, began a systematic search for these papyri.

In the following 10 years, they found 10,000 manuscripts and parts of manuscripts at Oxyrhynchus and nearby places. Other excavators also found great quantities of similar manuscripts in sand-covered rubbish heaps, in stuffings in mummy cases, and in embalmed crocodile bodies. They consisted mostly of letters, bills, receipts, diaries, certificates, almanacs, and such. Some of them were valuable historical documents dating as far back as 2000 B.C. Most of them, however, dated from 300 B.C. to A.D. 300. Among them were some early Christian writings, which is what makes them

of interest to the Bible student.

One of the papyri, a tiny scrap measuring a mere 3 1/2 by 2 1/2 inches, contains fragments of John's Gospel: on one side John 18:31–33, and on the other side John 18:37–38. It is a part of one leaf of a manuscript that had been originally 130 pages, measuring 8 1/4 by 8 inches. Comparing the shape of the letters and the style of writing with manuscripts whose date had been established with certainty, scholars assign it to the first part of the 2nd century. It is thus the oldest known Bible manuscript, and it is evidence that the Gospel of John was in existence and in circulation in Egypt in the years immediately following the death of John. The papyrus was found in 1920 and is now in the Rylands Library, Manchester, England.

Many other papyri have been found from somewhat later dates, containing parts of the rest of the New Testament (and Old Testament).

Besides the many fragments of papyrus leaves containing parts of Bible books, there are some that contained sayings of Jesus that are not found in the Gospels but that were apparently current in the 3rd century.

The Language of the Papyri

Adolf Deissmann, a German scholar, in the late 19th century noticed that the Greek of the papyri was the same as the Greek used in the New Testament, called *koine*, and not the classical Greek of earlier ages. There are 500 words in the Greek New Testament not found in classical Greek at all. This discovery that the New Testament was apparently written in the everyday language of the common people gave impulse to the modern-language translations of the New Testament that have appeared in this century.