

How We Got the Bible

Dr. Bob Harrington

All the documents that are part of the Bible were written somewhere between 1440 B.C. - 100 A.D.¹ There are two main divisions: the Old Testament books, which were written centuries before the time of Christ (from as early as 1400 B.C. to as late as 400-165 B.C.), and the New Testament books, which were written in a shorter period, from the middle to the end of the first century (50 to 95 A.D.). These two sets of writings are together considered the authoritative Word of God. Both sets are necessary, because one is incomplete without the other.

Scripture In Israelite History

Israelite history begins with Abraham, and by the time Abraham's descendants became a nation, there was a need to have an objective, written record of God's revelations. So God instructed Moses, the leader of Israel, to write down his words. Exodus 24 shows how this happened.

Then he [God] said to Moses, "Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the Lord; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him." When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws they responded with one voice, "Everything the Lord has said we will do." *Moses then wrote down every thing the Lord had said.* (Exodus 24:1-4)

In this way God provided the Israelites with a permanent record of his mighty deeds and words (Exodus 34:1, 27).

At the end of his life, Moses took all that God had revealed in the Law and gave it to the priests of Israel.

So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. Then Moses commanded them: "At the end of every seven years, in the year for canceling debts, during the feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people - men, women and children, and the aliens living in you towns - so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. (Deuteronomy 31:9-12)

God commanded that every seven years the law was to be read aloud to the whole community. God also commanded the parents to teach these laws to their children on a daily basis (Deuteronomy 6:1-9).

From the very beginning the Old Testament writings presented themselves as the inspired message of God to his people. God loved his people enough to know that they needed an objective and authoritative standard to guide them in their relationship with him. It was too easy to misunderstand or to forget the verbal instructions that God had given the nation. Earlier in Deuteronomy, God was very specific about the personal application of his law and the importance of not changing what had been revealed.

Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. *Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.* (Deuteronomy 4:1–2; see also, 4:5–9; 5:29–33; 6:1,4–9; 7:12; 8:1,6; etc.)

God wanted to ensure that the Israelites understood his sacred ordinances: they were the daily standard for living and to be adhered to without any changes in all things.

At the same time, God’s revelation through Moses was not God’s final word. As the Israelite nation developed, God continued to communicate with his people. Sometimes he would inspire the chronicling of important lessons in Israelite history, as he did in the books of Joshua through 2 Chronicles. At other times God would raise up prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah who spoke for God to the people and wrote down their words. They were never just human words. They were the words of God.

The Israelites knew that there were more revelations to come. So God gave them tests to determine whether a prophet was legitimate and really speaking for God (Deuteronomy 18:14–22). God also told Moses that there would be one special prophet who would come and the people were to heed the words of this new prophet, because his words would be those of God himself.

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. (Deuteronomy 18: 18-19)

Related themes can be found throughout the Old Testament (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Isaiah 11:1–5; etc.). The Old Testament writings anticipated a climactic revelation from God which would become the ultimate standard. This prophet did come, and we now know him as Jesus Christ (John 1: 45).

Though people and ideas changed, the Israelites had an objective standard that they looked to in the writings of the Law, History, and the Prophets to ensure that they stayed on the right track and remained faithful to God.

Scripture For the Christian Faith

The New Testament writings present Jesus Christ as the one who fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. When Jesus came, God fully and finally revealed himself.

Jesus cried out, “When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. *There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day.* For I did not speak of my own accord, but the father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say. (John 12:44–50)

Elsewhere Jesus compared his words and teaching to the foundation of a house. Claiming to follow him and to do great things in his name will not be enough on the day of judgment — only those who truly build their lives on the foundation of his teaching will enter the kingdom of heaven:

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers!” *Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.* (Matthew 7:21–24)

It is not surprising, then, that just before his ascension back to heaven, Jesus committed his words and teachings to the apostles as the basis of obedience for all future disciples.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.* And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20)

The proper place to begin to understand the nature of scripture in the Christian faith, then, is to look to the apostles. In this way we see that both the Old Testament writings and the teaching of Jesus fit together and claim to be the authoritative word of God.

As Matthew 28:18-20 indicates, the apostles became the messengers of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus had previously given them the assurance that the Holy Spirit would ensure that they properly presented his authoritative teaching.

These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. *But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.* (John 14:24–26)

The teachings of Jesus were entrusted to the apostles who were promised the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, God’s Spirit would ensure that the message of the apostles was, truly, the word of God and that the apostles would correctly teach what Jesus entrusted to them.

This is why, from the first days, the Christians devoted themselves to the ‘apostles’ teaching’ -- they were not just the apostles’ teaching -- they were the inspired teachings of “Jesus Christ!”

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)

Jesus Christ and his words were God’s *final* message for the human race.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Hebrews 1:1-2)

This is why the writers of the New Testament urged Christians to uphold and defend these objective teachings – from this point forward, God would provide no new teaching, no other path, and no other way (Jude 3).

It was natural, then, that the writings of the apostles, and those closely associated with them, quickly assumed the status of inspired scripture. Even when they were written, the writings of the apostles (or those associated with the apostles) were given special status.²

- The apostles writings were to be read in the meetings of the church; they were authoritative alongside the Old Testament (Colossians 4:16).
- The apostle Peter referred to Paul’s writings as “scripture” (2 Peter 3:16)
- The apostle Paul referred to the Gospel of Luke as scripture (along with the Old Testament in 1 Timothy 5:18).

Thus, through the writings of the apostles God ensured that there was a written record of Jesus’ teachings -- given through the apostles -- and made available for all people in an objective form. These books were regarded as the authoritative standard that we now call the “New Testament.” This recognition occurred early, as the apostles’ teachings spread throughout the world.

The Formation of the Canon

The writings of the apostles (and those closely associated with them) were combined with the writings of the Old Testament to form the “Canon” or list of books that are contained in the modern Bible.³ The “Canon” is a technical term which means “the list of books contained in scripture, the list of books recognized as worthy to be included in the sacred writings of a worshipping community.”⁴ Or, again, “the list of the writings acknowledged by the Church as documents of the divine revelation.”⁵ It is important to know something of the process by which books became part of our modern Bible.

The books in the New Testament were all written before the end of the first century (100 A.D.).⁶ Soon, however, these writings were not the only ones which were being read in the churches. Most of the other books supported that which the apostles taught. But some false teachings also emerged. Consider two clearly identified sources of heretical teaching.

- Marcion was a popular teacher who decided to reject some of the writings of both the Old Testament and the apostles, somewhere around 150 AD. He was rejected as a heretic in the early church. The early church leaders said that Marcion had two ways of nullifying the scriptures: 1) “he used the knife to excise from the scriptures whatever did not conform with his own opinion,” or 2) he perverted its “meaning by misinterpreting it.”⁷ Although he was an ancient heretic, he seemed to be doing, at an early time, the same thing sadly done today by liberal scholars.

- Some other gospels were written in the late second and third centuries (late 100s and 200s), long after the biblical gospels were written.⁸ They are known as the *Gnostic Gospels*, as found in the *Nag Hammadi* documents. They were rediscovered in Egypt after the Second World War, but were well known as heretical writings to the early, established church. They were not only written a long time after the original gospels, they depended on the true gospels and make outlandish claims about Jesus, while having the feel of being fake compared to the originals when you read them.

In order to protect Christians from false teaching after the death of all the apostles, the early leaders had to delineate those writings which were authoritative from those which were not. By 150 A.D. the Church leader Justin Martyr affirmed only the four gospels.⁹ From 200 A.D. on, the four gospels were clearly established, with no rivals (125 years before the Council of Nicea).¹⁰ From 177 A. D.¹¹ on to the end of the second century (late 100s), the concept of a full New Testament Canon became firmly established, along with a recommended list of books, as can be seen in the *Muratorian Fragment*.¹² Further clarification of the canon took time.

Early Christian leaders highly valued conservative tradition, accepting as scripture only those documents as canonical that were believed in the churches “everywhere, always, and by all.”¹³ This expression was key: “everywhere,” “always,” and “by all.” The early Christians recognized as authoritative those books which met at least four key criteria:

- 1) Apostolic - they had apostolic authors (or were closely associated with apostles).
- 2) Orthodox - they taught the well known faith of the apostles.
- 3) Ancient – they had been accepted in the churches from the beginning
- 4) Universal – they were used broadly, in all the churches.¹⁴

As the early church clarified the final list of authoritative books, they affirmed that the church itself had been established by words and work of Jesus communicated by the apostles (Ephesians 2:20). The written works associated with the apostles were the objective norm by which the church was to measure and evaluate herself.¹⁵ This standard naturally excluded those books which had previously been agreed upon as false, but it also excluded some books that contained other good teachings – and had been used by many in the Church. Books like *The Didache* and *The Epistles of Ignatius* were relegated to a second class status. Though the concepts and the main contents of the Canon were established hundreds of years earlier, it wasn’t until 367 A.D. that the final list of books which comprise our modern Bible was agreed upon. The books that were excluded, after some consideration, were never the books of heretics, but books that contained teachings that many valued, but they failed to meet the criteria of “everywhere,” “always,” and “by all.”

The canon of the church was not delivered to the church by some ecclesiastical authority. On the contrary, the councils that were held simply recognized the practices and the beliefs of earliest Christians, who first received the writings of the apostles. The timeless words of F. F. Bruce put the matter plainly in his book, *The New Testament Documents*:

The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them as

divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect ... What these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities, but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities.¹⁶

The earliest Christians, from the beginning, recognized that their faith was based, not on the church, but upon the *teaching of the apostles* and their written record from the beginning.

In doing this, the early church recognized that it was subject to the objective record of the apostles' teachings as its final authority.¹⁷ In affirming which books were authoritative and inspired, the early Church recognized that without the writings of the apostles the church could not keep itself or the apostolic teachings pure. Clark Pinnock summarized the meaning of the early church's actions:

In opting for the canon, the church seemed to say that the criteria of truth lay outside herself in a text that stood over her and at times even against her. By accepting the norm of Scripture, the church declared that there was a standard outside herself to which she intended to be subject for all time The church can fall into error and needs the Bible to measure herself by. In turn, the church serves the canon by continuing in the truth and faithfully proclaiming the Word of God.¹⁸

Under God's hand, the apostolic teachings and the Old Testament writings were fixed as the "Canon." They are the foundational documents and the standard for the church of all time.

There is a clear path by which the New Testament canon came to us. Jesus taught the apostles his Way. The apostles wrote down (or had associates write down) the teachings of Jesus. As soon as these books were written, they were automatically received as authoritative because they were the teachings of an apostle. These authoritative books were used, along with other helpful books. In time it became necessary to delineate – because of new challenges – which books had been received, from the beginning, as the foundational documents of the Christian faith. In the process of delineating the canon, the church leaders in the 300s were simply affirming what had been believed from the beginning, by the first followers of Jesus – “everywhere,” “always,” and “by all.”

¹ The accepted dates vary among scholars, but if one establishes Mosaic authorship of Genesis and apostolic authorship of 1&2 Timothy and Revelation, then these dates set the outermost boundaries. See Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992).

² Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 48.

³ For more detailed information about what follows consult the seminal works of F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), and Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, p. 17.

⁵ Ibid., quoting R. P. C. Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (London, 1954).

⁶ In addition to the work of Carson, Moo, and Morris quoted earlier, see and Donald Guthrie, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Downer Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1979).

⁷ See F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, p. 145.

⁸ See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. XVIII and the incisive critic of Philip Jenkins in *Hidden Gospels* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p 12.

⁹ Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, p.85.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Irenaeus delineated the works of heresy and orthodoxy. See Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, 110.

¹² See F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, pp. 158-169.

¹³ Ibid., p. 279.

¹⁴ In *The Canon of Scripture*, Bruce says that the criteria were 1) apostolic, 2) ancient, 3) orthodox, 4) universal, 5) traditional, and 5) inspirational. Lee McDonald ignores "traditional," see "Canon" in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2nd edition, 1998), p. 209. See also Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ The importance of this historical fact in contradistinction to the claims of the Roman Catholic Church has been definitively stated by Oscar Cullman, "The Tradition," in *The Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1956).

¹⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), p. 27

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁸ Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, p 81–82.