

## Who decided what got included in the Bible?

I like to keep answers to questions like this as easy to understand as possible, but this answer requires a bit more technical response than nonetheless I hope I have simplified enough. As you can see, I look separately at the Old and New Testament as the answer to the question for each testament is a bit different.

### The Old Testament (the part written before Christ was born)

Christians have always contended that God was the one who decided what was to be included in his Bible. The role of Christians was only to recognize what God had already given to be preserved. The apostles as well as early church leaders all recognized the Old Testament as the written covenant (or canon) given by God to his people. The Hebrew Old Testament which was common in Palestine during the days of Christ consisted of three sections of Scripture: The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. These three sections are confirmed as Scripture in and around the time of Christ (e.g., by Josephus, the Roman historian), and Jesus himself attests to them (Luke 24:44, Luke 11:51).

The Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE until 132 BCE and this translation was called the Septuagint (LXX). The LXX also included 16 books or additions written after the Hebrew OT books. These books were later called the Apocrypha. In the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, Jerome worked on the first Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate. He believed that the Apocrypha should not be included because it did not reflect the Hebrew OT which Jesus referred to. Augustine, his contemporary, however, was unfamiliar with Hebrew and was accustomed to the well distributed Greek LXX. He believed that the Latin translation should come from the LXX not the Hebrew OT and should thus include the Apocrypha. From the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Apocrypha was recognized as non-canonical by Protestants and was excluded from their Bibles. Catholics, however, reaffirmed the inclusion of the Apocrypha at the Council of Trent (1546).

Protestants have argued that the books of Apocrypha should not be considered part of the Old Testament on several counts:

1. The NT never cites any apocryphal books *as inspired*, but they regularly cite the books of the OT as inspired. (There are some passages in the NT which allude to passages in the Apocrypha, such as the 2 Peter 2:7 allusion to Wisdom 10:6, but this connection does not suggest that the book of Wisdom was specifically inspired by God to be part of Scripture.)
2. None of the apocryphal books claim to be the word of God as do many of the OT books.
3. Many early sources that define the OT canon do not include Apocrypha (such as Melito, who provided first OT list from within Christian circles in 170 AD, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Athanasius, and Jerome.)
4. There are geographical and chronological mistakes in Apocrypha. For example, Tobit is said to live in 722 BC but to be around at the time of the division of the kingdom (931 BC).
5. Historic Judaism has recognized only the 24 books of the Tanakh as Scripture. These 24 books have been subdivided to create the 39 books of the Protestant Bible. The books of Apocrypha are not included in the Tanakh.
6. Jesus gives every indication when speaking of Scripture that he was referring to the Tanakh.
7. Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, refers to sacred Scriptures divided into three parts, the five books of the Torah, thirteen books of the Prophets, and four other books of hymns and wisdom. This makes only 22 books. It may be that he combined Judges and Ruth and Jeremiah

and Lamentations, or he could have excluded two books. In either case, the Apocrypha is not included.

One might ask, "But why did the Jews or church leaders believe that books of the Old Testament, even if you don't include the Apocrypha, to be from God in the first place." That's a great question, and it has to do with **authentication at the time of writing**. For example, when Moses received the law from God on Mt. Sinai, the event was accompanied by supernatural events including a dense cloud came down and the voice of God from heaven could be heard. In addition, the mountain and all the ground surrounding shook and a trumpet sound grew louder and louder (Exodus 19). Similarly, we see God show up miraculously in the time of Joshua, the Judges, the days of the kings, and in the lives of Jews after their exile. This made people confident that the written text had been received from God by various prophets and should be preserved. This is why we see Daniel call the writings of Jeremiah Scripture even though they were contemporaries (Daniel 9:2) and why Jeremiah quotes the words of Micah (Micah 3:12) as being from the Lord (Jeremiah 26:18) even though he wrote just decades later.

Contrary to urban myths, the OT books were not decided upon at Jamnia in AD 90. That council had no binding authority, only the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon were discussed and only in regard to interpretation not inclusion. Furthermore, the books that were treated as canonical were no different than what we see in Josephus.

#### The New Testament (the part written after Christ was born)

As mentioned, Christians have always believed God made a covenant with the Jews and that this covenant was first recorded in the Old Testament. But once Christ came, they believed God had established a new covenant that extended to all people. This covenant did not invalidate the old covenant as represented by the Old Testament but completed the OT story. It is not surprising then that they expected God to provide a written declaration of that covenant, which would come to be known as the New Testament.

It is commonly argued that there were many writings which Christians recognized to be from God, but after the time of Constantine (early 4<sup>th</sup> century), those Christians who held political favor excluded certain books based on their theological preference. This argument is largely made so as to suggest that one should not think that the current New Testament is what the majority of Christians read and believed in the early days and should, therefore, not be trusted as the written message to God's people.

There are several problems with this argument, however. **First, there are many sources that provide lists or indications of which books should be included in the NT prior to the time of Constantine.** These sources while not identical repeatedly include the books of the NT and consistently disparage or ignore other books such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Acts of Paul, or the Epistle of Barnabas (see a [comparison](#) of these sources). **Second, the greatest factor for inclusion in the NT did not have to do with theological concerns but with whether they were recognized at the time of their writing as authoritative in nature.** For example, we see Paul referring to Luke's gospel as authoritative just years after its completion (1 Timothy 5:17-18). Later we see Peter referring to Paul's letters as Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16) and John boldly stating that every word of Revelation should be from Jesus and should not be altered in any way (Revelation 1:3, 22:18-19). Other books did not have any immediate seal of approval. **Third, when we consider the NT books versus other "Christian" writings they stand out both in terms of date of authorship and proximity to Jesus.** All the books in the NT were written in the first century, while all the writings that were excluded were later in date. Also, the books of the NT were written by

apostles who followed Jesus during his years of ministry (e.g., Matthew or John), by those who were close companions of the apostles (e.g., Mark and Luke), or by those who were close in relation to Jesus (e.g., Jude, who was Jesus' brother). The other gospels and writings which floated around in Christian circles in the early centuries could not claim a similar proximity to Jesus. In addition, many promote a gnostic (inward knowing) form of theology completely foreign to the early eyewitness accounts of Jesus' teaching. Thus, when the post-Constantine councils at Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) met to affirm the books of the NT, they were simply leaning on what had long been recognized by followers of Christ.

Let me finish with a little illustration that might help you understand better the process by which the books of the Bible were ultimately agreed upon. Suppose you are part of a royal family. The very first king of your royal line was very good and during his reign he was careful that the officials in his royal court recorded the principles and practices he wanted his kingdom to be governed by throughout the centuries. You now live several hundred years after the first king, and because of the great stories you hear of your royal ancestor you want to recognize the same principles and practices he set out. To do that, however, it is necessary to sort through a number of writings that have been circulated over the last several centuries by various court officials. Some of these writing provide some helpful guidance for governance, but in the end, what is important to you is maintaining and recognizing the principles and practices recorded by those who knew and followed the good first king. Because there are ample copies of these first-hand accounts, it is not hard for you to know what the vaunted king declared and to thereby put your stamp of approval on it as the basis for governing in the present day. Notice that in giving your approval, you are not really deciding the principles and practices that should govern the kingdom, you are simply recognizing what had been set out from the beginning. This is what could be said of the early church as well. When the famous councils at Hippo and Carthage affirmed what should be included in the Bible, they weren't ultimately deciding what should be included. They were simply affirming what had been already been recognized as God's word by those who first laid eyes on the original manuscripts.

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