How We Got the Bible

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The Bible is so vital to our Christian faith that if we are unable to fully trust in it, our faith is in big trouble. Yet many believers and unbelievers alike wrestle with questions about the Bible. Questions like: How did the Bible get put together? Why were certain books included in the Bible and others not? Can we trust the Bible as 'God's Word'?

There is also a steady stream of modern media coming out virtually every year, which popularises various 'alternative histories' about the Bible. These documentaries and books imagine a cloak-and-dagger style story of conspiracies and cover-ups regarding 'what really happened' when the Bible was put together. Although many of these productions are not trying to be too academic, they often succeed at undermining the faith of young believers.
So, in order to be fully confident in the Bible as the reliable and inspired Word of God, it is important to know some of the details of the history of how the Scriptures were formed, preserved, and recognised by the church.

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From Oral Tradition to Written Texts

In the earliest days of the church, there was no “Bible” as we know it now. All they had were the Old Testament writings. The Apostles and first disciples communicated the teachings of Jesus by word of mouth. If a church wanted to hear Jesus’ words, they had to host one of the Twelve Apostles so that they could re-tell the stories firsthand. For years, most Christians believed Jesus would return before the Apostles died, so there seemed to be no real urgency to write down His words.

But as the Apostles got older and travel became harder, the church grew worried that their eyewitness testimony would die with them. To preserve the words of Jesus, they began to write them down. Early Christian writer Justin Martyr described these accounts as “the memoirs of the Apostles.” Initially, the goal was not to compile a “Bible,” but to preserve the teachings of Christ.

Letters and Gospels were copied by hand—it was a slow and laborious process. Churches often exchanged these texts with one another. One congregation might have the Gospel of Matthew, while another had a letter from Paul. They would make copies and swap, gradually building collections of writings. These documents were treasured as the most valuable possessions of a church, often guarded with great care.

Because of geographical distances and slow communication across the Roman Empire, different churches ended up with different collections. Some communities had nearly all the writings; others had only a few. When visiting Christians arrived carrying a Gospel or a letter unfamiliar to a local church, questions naturally came up: “Did Peter really write this? Why have we never heard of it before?” This process of inquiry and verification was a vital part of how the church came to recognise which writings were truly authentic and apostolic.

The Authority of the Apostles

The early church valued the writings of the Apostles because Jesus Himself had given them authority to teach on His behalf. In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded the Apostles to teach others everything He had taught them (Matthew 28:18-20). Acts 2:42 tells us that the early believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching,” precisely because the Apostles were custodians of Jesus’ words and witnesses of His life, death, and resurrection. So, crucial criteria for a book to be included in the Bible were ‘Who wrote it?’ and ‘In what way is the author connected with one of the Twelve Apostles?’

The four Gospels illustrate this principle:

- **Matthew** was one of the twelve disciples, formerly a tax collector.
- **Mark** was a disciple of Peter, and his Gospel is essentially Peter’s account written down.

- **Luke** was a physician and traveling companion of Paul. He carefully investigated eyewitness testimony and also wrote Acts.
- **John** was "the disciple whom Jesus loved," another direct eyewitness.

What is interesting is that the authentic Gospel writers do not exaggerate or draw overt attention to their authorship. The false gospels were noticeably different in this way because they tended to overemphasise the names of the Apostles in an attempt to make themselves credible.

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The Unique Case of Paul

Paul was not one of the original Twelve Apostles, and his authority raised questions in the early church. Yet he consistently defended his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles. He testified that Jesus Himself appeared to him and entrusted him with the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:8-9). Paul admitted he was "abnormally born" as an apostle, having come later than the others, but his ministry was affirmed by Peter, James, and John (Galatians 2:7-9). Most importantly, Peter himself referred to Paul's writings as "Scripture" (2 Peter 3:15-16). Paul's letters bear the unmistakable weight and richness of divine truth, which is the quality that ultimately sealed the deal in the early church.

The Gradual Recognition of the Canon

As writings circulated, some regions accepted certain books later than others. For instance, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation were accepted more slowly in some areas. But over time, all were recognised across the church.

Church fathers began to compile lists of accepted writings. They also distinguished between universally accepted books, books widely rejected as heretical, and writings still under consideration. The earliest surviving list, which is identical to today's New Testament, comes from Athanasius' Easter letter in AD 367, which names all 27 books. Even earlier, by AD 170, a document known as the Muratorian Fragment already listed most of the New Testament books. The only books missing from this list are: Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter. The reason for this is possibly because of the fragment's damaged state or because some regions had not yet widely accepted them.

Therefore, long before the Council of Nicaea or Constantine, the accepted list of Bible books

(referred to as the 'canon of Scripture') was already mostly recognised and undisputed. Later councils at Laodicea (AD 363), Hippo (AD 393), and Carthage (AD 397) simply confirmed what the church already widely accepted.

False Gospels and Gnostic Writings

From the second century onward, alternative "gospels" appeared. Many of these were connected with Gnosticism—a different religion altogether that sought salvation through secret knowledge. To give their writings credibility, Gnostic authors attributed their writings to a well-known name within Christianity—one of the names of the Apostles or early believers. They produced texts such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

But these texts were composed long after the Apostles had died (all dated in the second century or later). They often contain bizarre embellishments or teachings contrary to the faith. For example, the Gospel of Peter describes a talking cross emerging from the tomb with Jesus, while the Gospel of Thomas contains chauvinistic statements about women needing to "become male" to enter heaven. The Gospel of Mary Magdalene portrays her as possessing hidden revelations that the Apostles supposedly lacked. These bizarre details make it clear (even to the non-scholar) that they are not authentic records of Jesus' life or teaching.

A helpful acronym to summarise the criteria by which the authentic writings were recognised is **REAL**:

- **R** – Recognised authority: the early church did not give the books their authority; they recognised it.
- **E** – Early: authentic writings date from the first century.
- **A** – Apostolic: they were connected directly to Apostles or their close companions.
- **L** – Lacking embellishment: the genuine writings do not contain extravagant or sensational details.

The Old Testament and the Apocrypha

The New Testament canon was effectively settled before debates over the Old Testament were fully resolved. The difference between Protestant and Catholic Bibles lies not in the New Testament but in the Old. Catholic Bibles include additional writings known as the Apocrypha (or "Deuterocanonical books"), such as 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, and others. These books were written in the period between Malachi and Matthew—during the "four hundred silent years." Even the book of Maccabees itself acknowledges that prophets had ceased to speak during that time:

“So there was great distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them.” (1 Maccabees 9:27)

The Jewish community never recognised these writings as Scripture, though they sometimes read them for historical or devotional purposes. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek (the Septuagint), these books were included in the collection, though not regarded as authoritative. Because many early Christians read the Septuagint, confusion arose about whether these writings belonged in the canon of Scripture.

In the early church, Augustine was in favour of including them in Scripture, while Jerome—who translated the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate)—argued that they should not be considered Scripture since the Jews themselves did not accept them. The Protestant Reformation later followed Jerome’s position, while the Catholic Church, at the Council of Trent in the 1500s, officially included them as Scripture.

Whilst these books do contain some reliable historical information and some edifying passages, they also include teachings that are inconsistent with the rest of Scripture and historical errors.

Doctrinal errors
Two key examples of doctrinal errors are:

- **Prayers for the dead:** Taught in 2 Maccabees 12:45-46, where Judas Maccabeus makes offerings for fallen soldiers so that they might be delivered from sin.
- **Purgatory:** Not mentioned anywhere in the canonical Scriptures but supported by Catholic tradition, partly because of the above passage.

Doctrines such as prayers for the dead and purgatory contradict the rest of Scripture and reinforce the Protestant conviction that they should not be considered part of the biblical canon.

Historical errors
Along with these doctrinal issues, the Apocrypha also contains historical mistakes that make it different from the inspired Scriptures. Here are a few key examples:

- **Judith 1:1** refers to Nebuchadnezzar as king of the Assyrians in Nineveh. In reality, Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon, not Assyria, and Nineveh had already been destroyed long before his reign.
- **Tobit 1:3–5** describes Tobit as living in the time of Jeroboam I (10th century BC) while also claiming he was taken into captivity by the Assyrians (8th century BC). The timeline doesn’t add up, since Tobit would have had to have lived for over 200 years.
- **Baruch 1:1–2** shows Baruch (Jeremiah’s scribe) reading his book to King Jeconiah in Babylon. Historically though, Jeconiah was taken captive to Babylon in 597 BC, while Jeremiah and

Baruch remained in Jerusalem.
These kinds of factual errors show a stark contrast with the kind of historical reliability that we have come to know and expect from the truly inspired and inerrant books of holy Scripture, which are always supported by modern archaeological and historical evidence.

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Preservation and Transmission of the Text

A common modern objection is that the Bible cannot be trusted because it is "a translation of a translation of a translation," like a game of broken telephone. This is a caricature of how manuscripts were copied and preserved.

The Bibles weren't copied in a single chain of transmission; they were copied many times in many places simultaneously. Mistakes made by one scribe did not spread unchecked because multiple copies could be compared. If nine manuscripts agreed and one had discrepancies, it was obvious where the error lay. This abundance of manuscripts—over 20,000 New Testament copies—makes it possible to identify and correct variations with great accuracy.

In fact, where there are obvious discrepancies between the manuscripts, modern Bibles often make mention of them quite transparently in the footnotes (e.g., "earliest manuscripts do not contain this passage"). Some notable examples are the longer ending of Mark (16:9-20) and the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11). It may be that these passages have kept authentic oral traditions, but because they are absent from the earliest manuscripts, we should treat them cautiously.

In modern documentaries and internet forums, it is common for people to claim that Constantine or some other church authority changed the Bible to suit their own agenda. But these are baseless claims because with thousands of copies spread across the ancient world, no one person could have revised them all. The very multiplicity of manuscripts ensures the reliability of the text we have today.

Conclusion

The Bible was not chosen arbitrarily by church councils or emperors. Instead, the writings that carried apostolic authority, divine truth, and the ring of authenticity were gradually recognised and affirmed by the church as holy Scripture. As has often been said before, nobody chose

which books belong in the Bible—the books ‘chose themselves’.

When false gospels came along, they were exposed as the frauds that they very obviously were. And the Apocrypha, though it is historically interesting, was rightly distinguished from the inspired Word of God.

We can be confident that the text we have today is a faithful representation of the originals because of the abundance of early manuscripts. We can be confident that what we hold in our hands today is what the Apostles actually wrote.

The history of how we got the Bible demonstrates God’s providential care in preserving His Word for us as His people across the centuries and is yet another testimony of how God is faithful to give us everything we need for faith and righteous living.

1. https://douglasjacoby.com/how-did-we-get-the-biblical-canon/

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