

History of the Bible FAQ

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What are the 66 books of the Bible?

Old Testament

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Job
Psalms
Proverbs

Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

New Testament

Matthew 1 Peter
Mark 2 Peter
Luke 1 John
John 2 John
Acts 3 John
Romans
Jude
1 Corinthians
Revelation
2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians
1 Timothy
2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
Hebrews
James

When was the Bible written?

The books of the Old Testament, which span from the creation of the universe to about 400BC, was written over the course of many hundreds of years. Much of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), if in fact written by Moses, can be dated around the latter half of the fifteenth century BC. The last book of the Old Testament, the minor prophet Malachi, is dated in the late fifth century BC, along with Ezra and Nehemiah.

The 27 books of the New Testament were written in a much shorter span of time. The earliest is probably the letter to the Galatians, written by Paul in the late 40s or early 50s AD. The first gospel, most likely Mark, is dated in the 50s or early 60s AD (though some place it just before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD). The last book of the Bible, Revelation, was most likely written around 95AD.

Who wrote the Bible?

Many men (and women, perhaps?) wrote the various books of the Bible (66 in the Protestant canon) over the course of many hundreds of years. These people were leaders (Moses, Paul), prophets (Jeremiah, Isaiah, John), historians (the author(s) of Joshua, Judges, Kings, Chronicles), poets (David and other authors of the Psalms) and apostles (Matthew, Mark, John). The authorship of most books is known within a reasonable doubt, though the authorship of a few is unknown or in dispute.

While Paul has been traditionally held to be the author of the letter to the Hebrews, the consensus of scholars is now that he did not. It was likely written by another follower of Jesus' teaching - Barnabas or Apollos have been suggested, among others. The Mosaic authorship of most of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) is also widely disputed.

As for the four canonized gospels, their authorship is fairly well established and not often disputed. Two were written by direct apostles of Christ - Matthew (Levi) and John (son of Zebedee). Mark was probably written by Paul and Barnabas' traveling companion and Peter's friend. Luke was likely written by Paul's Gentile companion, the doctor (cf. Colossians 4:14).

The letters of Paul include Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon, though some are more disputed than others.

In what language was the Bible written?

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, while the New Testament was composed in the common ("Koine") Greek of the first century. Some portions of the Bible were written in Aramaic.

Does the Bible have any errors or mistakes?

"Inerrancy," the doctrine that the Bible is free of any error (at least in the original languages), is always an issue of dispute among Christians. I believe that it is not necessary to hold blindly to the fundamentalist doctrine of inerrancy, twisting and turning the possible interpretation of a verse to try and make it agree with another. Plenty of minor errors exist in the Bible, from the age of Saul when he became king of Israel (missing from the original Hebrew in 1 Samuel 13:1) to the order of Jesus' deeds (jumbled in the four gospels). Many so-called "contradictions" asserted by those who are unfamiliar with the Bible are simply taken out of context, but errors are there.

There is no reason to toil day and night in attempts to reconcile every contradiction in the 66 books of the Bible. It was written, edited and copied (and eventually translated) by fallible men and women. Just as God uses our imperfection to further His will, so does He use an imperfect collection of writings as His inspired word.

Even Jesus Christ took on the limits of human form to reconcile the world to God. This is the gospel message itself: that God lowered Himself to our level, and thereby made His plan for salvation complete (cf. Philippians 2:5-11). In the same way, the written testimony of that gospel need not be textually perfect.

So-called "gospel harmonies," then (which collect all four gospels into one and attempt to resolve the conflicts between them), are contrary to each of the four gospels alone. These efforts produce a book that no one in the New Testament era wrote, and which no one in the New Testament era read. Each book has its own theological agenda, which is terribly confused by attempts to "correct" God's Word.

How were the books of the Bible chosen (canonized)?

The books of our New Testament, as well as a few that weren't included in the canon, were circulated between Christian churches for the first few centuries of Christianity. Many came to be regarded as authoritative, as 'scripture' on the same level as Jewish scripture (our Old Testament). Irenaeus listed the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) as scripture early in the second century. St. Athanasius was the first to list our 27 New Testament books together, in his Paschal letter of 367 AD.

Though it should be remembered that the books of the New Testament were widely considered "scripture" for hundreds of years before the canon was determined, "official" canonization did not occur until the latter part of the fourth century AD. Specific books were chosen and others were discarded for the Christian scriptures at the Council of Carthage (~397 AD). (The Council of Laodicea had also met regarding the issue of canonization around 363 AD - it's list of 26 New Testament books excluded Revelation.) The Council likely had a strict set of criteria that a gospel, letter or other book had to meet before it could be considered for canonization. A book had to have:

- 1) **Apostolic authority** - To be included in the canon of the New Testament, a book had to have been either written or sponsored by one of the apostles. Luke, for example, was not one of the twelve, but a companion of Paul (considered an apostle on par with the twelve, of course) who researched the life of Jesus. Mark, similarly, was a student of Peter - so that the gospel that bears his name is often referred to as Peter's account.
- 2) **Orthodoxy** - A book must not teach something contrary to what the church had accepted as the teachings of Christ. (A tenet of Gnosticism, for example, is that salvation requires "secret knowledge" ['Gnosticism' is derived from the Greek 'gnosis,' meaning knowledge]. This contradicts the orthodoxy of both Jesus and Paul, who taught salvation through the repentance of sins and faith in Christ. Gnostic texts, such as the Gospel of Thomas, would have been rejected for at least this reason.)
- 3) **Church circulation** - The book must have been in use by the the Christian churches scattered throughout Palestine, Asia Minor and the rest of the Roman world. If it hadn't been in circulation among Christians, the Council would obviously see no need to regard it as Christian scripture.

In addition to books which were eventually discarded from the canon, many books in our Bible today were in dispute: the Letter to the Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation were contested, but finally accepted.

As for the Christian Old Testament, the Church has traditionally used the Alexandrian list of books, which include the 18 books of the Apocrypha. At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, reformers looked to the traditional (and shorter, as it does not include the Apocrypha) Jewish list as authoritative.

When was the Bible first translated into English?

William Tyndale made the first translation from the original languages in his 1526 New Testament. He had completed about half of his translation of the Old Testament when he was captured and imprisoned. He was tried for heresy (his efforts to translate Scripture into a language other than Latin were not looked upon favorably by the Roman Catholic Church), and finally strangled and then burned at the stake on October 6, 1536.

Tyndale's English version was predated by John Wycliffe's, who translated the Bible from Jerome's Latin translation (the Vulgate) in the fourteenth century.

Don't different Christians have entirely different books in their Bibles?

The three main Christian groups - Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant - each have their own accepted canon of books of the Bible. Protestants regard the 39 traditional books of the Old Testament (excluding the Apocrypha) and 27 books of the New Testament (four gospel accounts, 21 letters, John's Revelation and the Acts of the Apostles) as authoritative.

Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox embrace the same 27 books of the New Testament, but also retain the Old Testament Apocrypha - a collection of writings composed mostly during the time between the Old and New Testaments (approximately 400BC to the first century AD, with the exception of 2 Esdras, which is dated near the end of the first century). In denying the inspiration of the Apocrypha, Protestant Reformers proclaimed a return to the original Hebrew collection of 39 books, while Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox reaffirmed the Alexandrian collection that includes the Apocrypha. Click [here](#) to read more about the Apocrypha.

What is the Septuagint (LXX)?

The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, produced in Alexandria, Egypt, around 250BC (at least the first five books, that is - the rest of the Old Testament and a few noncanonical books were completed some time before the first century AD). From the Latin for "70," the Septuagint is said to have been produced by 72 scholars in 72 days on the island of Pharos. Legend has it that these scholars were locked away in different rooms, and at the end of the 72nd day they had each produced an identical copy of the Torah (Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament). The Septuagint is abbreviated "LXX," the Roman numeral 70.

Many Jews lived outside of Palestine and no longer spoke Hebrew, so the Septuagint became the widely used Bible of choice. It also had profound influences on early Christianity, since many in the Greek-speaking first century Palestine (including the first Christians) read it as their Bible.

What is the Apocrypha? Why do only some Bibles contain it?

The "Apocrypha" (meaning "false," though that term doesn't do justice to the way many Christians perceive the books) is a collection of 18 books (some lists include 15 or 16, excluding 3 and 4 Maccabees) composed mostly during the intertestamental period (after the prophet Nehemiah in the fifth century BC and before the birth of Christ). They contain a variety of literature, from historical accounts of the Maccabean revolution under the leadership of Judas the Hammerer to fantastic tales of Old Testament heroes.

These books appear interspersed with the latter half of the Old Testament in many English translations - the New American Bible, and some editions of the King James and New Revised Standard, for example. While Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians regard the books as inspired, following the larger Alexandrian list of Old Testament books, Protestants do not. They side with the original Hebrew Bible, which limits the list to 39 books. While of great historical and literary value, the books are not deemed inspired by God and thus not on par with Scripture.

The books of the Apocrypha are: *First Esdras, Fourth Ezra, Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, The Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Prayer of Azariah, Daniel and Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, The Prayer of Manasseh, First Maccabees, Second Maccabees, Third Maccabees, Fourth Maccabees* and *Psalm 151*. They can be viewed online at Northwest Nazarene College's [Noncanonical Homepage](#).

Did Martin Luther and the Protestants throw out some books of the Bible at the Reformation?

Many point to Martin Luther's nailing of his 95 *Theses* on the door of the church at Wittenburg as the start of the Protestant Reformation. Luther fiercely argued against the Catholic Church's practice of selling indulgences, as well as its teaching of earning salvation by good deeds. One of his fiercest opponents in the Church was John Eck, who met with Luther for a formal debate in Leipzig in July, 1519. Luther argued against the infallibility of the Pope and of Church tradition, claiming that truth came from scripture alone ("sola scriptura").

But during a debate over the issue of baptism for the dead, Eck brought up Christian scripture: 2 Maccabees 12:39-46, in which Judas Maccabeus makes atonement for his fallen comrades. Luther was forced to deny the scriptural authority of the book, and came to claim that all of the Apocrypha, though "useful and good to read," was not inspired scripture.

For this and other reasons, the Protestant reformers shook off the Church's tradition of accepting the 18 books of the Apocrypha as canonical. They preferred the shorter list of the 39 books in the Hebrew Bible, and limited their Old Testament to that. In one sense, then, these books were "removed" from the Christian Bible. And in another sense, Protestants simply returned to the Hebrew collection, arguing that these books never should have been included in the Christian Bible to start with.

When did the Catholic Church start reading the Bible in English in the mass?

The mass has been conducted in Latin for many hundreds of years, but the Liturgical Movement of the twentieth century has led to the Roman Catholic Church's allowing of bishops to perform the mass in the language of the local people. The official decree came at the Second Vatican Council in 1965.

Ask a new question!

