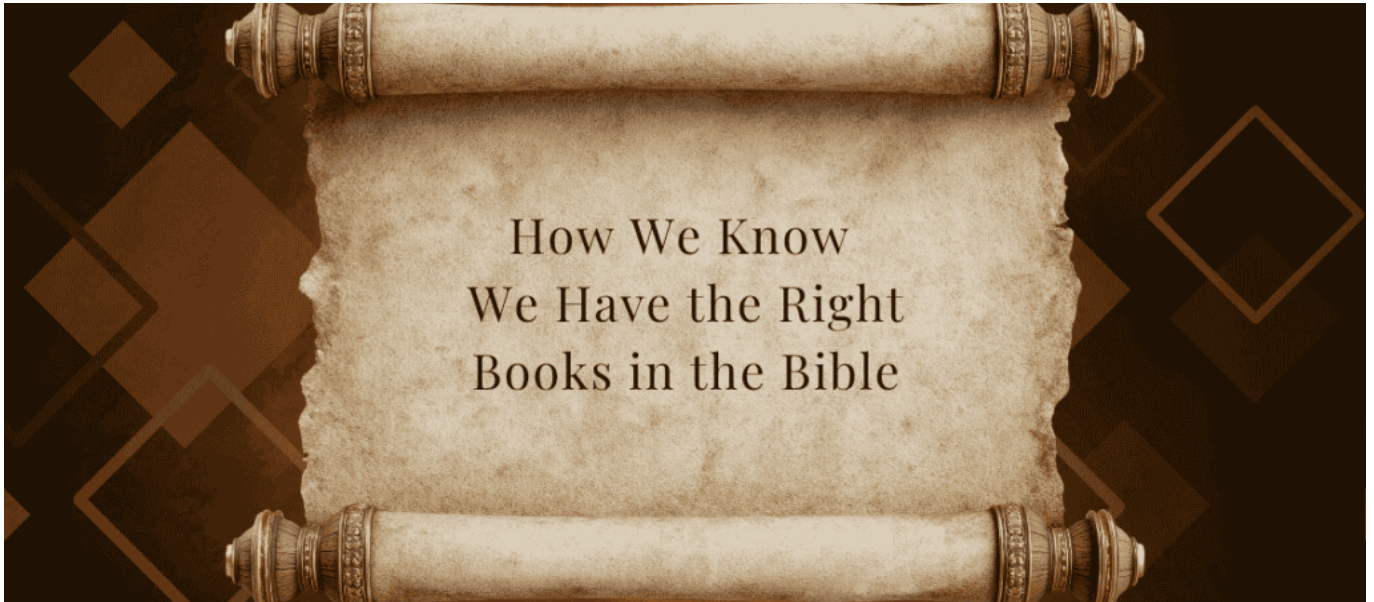




How We Know We Have the Right Books in the Bible

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One of the objections to the Bible that is commonly raised, even by some Christians is whether we can trust that the Bible we have today contains the correct books. Some argue that the Bible has been corrupted/changed throughout history, that books have been added or removed, and that there are lost or hidden writings containing information that Christians no longer have access to or have been hidden in the Vatican by the Catholic church.

The argument is typically presented that in light of this corruption, while the Bible may contain wisdom and moral teachings, the Bible cannot be trusted as the authoritative Word of God and should instead be viewed merely as a spiritual or philosophical collection of ancient writings and not as an objective standard of truth.

In this article, I set out to address the question of the canon of Scripture and how Christians can know that the collection of books in the Bible is the correct one. It is not primarily addressing whether the text of those books have been accurately preserved throughout history because that requires understanding how historians

evaluate ancient documents and comparing manuscript evidence which is beyond the scope of this article.

What Does It Mean to Have a Canon?

The word Canon comes from the Greek word *kanōn* meaning a “standard” or “measuring rod” so, when Christians refer to the canon of Scripture, they mean the collection of books that are recognised as the standard / authoritative Word of God and therefore belonging in the Bible.

I have heard professing Christians say that they don’t fully trust the Bible because it was the Roman Catholic church that invented the Bible. The Christian church has existed from the first century, long before the Roman empire adopted Christianity in 313AD.

The canon was gradually recognised within the wider Christian community over the first several centuries. The early church did not create Scripture by granting authority to certain books; rather, it recognised the authority that God had already given to writings inspired by Him. The church acted as a witness to the canon, not as the source of its authority.

One of the reasons people become so confused about the canon is that not all Christian traditions use the same collection of Old Testament books.

- Protestants recognise 66 books: 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament
- Roman Catholics recognise 73 books, including seven Deuterocanonical (Apocryphal) books in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament.
- Eastern Orthodox churches is a little more complicated as they each recognise the 27 New Testament books but generally include additional Old Testament books beyond the Roman Catholic canon, although the exact canon varies between Orthodox traditions.
- The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church has the largest biblical canon, traditionally recognising 81 books, including several writings not found in Protestant, Roman Catholic or most Eastern Orthodox Bibles.

Almost all Christian traditions recognise the same 27 New Testament books, although the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church includes additional writings in its broader canon.

Did Protestants Remove Books from the Bible?

A common accusation is that Protestants removed books from the Bible during the Reformation, however, this oversimplifies the historical situation. The writings commonly referred to as the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical books were Jewish writings written in the centuries between the Old and New Testaments. They were valued and used by many Christians throughout history, although there was disagreement about whether they should be considered part of the inspired canon of Scripture.

The Roman Catholic Church formally defined these writings as part of its canon at the Council of Trent in 1546, partly in response to debates during the Protestant Reformation. The disagreement was not simply that Protestants removed books that had universally been accepted by all Christians, but rather a disagreement over which writings carried divine authority.

Was the Bible Invented at the Council of Nicaea?

The Council of Nicaea which took place in 325 AD was an ecumenical council meaning that bishops from across the Christian world gathered together to address claims by a priest named Arius whose argument was that Jesus Christ was not eternal and fully divine, a claim that was not supported by the teaching of the early apostles.

Despite this council having nothing to do with the biblical canon, there are claims that the Bible was created at the Council of Nicaea, which does not align with any historical evidence whatsoever.

By the time of Nicaea, Christians had already been reading, copying, and circulating many of the New Testament writings for generations. Early Christian writers whose writings can be found in "The Apostolic Fathers", frequently quoted from the New Testament books, demonstrating that these writings were already considered authoritative long before any formal recognition of the complete canon.

Why Trust the Old Testament Canon?

Whilst there is debate among historians about when the Jewish Old Testament canon was formally closed, the resurrection of Jesus provides the foundation for

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trusting His view of Scripture. If Jesus truly rose from the dead, then His understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures can be trusted because He demonstrated Himself to be the Son of God.

Jesus consistently treated the Hebrew Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God.

- Matthew 4:1-11 when the tempter came to him responded to each attempt to make Jesus sin with “As it is written”, quoting from Deuteronomy
- Matthew 5:18 in the sermon on the mount Jesus says not even the smallest part of the Law will pass away until all is fulfilled
- In Luke 24:44, Jesus referenced the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms as authoritative writings that were to be fulfilled in Him.
- In Matthew 22:31-32, Jesus says “have you not read that which was spoken unto you by God” referring to Exodus 3 showing God spoke through the written text.
- In John 10:35, Jesus says scripture cannot be broken referring to the quote from Psalm 82:6 in verse 34

Jesus referred to the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms as the Scriptures that testified about Him and must be fulfilled (Luke 24:44). He also affirmed their complete authority, stating that “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

When considering the Apocryphal writings, the argument is not simply that Jesus did not quote them, since Jesus did not quote every book of the Old Testament either. Rather, the question is how Jesus and the apostles treated these writings in relation to the recognised Hebrew Scriptures. While some Apocryphal writings were respected as valuable historical and religious texts, they were not treated as possessing the same level of authority as the Scriptures that Jesus affirmed.

How Was the New Testament Canon Recognised?

The New Testament books we have in our bibles today do not come from the early church choosing books according to personal preference. The Early church recognised writings that carried apostolic authority.

As mentioned earlier the word canon means “measuring rod” or “standard”. Several important factors influenced the recognition of authoritative books.

- **Apostolic Authority** – In many cases, this meant the writing was produced by

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an apostle such as Matthew, John, Peter, or Paul, or by a close companion of an apostle such as Mark, who was associated with Peter, or Luke, who was associated with Paul. The key question was whether the writing could be connected to the eyewitness testimony and teaching of the apostles.

- **Consistency with Apostolic Teaching** – A book had to agree with the teaching that had already been received from Christ through his apostles. Books like Hebrews have an unknown author; however, it was recognised as carrying apostolic authority because its teaching was consistent with the apostolic faith.
- **Widespread Recognition** – The books were not recognised by a single church or council in isolation. They were read, copied, and used across many Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire. There were Christian writings such as the Didache (Teaching of the 12 Apostles), first letter of clement and the letter of barnabas to name a few that were accepted by several as scriptural but rejected by the majority. Only the writings that were consistently recognised and provided strong evidence that they were genuine apostolic writings made it into the canon.

What About the Lost Gospels?

The point of evidence that I have heard used most to question the trust of the Bible as we have it today comes the argument that the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Mary were excluded intentionally by the Roman Catholic Church because they wanted to suppress certain versions of Christianity that differed from our books.

The reason these writings were rejected from the canon go beyond simply because they presented different ideas. Many scholars date these writings to the 2nd century or later, meaning they appeared after the lifetime of the apostles and certainly after the lifetime of the individuals they claim to represent.

Additionally, many of these writings reflect theological ideas associated with later Gnostic movements rather than the first-century Jewish context and apostolic teaching found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The exclusion of these writings was therefore not an attempt to hide truth, but an attempt to preserve the teaching that originated from the apostles who were eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The question was not whether these writings contained any historical or spiritual value, but whether they could

legitimately trace their authority back to the apostles and faithfully preserve the message of Christ.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Christian confidence in the Bible as we have it today is rooted in Jesus Christ.

Jesus demonstrated His identity as the Son of God through His resurrection from the dead. If Jesus truly rose from the dead, as He claimed He would, then His teaching about Scripture is trustworthy.

Jesus affirmed the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures and appointed His apostles as His authorised witnesses (John 14:26, John 16:13). He promised that the Holy Spirit would guide them into truth and bring to their remembrance all that He had taught.

The early church did not invent these writings centuries later at some council; it recognised the authority already present in writings that came from God's revelation through the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles. The Bible was not created by the church; rather, the church received and recognised the Scriptures that God had given.