

How we got our Bible

Introduction

Most of us, most of the time, don't ask questions about how we got our Bible. The Bible is just one of those givens of our faith. We know there are many translations of the Bible – and we may each have our favourite version – but they're all translations of the same thing, aren't they?

But from time to time we are reminded that it's not quite as simple as that.

I work for Bible Society. In 1902, Bible Society was asked to provide a presentation Bible to King Edward VII on his coronation. But when the copy was produced, Frederick Temple, the then the Archbishop of Canterbury, refused to allow it to be presented. He declared that it was a "mutilated Bible". How had this Bible been "mutilated"? It failed to include the Apocrypha.

Bible Society now produces some Bibles which include the Apocrypha, or the deuterocanonical books as they are now commonly called. These are generally for use by Roman Catholics. Here is a copy of such a Bible which includes within its Old Testament such books as Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees and so on. Suddenly we are reminded that the Bible is not just a book, it's a collection of books – a collection that someone has put together. Why are books such as Tobit and Judith included in some Bibles and omitted from others? Who decided what books make up the Old Testament and how did they go about it? And most importantly, are we – are you – using a "mutilated Bible"?

And similar questions can be raised concerning the New Testament.

On Good Friday, the BBC screened a programme made by Melvyn Bragg called "The Mystery of Mary Magdalene." The programme suggested that there were many accounts of Jesus' life circulating in the first few centuries of the Christian era. The *Gospel of Philip* tells us that Jesus loved Mary Magdalene more than all the other disciples. The *Gospel of Mary* depicts her as having long and intimate conversations with Jesus. The hit of some of these Gospels is that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. But, we are told, such writings were excluded from the authorised version of Jesus' life when the Roman Empire took over Christianity with Emperor Constantine in the fourth century.

These suggestions are far from being new. They are similar to some of claims made by the fictional character Sir Leigh Teabing in Dan Brown's popular book – and the film – *The Da Vinci Code*.

If we know nothing about how we got our Bible, suggestions such as these can be unsettling. We need to know how our Bible came to be put together. We need to know why it includes certain books and excludes others. That's what I want us to look at this evening.

Canon

Let me begin by introducing you to a technical term – the word 'Canon'. 'Canon' in this context, comes from the same root as the word cane. In the ancient world a cane was used to measure things; it's what we might call a ruler. By the Canon of Scripture we mean the list of books that are treated as Scripture; the books that act as a ruler against which our lives are measured. It's not a cane to beat us with but a list of books that will be our guide. It's a recognition of authority.

The Canon of the Old Testament is the list of books that is considered to make up the Old Testament. The Canon of the New Testament is the list of books that is considered to make up the New Testament.

So the question we are considering this evening is “How did the canon of Scripture come to be fixed? How did it come to include these particular books?”

Unravelling History

The Bible is not so much a single book as a library or collection of books. The material it contains was written over a long period of time – more than 1500 years – and was written in a number of different languages. But these diverse writings have come to us bound up together in a single book.

The question of how our Bible was put together is difficult to answer because it’s a historical question. We are asking questions about things that happened hundreds of years ago, even thousands of years ago.

Now some of you may not have got on with history at school; you may even think history is boring. But history is what has made us who we are. You have a history that stretches back beyond your birth to parents and grandparents. That history has shaped you. The history of the United Kingdom has shaped our culture and made us the people we are today – and the Bible has had a place in that history. History has shaped us and the history of the Bible has shaped the people of the Book – has shaped us as Christians. We need to know its story because it is our story.

But how can we retell a story that might seem lost in the mists of time? It would be wonderful if we could get hold of a time machine and travel back to see when each book of the Bible was written, when and how they were collected together and hear why other books were left out. But we have no time machine.

What we have to do is therefore more like detective work – and you know how that works from your favourite TV detectives. We have to uncover the evidence – and there is plenty of it in this case – and then seek to piece it together to make a coherent story of what is most likely to have happened. Where there are gaps in the evidence, we need to ensure that our story spans the gaps and fits the evidence in the best way possible.

But I warn you now, different people come up with different stories as they seek to make sense of the same evidence; they come to different conclusions – it’s a bit like the stories being retold at the moment about the Thatcher years. All I can do is to present you with the evidence and tell the story as best I see in the light of the evidence. But if this does not satisfy you, I would encourage you to study the evidence for yourselves. I can certainly recommend further reading for you.

The Hebrew Bible – Writing and scrolls

We need to start our story with that of the Hebrew Bible, or what we call The Old Testament.

The larger part of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew – the language of the Israelites. A few portions of the Old Testament are written in Aramaic which was the Imperial language of the Assyrians and Babylonians. Aramaic became the language spoken by the Jews after they returned from Exile in Babylon and was later the language spoken by Jesus – as you will know if you have watched *The Passion of the Christ*.

But many of the Books we currently have in our Old Testament include material that existed before it was written down in these books. Some of that was oral material: the stories of Noah and of Abraham, for instance, would have been passed on orally from generation to generation before they came to be recorded in the book we know as Genesis. Other books were written making use of earlier written material.¹ Our Old Testament books may have been written and expanded over a period of time.

The various books would have been written on scrolls. These were made either from papyrus or from parchment (animal skin). Strips of this material would be fixed together to form a long sheet that would be rolled around two wooden rods so that it could be unrolled from one rod while being rolled up on the other, leaving a strip of writing – a column or page if you will – exposed for reading.²

A scroll could contain about the amount of text we find in such books as Genesis. Each sizeable book would therefore be on a separate scroll. Some longer books required two scrolls and have therefore come down to us as if they were separate books, such as 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings. Some short books were put together on a single scroll: the so-called ‘Minor’ prophets shared a single scroll and were commonly referred to as The Book of The Twelve.

Assembling the Hebrew Scriptures

But how did these various writing come to be recognised as a single body of Scripture?

I want to begin to answer this question by looking at the structure of the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible does not have its books arranged in the same order as we commonly have them in our English Old Testaments. The division looks like this:

¹ The book of Numbers makes reference to “The Book of the Wars of the Lord” (Numbers 21:14), Joshua 10:13 refers to “The Book of Jashar”, and both Kings and Chronicles refer to “The Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel [and Judah]” (1 Kings 14:19; 2 Chronicles 27:7).

² It is odd how technology has come full circle. The scroll was succeeded in the first century AD by the Codex (the form we think of as a book). Now we have the internet in which a ‘book’ may be represented as a continuous piece of text (a single html page) which we scroll down to read!

Law	Prophets		Writings
Genesis	Joshua	Isaiah	Psalms
Exodus	Judges	Jeremiah	Proverbs
Leviticus	Samuel	Ezekiel	Job
Numbers	Kings		
Deuteronomy		Hosea	Song of Songs
		Joel	Ruth
		Amos	Lamentations
		Obadiah	Ecclesiastes
		Jonah	Esther
		Micah	
		Nahum	Daniel
		Habakkuk	Ezra
		Zephaniah	Nehemiah
		Haggai	Chronicles
		Zachariah	
		Malachi	

The Hebrew Scriptures are organised into three main sections:

The first section is **The Law** or **Torah** and consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These first five books of the Bible are sometimes called the **Pentateuch** or the **Books of Moses**. This last description does not mean that Moses wrote their entire contents. He is, however, recorded to have written sections of them such as the laws in Exodus 34:11-26 (see Exodus 34:27-28). And the Book of Deuteronomy records an extended address by Moses to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land.

The second section of the Hebrew Bible is called **The Prophets**. The term is used in a broader sense than is customary for us since it includes the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. These are followed by the major writing prophets, namely Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel and then the Book of the Twelve, the so called minor prophets.

The third and final section is called **The Writings**. This consists of the major poetical or wisdom books of Psalms, Proverbs and Job. These are followed by a collection of 5 shorter writings called the **Meggilloth** consisting of The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther.³ The Writings conclude with Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles.

³ These might seem to be an odd collection of books, but it's interesting to note that commentaries have recently been written by Christians on this collection: Eugene Peterson's *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* and Barry Webb's *Five Festal Garments*.

Law and Kingdom

The major division within the Hebrew Bible is between the Law and the remaining writings. The Law was viewed as foundational to Israel's existence as the people of God. The remaining writings were often viewed as commentary upon the Law, application of the Law, or response to the Law.

The books of the Law describe Israel's history up to the point where they are about to possess the Promised Land. In particular, they record how God remembered his covenant with Abraham and came down to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God brought them to Sinai to meet with himself. There he gave them the law as a pattern for their life in the land he was to give them.

How much of this material was written down at the time we do not know. But at the beginning of the Book of Joshua we read God's words to him after the death of Moses:

Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This *Book of the Law* shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Joshua 1:5-8)

Reference is made here to "The Book of the Law" which evidently contained the law given by God to Israel through Moses. Much of the material we currently have in the first five books of the Bible was clearly written down at an early date and was treasured by the people to whom these words were given.⁴

The tabernacle – the tent representing God's presence with his people – contained the Ark of the Covenant. This in turn contained the Ten Commandments "written by the finger of God." Along with these stone tablets, other documents may well have been kept in the Tabernacle and treasured as holy writings – covenant law.

In about 960 BC, the Temple was built by Solomon in Jerusalem to replace the portable tabernacle. This now became the centre for Israelite worship. It was probably at this time that scrolls of sacred writings began to be stored at the Temple.⁵

In around 623 BC we read that Josiah ordered the Temple to be repaired. During the renovations, Hilkiah the High Priest discovered "The Book of the Law" in the Temple (2 Kings 22:8. 2 Chronicles 34:14 refers to it as "The Book of the Law of the Lord given through Moses"). This book was read to the king who wept when he realised how the kingdom of Judah had failed to live in obedience to God's Word. It is interesting to note that the words used to describe the discovered book are identical to those used of the "book" entrusted to Joshua. Scholars have argued that the book in

⁴ Meredith G Kline has argued that insufficient attention has been given to the correlation of the concepts of covenant and canon, particularly in the light of the form of Ancient Near East vassal treaties. See "The Correlation of the Concepts Canon and Covenant" in *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. by J.B. Payne. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1970), pp. 265-279. See <http://www.meredithkline.com/klines-works/articles-and-essays/the-correlation-of-the-concepts-canon-and-covenant/> and *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972)

⁵ It would be good to note here how the kings were intended to lead the people in obedience to God's law, see, for instance, 1 Kings 2:1-2, 9:4-5.

question may have been the book of Deuteronomy, but if that is so, it presupposes the existence of much of the material we find in the other books of the Pentateuch.

One further piece of evidence needs to be cited. The Samaritans appear to have recognised *only* these first five books as being Scripture; they recognised the Law or Torah but not the Prophets or Writings. They had their own slightly variant form of the Pentateuch. The schism between the Jews and the Samaritans dates to about 500 BC. It is evident therefore that the Pentateuch or Law of Moses was recognised as the Scriptures of Israel by about 500 BC.

The Jewish Scriptures

But the key question is when did *all* of the Old Testament come to be recognised as Scripture? The answer is that we cannot know for sure, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the process was complete by about 164 BC when Judas Maccabeus gathered together the scattered Scriptures after a time of persecution⁶.

What is clear is that the canon of the Jewish Scriptures was settled by the time of Jesus⁷.

Jesus had many disputes with the Jewish authorities of his day – the experts in the Law, but at no point did they argue about which documents constituted their sacred Scriptures. Indeed, Jesus is at pains to emphasise that every word on their scrolls which they venerate as Scripture is treated as equally precious by him. In his Sermon on the Mount he assures the crowds, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18, see also Luke 16:14-15). Jesus could not have spoken in this way if there was some doubt over the content of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jesus’ disagreement with the Jewish authorities was not an argument about the extent or the authority of the Scriptures but about their meaning. To the Jewish leaders he said, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40). Jesus clearly implies that he and the Jewish leaders both read the same Scriptures. The problem is that they cannot see that all of these Scriptures find their fulfilment in him.

⁶ Beckwith concludes many pages of detailed argument as follows: “At the end of the previous chapter, we drew the conclusion that, as a result of the work of Judas Maccabaeus in gathering together the scattered Scriptures about 164 BC, after the Antiochene persecution, a settled national archive of listed books had probably existed from that time onwards; that his list the books were apparently not only organized in three sections and arranged in order but numbered as 24; that shortly afterwards his list seems to have been adapted to the number of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet, as 22 books, but without any alteration to their identity; and that these 24 (or 22) books can with little doubt be named as the books of the present Hebrew Bible.” R. T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1985) p. 316

⁷ “Placing a *terminus ad quem* on the completion of the Old Testament canon is difficult, partly due to an almost total lack of evidence... What can be said with confidence is that *at least* a century before the Christian era, the Jews were conscious that prophecy in its classical form belonged to the past. If the failure of prophecy and the closure of the canon were understood as correlative ideas in intertestamental Judaism (as they were later with Josephus), then a date of about 100 BC would seem to be the latest that could be entertained on the basis of our evidence. On the other hand, if Sirach 48:22-49:10 does reflect a canonical ordering, a substantially earlier date for closure would be likely.” David G Dumba, “The Biblical Canon”, *Hermeneutics and Canon* (Leicester: IVP, 1986) pp. 299-360, p. 315.

The Septuagint – LXX

But now I need to backtrack a little on the history we have been reviewing.

In the centuries before Christ, particularly after the time of the exile in Babylon, many of the Jewish nation became scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. With the rise of Alexander the Great this world became a Greek speaking world. Many Jews grew up with little knowledge of the Hebrew language. For this reason, sometime between 250 and 150 BC the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek.

There were several versions of the Greek Old Testament, but the dominant one came to be called the Septuagint because it was supposed to have been the work of 70 men.

This Greek Old Testament circulated along with various other spiritual Jewish writings, some of which were translated from the Hebrew while others had been written in Greek. The Septuagint arranged the Old Testament books in much the same order as is commonly found in our English Bibles but included some extra books or portions, namely:

- 1 Esdras (2 Esdras = Ezra and Nehemiah)
- Judith
- Tobit
- Additions to Esther
- Wisdom of Solomon
- Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach)
- Psalms 151
- Baruch
- The Letter of Jeremiah
- Additions to Daniel (History of Suzannah, Bel and Dragon)
- Books of Maccabees

These books are sometimes referred to as the Septuagintal plus because they are material contained in the Septuagint over and above what is found in the Hebrew Scriptures. It does not seem that these books were necessarily viewed as Scripture by the Jewish community.⁸ Certainly they did not form part of the Jewish Scriptures in later centuries. They were simply spiritual writings which circulated along with the Scriptures providing further information on the history of the Jewish people.

However, the Christian church, scattered around the Mediterranean was largely Greek speaking. It adopted the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Scriptures as its Old Testament Bible. How would it treat the additional books found in the Septuagint?

Melito of Sardis in about 170 AD was the first Christian writer to provide us with a list of the Old Testament books. His list is identical to our own Old Testament except that he makes no mention of Esther⁹. He includes none of the extra writings of the Septuagint – none of the Septuagintal plus.

⁸ Josephus made use of the Septuagint and was well aware of the books that are not found in the Hebrew Scriptures. As we have seen, he did not consider them canonical.

⁹ Questions were often raised about Esther because the book never mentions God. This led many to suggest that it should not be treated as part of Scripture.

But in 367 AD Athanasius gives a list which does include several of the Septuagintal additions. The Greek speaking Eastern church after the time of Athanasius progressively accepted the entire Septuagintal plus as part of the Old Testament.

But by this time, the Christian church in the West was spoke Latin. In about 380 AD, Jerome produced a new Latin translation of the Bible. He was a Hebrew scholar and listed the books of the Hebrew Bible saying that what cannot be found in the Hebrew ought to be set aside as *Apocrypha*. Such books as Ecclesiasticus, the Wisdom of Solomon, Judith, Tobit and the Books of Maccabees may be read for edification but are not to be received as Scripture.

Jerome's statement, clear and precise though it was, failed to have a dominating influence upon the Western church. Augustine revered Jerome yet his list of the books of the Old Testament includes the Septuagintal plus or Apocrypha. From this time on, the Western or 'Catholic Church' included the Apocrypha as part of Scripture.

Serious debate on the extent of the Old Testament canon was not revived until the time of the Reformation. The Reformation saw a new appreciation of the authority of Scripture and the need to define precisely what is Scripture.

Luther agreed with Jerome in rejecting the Apocrypha and accepting only the books found in the Hebrew Old Testament. The same was true of Calvin and of the English Reformers and of Tyndale and Coverdale who translated the Old Testament directly from Hebrew into English.

In response, the Roman Catholic church at the Council of Trent laid aside Jerome's distinction and formally asserted that the extra material that derives from the Greek Septuagint is equally canonical with the Hebrew Scriptures.

That division continues to this day. Evangelical Christians accept as their Old Testament Scripture the Hebrew Scriptures that were accepted by Christ and contemporary Judaism. We agree with Jerome that other books such as Ecclesiasticus, the Wisdom of Solomon, Judith, Tobit and the Books of Maccabees may be read for edification but are not to be treated as Scripture.¹⁰

So much for the canon of the Old Testament, but what of the New?

The Formation of the New Testament

The New Testament was written in Greek. It was not written as one volume of sacred writings but as a number of individual documents, each written for a particular purpose or readership.

Paul's letters are the earliest of the New Testament documents.¹¹ Each was written for a particular church or group of churches. Each was written out of pastoral concern and deals with issues which were particularly appropriate to the church being addressed. Paul may well have viewed his letters as second best to a personal visit: he would rather have spoken with the churches face to face (see Gal 4:20). In the goodness of God however, he wrote, and what he wrote remains as a permanent record that we also can read.

¹⁰ Article 6 of the 39 Articles of the Church of England lists the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 of the New as containing "all things necessary to salvation." It then adds concerning the Apocrypha, "And the other books (as *Hierome* [Jerome] saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine."

¹¹ Galatians or 1 Thessalonians being the earliest of all New Testament Documents.

The four Gospels were written as records of the things that Jesus said and did. Like many of the Old Testament documents, they also have a pre-history. Stories of what Jesus said and did would have been passed on orally – they would have formed part of the preaching of the apostles. Collections of sayings may have been put together.¹² As those who had been eyewitnesses of the Lord began to be removed by death, more formal, complete and permanent records were needed by the churches. In response to this need each of the Gospel records was put together, each probably for a particular church or group of churches.

Luke gives some insight into the way he went about writing his Gospel – probably for the churches which he had visited with Paul. He opens his Gospel with the words, “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye witnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1-4). Luke later wrote Acts as a continuation of his Gospel account. He intended it to be viewed as testimony to the continuing work of Christ among his people by his Spirit.

Other particular needs gave rise to Hebrews and the epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude. The book of Revelation was also written firstly for a particular group of churches – seven churches to whom it is addressed as a letter.

Each of these writings would originally have belonged to the church in one particular town or group of towns – the church or churches for whom it was written. Their preservation bears testimony to the way in which these documents were treasured by the churches as apostolic testimony to Christ and the gospel – though we need also to recognise that there are some letters that have been lost.¹³ One church might then seek to obtain a copy of the writings possessed by a neighbour and in this way collections of New Testament writings began to circulate among the churches.

In the middle of the second century an Assyrian Christian named Tatian had the idea of putting together a harmony of the Gospels to give a single account of the life and teaching of Jesus. The resultant work was called Diatessaron (meaning, through four). Copies of this work, and of commentaries upon it suggest that it was constructed from the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John with which we are familiar. This work bears testimony to the early dating of the four Gospels from which it was formed and that these four Gospels were viewed as the authoritative accounts of the life of Christ.

We have similar historical evidence that Paul's letters were circulating together from early in the second century. It is not unlikely that they were collated even in New Testament times, perhaps by

¹² The *Gospel of Thomas* is a collection of a little over 100 supposed sayings of Jesus recorded by Thomas. The document comes from the second century and bears evidence of gnostic influences with its emphasis on “secret sayings” of Jesus. Nevertheless it bears testimony to the way in which collections of sayings may have circulated. It is also argued that a similar collection of Jesus’ teaching may lie behind the common material found in Matthew and Luke but absent from Mark – an otherwise unknown source commonly known as Q.

¹³ Paul’s letters to the Corinthians bear witness to other letters which he wrote to them that have not been preserved – 1 Cor. 5:9 refers to a “former letter”, and in 2 Cor. 2:4 Paul refers to a “sorrowful letter.” Similarly, Colossians 4:16 mentions a letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in Laodicea. Paul suggests that, when each church had read its letter, they swapped them over and that each read the letter he had sent to the other. Some think that the letter we know as Ephesians is actually the lost letter to the Christians at Laodicea.

Luke. 2 Peter 3:15,16¹⁴ seems to suggest that Paul's letters were a recognisable body of literature which was considered as Scripture alongside the Old Testament. The oldest surviving manuscript of the Pauline letters is the Chester Beatty codex p46 dating from about AD 200. This does not include the Pastoral Epistles but it does include Hebrews.

Luke's second volume, Acts, forms a natural bridge between the Gospel accounts and the letters of Paul and would have encouraged the assembling of all of this material into a single book.

And here we need to mention a new technology. The end of the first century saw the arrival of the Codex. Instead of books being written in columns on long strips of material to be made into a scroll, they were written on folded pieces of paper that were then sewn together at the fold to make what we familiar with as a book. This new technology seems to have been eagerly exploited by Christians who saw it as the gift of God, enabling them to assemble their Scriptures into a single volume. But which books should be included in this volume and which excluded?

The age of Controversy

It was controversy that forced the Christian community to state explicitly which writings they viewed as sacred Scripture.

In about 140 AD, a man named Marcion began to teach some rather strange doctrines. He claimed to base his teaching on that of the Apostle Paul but he believed that law and grace were absolutely opposed to one another. He rejected the Old Testament, claiming that it spoke of an inferior god to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁵ Marcion's Scripture consisted of an edited version of Luke's Gospel, excluding, among other things, the birth narratives of Christ since he believed Jesus had descended from heaven. The only other documents he accepted were edited versions of Paul's epistles (without the Pastorals). Marcion cut out any bits which he considered to be inconsistent with his own understanding of the gospel and particularly anything which suggested an element of continuity between Judaism and the Christian message – such as Paul's assertion that believing Gentiles are children of Abraham. Such an edited New Testament challenged the church to make clear the true extent of the word of God.

If Marcion wanted to cut out parts of the New Testament there were others that wanted to add material of their own.

In the second century and beyond there were false teachers who claimed that Christ and the Apostles had passed on orally "secret teachings" additional to what had been committed to writing. These teachers claimed to have knowledge of such secret teachings and they promised to pass on these to their disciples. A body of writings began to be produced by such "gnostics". Gnostic writers:

- Suggested that the god of the Old Testament was an inferior and imperfect god, unlike the God revealed by Jesus Christ
- They drew a distinction between the material world – the creation of the inferior god – and the spiritual world
- They denied the real incarnation and humanity of Christ

¹⁴ "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."

¹⁵ It's not difficult to find neo-Marcionites amongst Christians today!

- They claimed to have secret knowledge that was essential if you were to rise from earth through the various spiritual realms to the highest heavens

Such additions to the Gospel challenged the church to define the limit of the canon of Scriptural teaching.¹⁶

In addition, from the middle of the second century various collections of fables concerning Jesus and the apostles began to circulate among the churches having such titles as “Acts of Peter”, “Acts of Paul”, “Acts of Andrew”, “Gospel of Thomas” etc. The church needed to respond to such writings by drawing a clear dividing line between such pious forgeries and the genuine Gospels, Acts and letters.

Defining the Canon

The earliest list, still in existence, of documents recognised as New Testament Scriptures is the Muratorian Fragment dating from the end of the second century – i.e. 100 years after the New Testament documents were written. The list consisted of:

- 4 Gospels and Acts
- Paul's letters, all 13 of them
- Jude
- 1 and 2 John
- Apocalypse of John or Revelation
- Apocalypse of Peter

It rejected the Shepherd of Hermas and Gnostic writings.

Origen, a biblical scholar of the early part of the third century, distinguished undisputed New Testament documents from those over which there was disagreement among the churches. The undisputed ones, according to Origen, were:

- 4 Gospels and Acts
- The Pauline Epistles
- 1 Peter
- 1 John
- Revelation / Apocalypse of John

Disputed scriptures were:

- Hebrews
- 2 Peter
- 2 and 3 John
- James
- Jude.

¹⁶ In his book, *Surprised by Hope*, Tom Wright comments, “The discovery of the Nag Hammadi scrolls (a library of gnostic texts found in Upper Egypt) has in our day fuelled a desire to reinterpret Christianity itself in terms of a supposedly original gnostic spirituality which contrasts sharply with the very concrete kingdom-of-God-on-earth announced by the Jesus of the canonical gospels. Travel far enough down that road, and you will end up with the blatant and outrageous conspiracy theories of a book like *The Da Vinci Code*. But there are many who, without going that far, have come to assume that some kind of Gnosticism is what genuine Christianity was supposed to be about.” [I.e. they suppose that the gospel is about escape from earth to heaven.] Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007) p. 102.

Origen admitted that Hebrews often circulated with the Pauline letters, but he believes that it was written by someone else. As for who its author might have been, Origen declared that God alone knows. Origen also mentions the Didache, the Letter of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas as spiritual works, valued among the churches, but not, in his opinion, of the same weight as the apostolic writings.

Eusebius in the early fourth century was asked by the Emperor Constantine to prepare 50 Bibles for the churches of his new capital city, Constantinople. Before undertaking this task, Eusebius produced three lists of books. In the first he included all those writings which were universally accepted among the churches as Scripture. This list consisted of:

- 4 Gospels and Acts
- The Epistles of Paul and Hebrews
- 1 Peter
- 1 John
- Revelation / Apocalypse of John

Despite including Hebrews in this list, Eusebius expressed personal doubts about the authority of this letter.

The second list consisted of those writings which were accepted by the majority of the churches. This list was made up of:

- James
- Jude
- 2 Peter
- 2 and 3 John

The third list consisted of works generally regarded as spurious and included:

- The Acts of Paul
- The Shepherd of Hermas
- The Apocalypse of Peter
- The Gospel of Thomas.

The Bibles produced by Eusebius for Constantine contained all the books on the first two lists and consisted of exactly the same 27 New Testament books that we have in our Bibles today. This was the list that was affirmed as New Testament Scripture at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, a council presided over by Constantine.

The extent and limits of the New Testament canon have not been the subject of serious debate since the fourth century – even though Luther disliked the letter of James and called it “an epistle of straw”.

Constantine and the New Testament Canon

Is it true then that the canon of the New Testament was only decided when the Roman Empire took over Christianity with the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century AD? Or, to ask an even more

pointed question, did Constantine and the Roman Empire decide what constituted the New Testament?¹⁷

It's important to note that the process of defining the canon of Scripture, whether of the Old Testament or New, does not *create* Scripture but rather *recognises* that certain books and not others constitute Scripture. The majority of the New Testament books had long been recognised as authoritative within the Christian community, particularly the 4 Gospels and the Pauline Epistles which were recognised from the beginning of the second century. Discussion concerned only a few books – those mentioned in the second and third lists of Eusebius.¹⁸ The Council of Nicea may have resolved the debates over these marginal books, but it did not create the New Testament, let alone create the Bible.¹⁹

¹⁷ One, admittedly cranky website seeking to prove that connection between UFOs and the Bible puts this view succinctly when it states “There was no specific list or accounting of all the books that made up the Bible until the commission of the first Bible by the Emperor Constantine in the 4th Century AD.”

¹⁸ John Barton comments concerning the New Testament canon, “Canonicity is generally not a matter of being simply ‘in’ or ‘out’: there is a marginal category of books whose status is unclear, not unlike the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament. Books fall into one of *three* categories, not just of two.” John Barton, *How the Bible Came to Be* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 1997), p. 83.

¹⁹ “There is a distinction between the canonicity of a book of the Bible and its authority. Its canonicity is dependent upon its authority. For when we ascribe canonicity to a book we simply mean that it belongs to the canon or list. But why does it so belong? Because it was recognised as possessing special authority. People frequently speak and write as if the authority with which the books of the Bible are invested in the minds of Christians is the result of their having been included in the sacred list. But the historical fact is the other way about; they were and are included in the list because they were acknowledged as authoritative.” F F Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Basingstoke: Pickering and Inglis, Fourth Revised and Enlarged Edition, 1984), pp. 86-87

And here I cannot forbear quoting the final paragraphs from the conclusion of Metzger's masterful book on the New Testament Canon. “The distinction between the New Testament writings and later ecclesiastical literature is not based upon arbitrary fiat; it has historical reasons. The generations following the apostles bore witness to the effect that certain writings had on their faith and life. The self-authenticating witness of the word testified to the divine origin of the gospel that had brought the Church into being; such is the implication of Paul's words to the Thessalonians: ‘We thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of any human being but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you believers’ (1 Thess. 2:13). During the second and succeeding centuries, this authoritative word was found, not in the utterances of contemporary leaders and teachers, but in the apostolic testimony contained within certain early Christian writings. From this point of view the church did not create the canon, but came to recognise, accept, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the church. If this fact is obscured, one comes into serious conflict not with dogma but with history.

“By way of conclusion, and in comparison with the dozens of gospels, acts, letters, and apocalypses that have recently come to the Church's attention in the Nag Hammadi library, one can say with even greater assurance than before that no books or collection of books from the ancient Church may be compared with the New Testament in importance for Christian history or doctrine. The knowledge that our New Testament contains the best sources for the history of Jesus is the most valuable knowledge that can be obtained from study of the early history of the canon. In fact, whatever judgment we may form of the Christianity of the earliest times, it is certain that those who discerned the limits of the canon had a clear and balanced perception of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“But such words of commendation are superfluous. Neither religious nor artistic works really gain anything by having an official stamp put on them. If, for example, all the academics of music in the world were to unite in declaring Bach and Beethoven to be great musicians, we should reply, ‘Thank you for nothing; we knew that already.’ And what the musical public can recognise unaided, those with spiritual discernment in the early church were able to recognise in the case of their sacred writings through what Calvin called the interior witness of the Holy Spirit. The *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*, however, does not create the authority of

In Conclusion

We have looked at something of the history of how we came to get our Bible. There is much more that could be said of debates over the detail of the text of Scripture and of the history of translation which has given us our English Bible. These things, though fascinating, are well beyond the scope of this paper. I want rather to conclude with a comment on the authority of Scripture.

On the website of this church is a document entitled **What do we believe as a Church?** It states, “There are certain fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith without which the organisation cannot be said to be a true Church.” That’s what I call nailing your colours to the mast. Point nine in the list of ten “fundamental doctrines” is, “Belief in the Bible as the authentic and authoritative word of God. It is God-breathed and Christians can know its proper meaning as the Holy Spirit reveals the truth.”

Given the history we have traced and the various debates over what should be in our Bible and what should be left out, let me ask this deliberately provocative question: “How can we be sure what is authoritative if we are not absolutely 100% certain what’s in and what’s out?”

I want to suggest to you very humbly that this is the wrong place to start concerning authority – and indeed it’s not where your statement of faith begins. We are Christians because we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and that all authority in heaven and on earth is given to him. We receive the Scriptures because they bear witness to him. All of the Old Testament – the Scriptures received by Jesus – points forward to him and finds its focus and fulfilment in him.²⁰ The Old Testament tells the story of God’s redemptive purposes which culminate in God’s coming in Christ to redeem his people. The New Testament is all about Jesus Christ: it’s about what God has done in Christ to establish his kingdom and about the call of Christ upon our lives as he works through us to make his kingdom come.

It is the unique and authoritative character of Jesus Christ that makes Scripture unique and authoritative. It is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus, by whose breath Scripture was written, who impresses its authority upon our lives as he refashions us in the image of Christ.²¹

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Scripture (which exists already in its own right), but is the means by which believers come to acknowledge that authority.” Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 286-288.

²⁰ See Jesus’ words to the Jewish leaders in John 5:39

²¹ A paragraph from F F Bruce is well worth quoting here. “The Bible is not simply an anthology; there is a unity which binds the whole together. An anthology is compiled by an anthologist, but no anthologist compiled the Bible. Somehow or other it *grew* in the course of these many centuries until at length it attained full stature as the Bible which we know. And it grew under the hand of him who makes all living things grow, ‘the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who spake by the prophets’. The unifying principle which makes the Bible a living whole ... is Christ himself, the Bringer of salvation. The Holy Scriptures in their entirety were given to make us wise unto salvation through faith in him and to teach us how, in the divine fellowship which links all the heirs of salvation in Christ, we ought to direct our ways according to the will of God.” F F Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, pp. 79-80

Select Bibliography

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F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Glasgow: Chapter House Ltd., 1988)

Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)

For anyone wishing to read further on the subjects discussed in this paper, I would recommend starting with the two books by FF Bruce. They make easy and fascinating reading. Beckwith's book on the Old Testament canon is a *tour de force*. It is detailed in its examination and discussion of sources and makes hard (and even tedious) reading for those who want to get to a quick conclusion. Beckwith illustrates the complexity of the issues involved but also approaches his subject with dogmatic and apologetic rather than historical and investigatory interest. Metzger's book is, in my view, the finest on the subject of the canon of the New Testament. He argues clearly and carefully as a New Testament scholar. (His twin volume on *The Text of the New Testament* is equally masterful and helpful on its subject.)

On the authority of Scripture, I would thoroughly recommend Tom Wright's *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005). Tom Wright argues that Scripture is the story of God's redemptive purposes that have their focus in Christ. They exercise authority over us because we have become part of that story – it is our script. For more on Christ as the focus of the story see his recent book, *How God Became King* (London: SPCK, 2012).