

Who decided which books were included in the Bible?

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1. This question is very important because Christians hold the Bible to be the word of God regarding questions of faith and life. It is the source we look to first for information about God and His activity.
2. **2 Timothy 3:16-17** 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.
 - a. Which books are God-breathed "Scripture", and how do we know?
 - b. Christians for the past 1,850 years have largely agreed that the 66 books in our modern Bibles are uniquely inspired and therefore authoritative for teaching the church. These 66 books are called the Biblical **canon** which means the 'rule' or 'standard'.
3. **Formation of the Canon**
 - a. This canon was created by God through inspiration ["God-breathed" **2 Timothy 3:16**] and then recognized by the church for what it is.
 - b. **The Old Testament Canon**
 - i. The 39 book Old Testament canon (the Tanakh) was set before Jesus' day.
 - ii. Jesus accepted these books as authoritative through various ways he referred to the Old Testament. For example: **Luke 24:44** Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." In this passage Jesus is referring to the 3-fold arrangement of the Old Testament used by Jews which is called the Tanakh. It includes the Torah/Law of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy), Prophets (Isaiah-Malachi), and Writings/Psalms.
 - c. **The New Testament Canon**
 - i. Beginning around 140, church leaders around the Roman Empire began to investigate and determine what the limits of the New Testament canon should be in response to:
 1. **Marcion**: A teacher who developed a view of God that conflicted with the New Testament authors. Marcion blended Greek philosophy with Christianity and established his own canon in 140 that excluded 16 of the 27 books of the New Testament and rejected the Old Testament.
 2. **Pseudepigrapha** ("false writings"): Books written in the 2nd and 3rd centuries appeared with the names of dead apostles falsely ascribed to them. Examples: *Gospel of Thomas*, *Epistle of Barnabas*.
 - ii. Writings by church leaders in the 2nd century include discussions about the canon. Later councils did not decide which books got in and which did not. Rather, they recognized which biblical books were already accepted as authoritative within the broad church.

- iii. Criteria used by the early church leaders in determining the New Testament canon:
 - 1. **Authorship:** Was the book written by an apostle (a confirmed eyewitness of the events of Jesus named by Jesus or affirmed by those eyewitnesses) or a known co-worker of those apostles?
 - a. We see this principle in the writings of John who was an eyewitness (1 John 1:1-3, 5; 2:24, 4:2-6, 4:14).
 - b. In 2 Peter 3:15-16 Peter refers to Paul's writings as Scripture.
 - c. Paul is acknowledged as a leader in the early church by the eyewitnesses (Acts 15, Galatians 2:8-9).
 - d. No book written after 120 was ever considered for inclusion in the canon.ⁱ
 - 2. **Consistency:** Is the book consistent with the other recognized books?
 - 3. **Acceptance:** Has it received broad acceptance in the rest of the church?
- iv. In 367 our exact New Testament canon list was published by Athanasius and has remained the standard New Testament canon.
 - 1. Question: Isn't this rather late?
 - 2. Answer: Not when you consider the following:
 - a. The need for a canon was not pressing until the time of Marcion and the appearance of the Pseudepigrapha in the 2nd century.
 - b. The [Muratorian Fragment](#) from 170 is the earliest church canon list we have and it is consistent with Athanasius' list.
 - c. The church was officially persecuted by the Roman Empire until 313. It was difficult for a broad-based council of church leaders to gather before that time.
 - d. During the first three centuries of the church, its spread was rapid, its structure was loose, and communication was slow.
 - 3. See how our present-day canon compares with other known [early lists](#).
 - 4. A more detailed outline of how the NT canon came to be can be found [here](#).
- 4. The [Apocrypha](#) was added to the Old Testament in 1546 by the Roman Catholic Church in part because it contained material which supported certain Roman Catholic doctrines, such as purgatory, praying for the dead, and the treasury of merit.
- 5. **Resources** for further reading:
 - a. Books:
 - i. *Journey from Texts to Translations*, Paul Wegner
 - ii. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable*, F.F. Bruce
 - iii. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, Bruce Metzger
 - iv. *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books*, Michael Kruger

b. Online:

- i. bible-researcher.com/canon.html
- ii. michaeljkruger.com/
- iii. carm.org/questions/about-bible

ⁱ Ben Witherington, [*Why the 'lost gospels' lost out*](#), CT June 2004