

# how we got the bible

The Bible sets the bounds for orthodox beliefs for Christians around the world. While some churches describe themselves as “Bible believing,” one would be hard pressed to find Christian churches that reject the Bible outright. In truth, Christians differ on how they interpret the Bible, while the Bible itself is taken as a given.

The Bible is not a single book, but a collection of 66 books written over more than a millennium. There are histories, poetry, letters and more all within the two divisions we now call the Old and New Testaments. We know a lot about how we got the writings contained in the Bible as well as why some books did not make it in to our scripture.

## the canon

It was not until Council of Carthage in 397 A.D. that there was an official list of the books of the Bible. This was more than 350 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, that the church officially set a canon of scripture, or an official list of what is in and what is out. The 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament had been fairly well set since at least the year 150, but there were some alternatives rejected along the way, most notably The Shepherd of Hermas very nearly made it in (except it was not apostolic in origin, nor routinely read in church) and Revelation nearly did not make it in (it was not read in all churches early on as it was easily misunderstood).

## the ones that got away

The group of biblical scholars known as The Jesus Seminar created a book called The Complete Gospels giving the text for the 16 Gospels and Gospel fragments telling of Jesus life that did not make it into the Bible along with the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which were included. Many of these texts were written well after Jesus life, more than 100 years later, by people with no direct knowledge of the events described. This demonstrates why there was a need for criteria in selection.

## CRITERIA

The three criteria for selection were:

- **Apostolic Origin**—attributed to and based on the preaching and teaching of the first-generation apostles (or their close companions).
- **Universal Acceptance**—acknowledged by all major Christian communities in the ancient world (by the end of the fourth century). This included the idea of liturgical use, that the scriptures are ones read publicly when Christian communities gather for worship.
- **True Doctrine**—Did it conform to the creeds and the rest of the canon of scripture.

## EVIDENCE

Our earliest source of information on the canon of scripture comes through a text from 170 A.D. known as the Muratorian Fragment (a fragment as the beginning is missing). This text lists the books then routinely being used in churches as consisting of the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; the Book of Acts; 13 letters of Paul; and some other writings. This early list differed from the current New Testament in not including Hebrews, James, I and II Peter, and 3 John, while adding the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Apocalypse of Peter and noting that Revelation was not used in all churches and The Shepherd of Hermas should be read, but not in public worship. All Gnostic writings are rejected.

A second important source is the list was that of Tertullian (who died in 220 A.D.). He cites all the books of the New Testament with the exception of II Peter, James, II John, and III John and mentioned The Shepherd of Hermas to be valuable, though not scriptural.

Church historian Eusebius around 310 A.D. which listed books in four categories: recognized, disputed, spurious and heretical. All of the current New Testament was listed as recognized or disputed. And finally, in his Christmas letter of 367, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria listed the current canon of 27 writings exactly as it appears in the New Testament. The Council of Carthage would ratify this list 30 years later.

See [www.ntcanon.org](http://www.ntcanon.org) for more on the above references.



# glossary

**Canon**—This is from the Greek *kanon*, meaning a rule or measuring stick. Canon can refer in church terms to any decisions of a church council. With regards scripture, the canon is the official list of the books of the Bible. The canon was not formalized until the Council of Carthage in 397 A.D.

**Dead Sea Scrolls**—Scrolls and fragments discovered between 1947 and 1960 in seven sites near the Qumran community along the Dead Sea in Israel. There are remains of more than 750 Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek documents, dating from the 3rd century B.C. to 50 A.D. These documents include texts found in the current Bible together with documents not found in scripture.

**Gnosticism**—Gnostics taught that they had special “gnosis” or knowledge passed down from a secret tradition teaching that the spirit was all good and the flesh and material things were bad. Gnostics taught that Jesus was a spirit-being who only appeared to be human. Writings countering these claims are in John’s epistles. Gnosticism was fully rejected by the end of the 2nd century A.D.

**Nag Hammadi**—This was the site in upper Egypt of the discovery in 1945 of thirteen ancient codices containing over fifty texts. Many of these text were known of through quotes in other works, but not through complete texts. These works were Gnostic Christian writings ruled as heretical by the second century. Included in the find were the collections of sayings known as The Gospel of Thomas, which some scholars today argue was as early and as apostolic in origin as the four Gospels found in scripture.

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