

The Anchor Q&A

How was the Bible compiled?

A Little Background

A common question asked about the Bible is, “who decided what books should be included”? At the heart of this question is a concern about whether the books in there are the ones God wanted to be in there. Should all of those books be in there? Were there other Divinely inspired books left out that He wants us to find? Let’s start by defining a new word we will use in this study.

Canon – a list or collection of books that are accepted as the authoritative rule for faith and practice

The history of the Bible spans thousands of years. As we discussed in a previous lesson, the Lord used godly men to write the books of the Bible as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:21) This took place over approximately 1,600 years. It took even longer for each of the books to be gathered together into one volume and then translated into English, our native language. Who decided what books should be in the Bible? The simple answer to this question is God.

Man did not determine canon, but recognized the canon established by God.

This is a very important concept to understand. Our focus in this lesson will be to look at canonization from a Biblical perspective.

The Concept of Canon

If there is to be a canon, or official set of books in the Bible, then that concept should be found in the Word of God. Look at the following passages and summarize their teachings.

Deuteronomy 4:22 – God instructed the Israelites to preserve His Word as He delivered it to them. They were not to add or take away an portions.

Proverbs 30:5-6 – God promised to expose all who would try to add to His Word. Their lies would be made obvious and therefore would be easy to differentiate from the truth.

Ecclesiastes 3:14 – God’s works will last forever. If the Bible is His work, it will also endure despite men’s best efforts to destroy it.

John 12:48 – Jesus said that men would either reject or embrace His Words and they will endure and be used by God to judge men on the last day.

Canonization of the Old Testament

Remember, men didn’t determine what books should be in the Old Testament. The Lord made that decision when He inspired those books. Man’s part was to recognize what the Lord had already done. As we learned from the previous passages, the Lord will make sure His Word is preserved!

How quickly would an inspired book be recognized as part of the Scriptures? We know from Deuteronomy 4:22, that the words penned by Moses were immediately recognized as Scripture and preserved. What about other Old Testament books? Let’s look at a couple of examples.

The Book of Joshua. Read *Joshua 24:26*.

Joshua wrote his history book directly into the law that was being preserved by the Israelites, indicating it was to be included as Scripture.

The Book of Jeremiah. Read *Daniel 9:2*.

The prophet Jeremiah and Daniel lived at the same time. Jeremiah was much older than Daniel and died sometime around 574 B.C. During his lifetime, he wrote the Old Testament books of Jeremiah and Lamentations. In Daniel 9:2, written about 37 years later, Daniel references the prophecies of Jeremiah as Scripture.

So when did the entire Old Testament get put together in one book? Read the following passage.

Amos 8:11-12 – Amos warns of a spiritual famine when new revelation would cease.

Whether the passage in Amos is prophecy of the time we are about to talk about, or not, it is a reminder that the Lord did put Israel through times when no new revelation was given. According to Jewish historical traditions, prophecy ceased around 400 B.C. in Israel. They recognized that the Lord was no longer speaking to them and giving divine revelation. How could they tell?

When the Lord spoke through the prophets, He would often affirm their message with miracles, signs, and wonders. Also, a true prophet's prophecies were fulfilled 100% of the time. It was obvious to them that no one met these criteria any longer.

Once they recognized that new books of Scripture were no longer being written, it became important to preserve the ones they already had. According to Josephus, a Jewish historian, there were four criteria used to determine the Old Testament canon.¹

1. The book contained no contradictions with other books of Scripture;
2. The book was written by a prophet or an individual with Divine authority;
3. It originated through inspiration from God; and
4. It was accepted by the Jews as authoritative.

Jesus lived around 400 years after the last book in the Old Testament was written and a few hundred years after they collected all of the books into one larger volume, known to us as the Old Testament. What did Jesus think about the accuracy of the Old Testament canon?

Luke 11:50-51 – In Jewish Bibles, the Old Testament has a different order of the books. Abel was the first martyr in the books of Genesis and Zechariah was the last Old Testament martyr recorded in the last book of the Jewish Bible, 2 Chronicles. Jesus indirectly referenced their canon.

Matthew 5:17-18 – “The Law and the Prophets” was an expression used by the Jews to refer to the entirety of Scripture. Jesus believed that the Old Testament canon was perfect and complete as preserved in His day and all prophecy therein would be fulfilled.

Canonization of the New Testament

We will see a lot of similarities between the canonization of the New Testament and the Old Testament. How quickly were the books of the New Testament recognized as part of the Scriptures?

2 Peter 3:15-16 – Peter refers to the writings of the Apostle Paul as Scripture.

1 Timothy 5:8 – Paul quotes from both the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus in this passage. Either a gospel was already written or the oral tradition was still reliable.

During the writing of the New Testament, did the writers realize they were writing on God's behalf?

Galatians 1:1 – Paul recognized his calling and ministry as a Divine decree.

1 Corinthians 7:5-10 – Paul clearly understood that the Lord was speaking through him. If he wanted to say something else, he sought permission and clarified it in the writing.

When did the Lord stop using men to write new books of Scripture? Ephesians 2:20 states that the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Although all of the apostles and prophets passed away almost two thousand years ago, their work lives on in the writings of Scripture. The Lord almost

¹ Contra Apion 1:37-42

exclusively used apostles to write the New Testament, with the exception of some godly men who wrote under the direction of an Apostle. Books of the New Testament ceased to be written at the death of the Apostles. The newest book of the New Testament is Revelation, written by the Apostle John who outlived all the other Apostles. Since his death, no other books of Scripture were written.

What were the four criteria used to determine canonicity? One old copy of Scripture, called the Muraturian Canon, eludes to four principles used to recognize what books were to be included in the New Testament.

1. Was it written by an apostle or someone with recognized authority?
2. Did it agree with the Old Testament canon?
3. Did it enjoy universal acceptance?
4. Did it have a self-authenticating divine nature? (see Hebrews 4:12)

Is the New Testament Canon closed? Could any other books ever be added?

We learned early in this lesson that the Lord preserves His truth. To think that there was a book we needed, but that Satan succeeded in hiding for two thousand years is hard to imagine. The Lord preserved what is necessary for us. If a new book were to be added to the Bible, someone who was divinely approved would have to emerge to write the book. As in Old Testament and New Testament times, the Lord would have to demonstrate that He was with the individual through miracles or some other means. We don't have to worry about this issue. If the Lord wants another book to be added, He will make it clear.

What has the Lord done to demonstrate that the Bible, as we know it, is accurate?

He has preserved it. It has stood the test of time and it still has the same life-changing power that it had when it was written. A lie would not have this power. Remember the words of Proverbs 30:5-6. The Lord will expose all who seek to alter His Word.

Why has the Lord sought to preserve His Word? (see *Hebrews 4:12, Romans 1:16*)

Because it has a life-changing power. It is one of His chosen means of communicating to man. He would not send His Son to die and allow its saving power to fade in the pages of history. It has endured because His love for man has endured.

Revelation, the last book of the Bible, ends with this command. It is a fitting conclusion to this discussion.

Revelation 22:18-19 – “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”