

HOW WAS THE BIBLE FORMED?

The Bible is an assorted collection of ancient writings. Christians believe there is something special about these works because God orchestrated their formation. Of course, ordinary people like you and me wrote the various poems and letters and historical accounts that became books of the Bible. But somehow God inspired these writings, unlike any other works of literature, so that they provide us with a unique and accurate picture of life, history, reality, and God himself.

This raises a question—if so much is riding on this collection of books, how do we know we have the “right” books? What if God inspired someone, but their book didn’t make the cut? Or what if we got the wrong books and, consequently, our whole view of God is wrong?

Fortunately, there’s ample historical documentation about the formation of the Bible that can be of great help as we tackle these challenging questions.

To begin with, little debate exist about the Old Testament. Early in their history, the Jewish people began to collect writings that were important to their history and faith. These included the Ten Commandments and the Law, originally given by God to Moses; historical documents that traced God’s relationship with humanity and Israel; poems, songs, and wisdom literature that Israel used for worship and character formation; and the messages of great prophets whom God called to guide and correct the people.

By the time of Jesus, most Jews considered this collection of works authoritative. This Hebrew Bible included thirty-nine different books (the same books Christians call the Old Testament, though in different order) and described events from the creation of the world until roughly 400 B.C. Various other Jewish books, later called the Apocrypha, were written between 400 B.C. and the time of Jesus, but Jews did not consider them as part of the authoritative canon. Jesus himself only quoted from Old Testament books and never referenced the apocryphal writings. There remain some Christians today (e.g., the Roman Catholic Church) that include the Apocrypha in their Bibles, but neither Jews nor early Christians believed in their authority and we should follow their lead.

The development of the New Testament took place over the first few centuries of the early church. Shortly after Jesus’ death, writings began to appear from a growing group of both Jews and non-Jews who believed he was not only Israel’s messiah, but also a saviour for the world.

First, there were letters between these early Christians, mostly from a preacher named Paul to his converts. But as the movement grew and the stories of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection were told over and over, some individuals accepted the responsibility to accurately record the great events that had unfolded around them. Thus, what emerged from the first century A.D. was an assortment of writings that included “gospel” accounts of Jesus’ life, teachings, and climactic death and resurrection; letters from church leaders to specific individuals or churches regarding specific issues; and apocalyptic writings that describe God’s cosmic plans for history and humanity.

More writings appeared in the centuries that followed, and on some occasions church leaders were faced with decisions regarding which books should be considered biblical. Consensus developed, and in A.D. 367 the respected church leader Athanasius published a universal list of twenty-seven accepted New Testament books, the same books in our Bibles today. As this decision-making process unfolded, several important criteria guided early church leaders. It’s important to understand, however, that these criteria did not appear as a checklist by which bishops “voted” books in or out. Rather, they gradually emerged as Christian communities elevated certain texts as having significant and lasting value for the Christian faith. There were three primary criteria for evaluating a work.

1. Apostolic authorship.

It was important that a work be authored by or associated with an apostolic witness—one of those first generations of people who had actually seen the risen Jesus. This excluded documents that were written much later, as useful as they may be. Second and third century Christians understood that these first apostles could best convey the truth about Jesus' life and its significance.

2. Widespread usage and acceptance.

The early church grew quickly and broadly. As a result, Christians of different backgrounds, nationalities, and even schools of thought developed. But when a text maintained or gained universal usage and acceptance among the vast majority of diverse groups, this attested to its authenticity.

3. Conformity to the rule of faith.

Perhaps the most significant factor regarding the value of a document was its consistency (or lack of) with the general beliefs and practices recognized in early churches. Therefore, writings with especially questionable theology or practices dissimilar to those passed down from the apostles were intensely scrutinized.

In light of these considerations, the four gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline letters, 1 Peter, and 1 John, were universally acknowledged as biblical by the end of the second century. Only Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation faced more scrutiny, but were eventually accepted. Together with the Old Testament, this is the Bible Christians read today.

Ultimately, we believe that God guided the process of the Bible's formation. And while God can reveal himself to humans in many different ways, the Bible remains of chief significance for the church and all who seek him. It is not only an anchor for faith, but also an epic narrative that tells of creation, brokenness, redemption, and hope. And like the ancient Hebrews, early disciples, and Christians of the past 2000 years, in the word of God we can begin to find our place in the story.