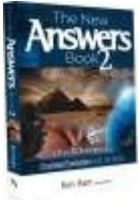


Chapter 17: Why 66?

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Featured In



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How can we be sure that we have the correct 66 books in our Bible? The Bible is a unique volume. It is composed of 66 books by 40 different writers over 1,500 years. But what makes it unique is that it has one consistent storyline running all the way through, and it has just one ultimate author—God. The story is about God’s plan to rescue men and women from the devastating results of the Fall, a plan that was conceived in eternity, revealed through the prophets, and carried out by the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Each writer of the Bible books wrote in his own language and style, using his own mind, and in some cases research, yet each was so overruled by the Holy Spirit that error was not allowed to creep into his work. For this reason, the Bible is understood by Christians to be a book without error.¹

This collection of 66 books is known as the “canon” of Scripture. That word comes from the Hebrew *kaneh* (a rod), and the Greek *kanon* (a reed). Among other things, the words referred equally to the measuring rod of the carpenter and the ruler of the scribe. It became a common word for anything that was the measure by which others were to be judged (see [Galatians 6:16](#), for example). After the apostles, church leaders used it to refer to the body of Christian doctrine accepted by the churches. Clement and Origen of Alexandria, in the third century, were possibly the first to employ the word to refer to the Scriptures (the Old Testament).² From then on, it became more common in Christian use with reference to a collection of books that are fixed in their number, divine in their origin, and universal in their authority.

In the earliest centuries, there was little *debate* among Christians over which books belonged in the Bible; certainly by the time of the church leader

Athanasius in the fourth century, the number of books had long been fixed. He set out the books of the New Testament just as we know them and added:

These are the fountains of salvation, that whoever thirsts may be satisfied by the eloquence which is in them. In them alone is set forth the doctrine of piety. Let no one add to them, nor take anything from them.³

Today, however, there are attempts to undermine the clear witness of history; a host of publications, from the novel to the (supposedly) academic challenge the long-held convictions of Christians and the clear evidence of the past. Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* claimed, “More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only relatively few were chosen for inclusion—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John among them.”⁴ Richard Dawkins, professor of popular science at Oxford, England, has made similar comments.⁵

So, what is the evidence for our collection of 66 books? How certain can we be that these are the correct books to make up our Bible—no more and no less?

The Canon of the Old Testament

The Jews had a clearly defined body of Scriptures that collectively could be summarized as the Torah, or Law. This was fixed early in the life of Israel, and there was no doubt as to which books belonged and which did not. They did not order them in the same way as our Old Testament, but the same books were there. *The Law* was the first five books, known as the Pentateuch, which means “five rolls”—referring to the parchment scrolls on which they were normally written. *The Prophets* consisted of the Former Prophets (unusually for us these included Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah which included Lamentations, and the 12 smaller prophetic books). *The Writings* gathered up the rest. The total amounted generally to 24 books because many books, such as 1 and 2 Samuel and Ezra and Nehemiah, were counted as one.

When was the canon of the Old Testament settled? The simple response is that if we accept the reasonable position that each of the books was written at the time of its history—the first five at the time of Moses, the historical records close to the period they record, the psalms of David during his lifetime, and the prophets written at the time they were given—then the successive stages of acceptance into the canon of Scripture is not hard to fix. Certainly, the Jews generally held this view.

There is a lot of internal evidence that the books of the Old Testament were written close to the time they record. For example, in [2 Chronicles 10:19](#), we have a record from the time of Rehoboam that “Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.” Clearly, therefore, that must have been recorded prior to 721 B.C., when the Assyrians finally crushed Israel and the cream of the population was taken away into captivity—or at the very latest before 588 B.C., when Jerusalem suffered the same fate. We know also that the words of the prophets were written down in their own lifetime; Jeremiah had a secretary called Baruch for this very purpose ([Jeremiah 36:4](#)).

Josephus, the Jewish historian writing around A.D. 90, clearly stated in his defense of Judaism that, unlike the Greeks, the Jews did not have many books:

For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another [as the Greeks have] but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine.⁶

The Council of Jamnia

Between A.D. 90 and 100, a group of Jewish scholars met at Jamnia in Israel to consider matters relating to the Hebrew Scriptures. It has been suggested that the canon of the Jewish Scriptures was agreed here; the reality is that there is no contemporary record of the deliberations at Jamnia and our knowledge is therefore left to the comments of later rabbis. The idea that there was no clear canon of the Hebrew Scriptures before A.D. 100 is not only in conflict with the testimony of Josephus and others, but has also been seriously challenged more recently. It is now generally accepted that Jamnia was not a council nor did it pronounce on the Jewish canon; rather it was an assembly that examined and discussed the Hebrew Scriptures. The purpose of Jamnia was not to decide which books should be included among the sacred writings, but to examine those that were already accepted.⁷

The Apocrypha and the Septuagint

There is a cluster of about 14 books, known as the Apocrypha, which were written some time between the close of the Old Testament (after 400 B.C.) and the beginning of the New. They were never considered as part of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Jews themselves clearly ruled them out by the confession that there was, throughout that period, no voice of the prophets in the land.⁸ They looked forward to a day when “a faithful prophet” should appear.⁹

The Old Testament had been translated into Greek during the third century B.C., and this translation is known as the Septuagint, a word meaning 70, after the supposedly 70 men involved in the translation. It was the Greek Septuagint that the disciples of Jesus frequently used since Greek was the common language of the day.

Whether or not the Septuagint also contained the Apocrypha is impossible to say for certain, since although the earliest copies of the Septuagint available today do include the Apocrypha—placed at the end—these are dated in the fifth century and therefore cannot be relied upon to tell us what was common half a millennium earlier. Significantly, neither Jesus nor any of the apostles ever quoted from the Apocrypha, even though they were obviously using the Greek Septuagint. Josephus was familiar with the Septuagint and made use of it, but he never considered the Apocrypha part of the Scriptures.¹⁰

The Dead Sea Scrolls

The collection of scrolls that has become available since the discovery of the first texts in 1947 near Wadi Qumran, close by the Dead Sea, does not provide scholars with a definitive list of Old Testament books, but even if it did, it would not necessarily tell us what mainstream orthodox Judaism believed. After all, the Samaritans used only their own version of the Pentateuch, but they did not represent mainstream Judaism.

What can be said for certain, however, is that all Old Testament books are represented among the Qumran collection with the exception of Esther, and they are quoted frequently as Scripture. Nothing else, certainly not the Apocrypha, is given the same status.

In spite of suggestions by critical scholars to the contrary, there is no evidence, not even from the Dead Sea Scrolls, that there were other books contending for a place within the Old Testament canon.

For the Jews, therefore, Scripture as a revelation from God through the prophets ended around 450 B.C. with the close of the book of Malachi. This was the Bible of Jesus and His disciples, and it was precisely the same in content as our Old Testament.

The New Testament scholar John Wenham concludes: “There is no reason to doubt that the canon of the Old Testament is substantially Ezra’s canon, just as the Pentateuch was substantially Moses’ canon.”¹¹

Jesus, His Disciples, and the Early Church Leaders

For their part, the Christian community both in the days of Jesus and in the centuries following had no doubt that there was a body of books that made up the records of the old covenant. Since there are literally hundreds of direct quotations or clear allusions to Old Testament passages by Jesus and the apostles, it is evident what the early Christians thought of the Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament writers rarely quote from other books and never with the same authority. The Apocrypha is entirely absent in their writing.

While it is true that some of the early church leaders quoted from the Apocrypha—though very rarely compared to their use of the Old Testament books—there is no evidence that they recognized these books as equal to the Old Testament.¹²

The conviction that there was a canon of old covenant books that could not be added to or subtracted from doubtless led the early Christians to expect the same divine order for the story of Jesus, the record of the early church, and the letters of the apostles.

The Canon of the New Testament

The earliest available list of New Testament books is known as the Muratorian Canon and is dated around A.D. 150. It includes the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, Jude, two (perhaps all three) letters of John, and the Revelation of John. It claims that these were accepted by the “universal church.” This leaves out 1 and 2 Peter, James, and Hebrews. However, 1 Peter was widely accepted by this time and may be an oversight by the compiler (or the later copyist). No other books are present except the Wisdom of Solomon, but this must be an error since that book belongs in the Apocrypha and no one ever added it to the New Testament!

By A.D. 240, Origen from Alexandria was using all our 27 books as “Scripture,” and no others, and referred to them as the “New Testament.”¹³ He believed them to be “inspired by the Spirit.”¹⁴ But it was not until A.D. 367 that Athanasius, also from Alexandria, provided us with an actual *list* of New Testament books identical with ours.¹⁵

However, long before we have that list, the evidence shows that the 27 books, and only those, were widely accepted as Scripture.

Why Did It Take So Long?

The New Testament was not all neatly printed and bound by the Macedonian Pub. Co. at Thessalonica shortly after Paul’s death and sent out by the pallet

load into all the bookstores and kiosks of the Roman Empire. Here are six reasons why it took time for the books of the New Testament to be gathered together.

- 1. The originals were scattered across the whole empire. The Roman Empire reached from Britain to Persia, and it would have taken time for any church even to learn about all the letters Paul had written, let alone gather copies of them.**
- 2. No scroll could easily contain more than one or two books. It would be impossible to fit more than one Gospel onto a scroll, and even when codices (books) were used, the entire New Testament would be extremely bulky and very expensive to produce. It was therefore far more convenient for New Testament books to be copied singly or in small groups.**
- 3. The first-century Christians expected the immediate return of Christ. Because of this, they didn't plan for the long-term future of the Church.**
- 4. No one church or leader bossed all the others. There were strong and respected leaders among the churches, but Christianity had no supreme bishop who dictated to all the others which books belonged to the canon and which did not.**
- 5. The early leaders assumed the authority of the Gospels and the apostles. It was considered sufficient to quote the Gospels and apostles, since their authority was self-evident. They did not need a list—inconvenient for us, but not significant for them.**
- 6. Only when the heretics attacked the truth was the importance of a canon appreciated. It was not until the mid-second century that the Gnostics and others began writing their own *pseudepigrapha* (false writing); this prompted orthodox leaders to become alert to the need for stating which books had been recognized across the churches.**

In the light of all this, the marvel is not how long it took before the majority of the churches acknowledged a completed canon of the New Testament, but how soon after their writing each book was accepted as authoritative.

Facts about the New Testament Canon

- **There were only ever the four Gospels used by the churches for the life and ministry of Jesus. Other pseudo-gospels were written but these were immediately rejected by the churches across the empire as spurious.**
- **The Acts of the Apostles and 13 letters of Paul were all accepted without question or hesitation from the earliest records.**
- **Apart from James, Jude, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation, all other New Testament books had been universally accepted by A.D. 180. Only a few churches hesitated over these seven.**
- **Well before the close of the first century, Clement of Rome quoted from or referred to more than half the New Testament and claimed that Paul wrote “in the Spirit” and that his letters were “Scriptures.”**
- **Polycarp, who was martyred in A.D. 155, quoted from 16 NT books and referred to them as “Sacred Scriptures.”**
- **Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the most able defenders of the faith, around A.D. 180 quoted over 1,000 passages from all but four or five New Testament books, and called them “the Scriptures” given by the Holy Spirit.**
- **Tertullian of Carthage, around A.D. 200, was the first serious expositor and used almost all the NT books. They were equated with the Old Testament, and he referred to “the majesty of our Scriptures.” He clearly possessed a canon almost, if not wholly, identical to ours.**
- **By A.D. 240, Origen of Alexandria was using all our 27 books, and only those, as Scripture alongside the Old Testament books.**

And these are just examples of many of the church leaders at this time.

What Made a Book “Scripture”?

At first, the churches had no need to define what made a book special and equal to the Old Testament Scriptures. If the letter came from Paul or Peter, that was sufficient. However, it was not long before others began writing additional letters and gospels either to fill the gaps or to propagate their own ideas. Some tests became necessary, and during the first 200 years, five tests were used at various times.

1. Apostolic—does it come from an apostle?

The first Christians asked, “Was it written by an apostle or under the direction of an apostle?” They expected this just as the Jews had expected theirs to be underwritten by the prophets. Paul was insistent that his readers should be reassured that the letters they received actually came from his pen (e.g., *2 Thessalonians 3:17*).

2. Authentic—does it have the ring of truth?

The authoritative voice of the prophets, “This is what the Lord says,” is matched by the apostles’ claim to write not the words of men but the words of God (*1 Thessalonians 2:13*). It was the internal witness of the texts themselves that was strong evidence of canonicity.

3. Ancient—has it been used from the earliest times?

Most of the false writings were rejected simply because they were too new to be apostolic. Early in the fourth century, Athanasius listed the New Testament canon as we know it today and claimed that these were the books “received by us through tradition as belonging to the Canon.”¹⁶

4. Accepted—are most of the churches using it?

Since, as we have seen, it took time for letters to circulate among the churches, it is all the more significant that 23 of the 27 books were almost universally accepted well before the middle of the second century.

When tradition carries the weight of the overwhelming majority of churches throughout the widely scattered Christian communities across the vast Roman Empire, with no one church controlling the beliefs of all the others, it has to be taken seriously.

5. Accurate—does it conform to the orthodox teaching of the churches?

There was widespread agreement among the churches across the empire as to the content of the Christian message. Irenaeus asked the question whether a particular writing was consistent with what the churches taught.¹⁷ This is what ruled out so much of the heretical material immediately.

Providence

Our final appeal is not to man, not even to the early church leaders, but to God, who by His Holy Spirit has put His seal upon the New Testament. By their spiritual content and by the claim of their human writers, the 27 books of our New Testament form part of the “God breathed” Scripture. It is perfectly correct to allow this divine intervention to guard the process by which eventually all the canonical books—and no others—were accepted. The idea of the final canon being an accident, and that any number of books could have ended up in the Bible, ignores the evident unity and provable accuracy of the whole collection of 27 books.

Bruce Metzger expressed it well: “There are, in fact, no historical data that prevent one from acquiescing in the conviction held by the Church Universal that, despite the very human factors . . . in the production, preservation, and collection of the books of the New Testament, the whole process can also be rightly characterized as the result of divine overruling.”¹⁸

A belief in the authority and inerrancy of Scripture is bound to a belief in the divine preservation of the canon. The God who “breathed out” (*2 Timothy 3:16*) His word into the minds of the writers ensured that those books, and no others, formed part of the completed canon of the Bible.

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Footnotes

1. **For a more full discussion of the inspiration of the Bible, see Brian Edwards, *Nothing But the Truth* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2006), p.116–143. In this, the following definition can be found: “The Holy Spirit moved men to write. He allowed them to use their own style, culture, gifts and character, to use the results of their own study and research, to write of their own experiences and to express what was in their mind. At the same time, the Holy Spirit did not allow error to influence their writings; he overruled in the expression of thought and in the choice of words. Thus they recorded accurately all that God wanted them to say and exactly how he wanted them to say it, in their own character, style and language.” [Back](#)**
2. **Clement of Alexandria, *The Miscellanies* bk. VI.15. He comments, “The ecclesiastical rule (canon) is the concord and harmony of the Law and the Prophets.” B.F. Westcott, referring to Origen’s commentary on Matthew 28, wrote: “No one should use for the proof of doctrine books not**

- included among the canonized Scriptures.” (*The Canon of the New Testament During the First Four Centuries* [Cambridge: Macmillan & Co., 1855], p. 548). [Back](#)
3. From the Festal Epistle of Athanasius XXXIX. Translated in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV., p. 551–552. [Back](#)
 4. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Bantam Press, 2003), p. 231. [Back](#)
 5. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), p. 237. [Back](#)
 6. Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. William Whiston (London: Ward, Lock & Co.), bk. 1, ch. His 22 books consisted of exactly the same as our 39 for the reasons given in the text. [Back](#)
 7. This is a widespread view. See for example R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 276. Also, A. Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1948), p. 31; Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 110; John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (London: Tyndale Press, 1972), p.138–139. [Back](#)
 8. The Apocrypha. [1 Maccabees 9:27](#) at the time of revolt against Syrian occupation in the mid second century B.C. by Judas Maccabeas: “There was a great affliction in Israel, the like whereof was not since the time that a prophet was not seen among them.” [Back](#)
 9. The Apocrypha. [1 Maccabees 14:41](#). [Back](#)
 10. It should be noted that the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches do accept some of the Apocryphal books as Scripture because they support, for example, praying for the dead. [Back](#)
 11. John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (London: Tyndale Press, 1972), p.134. [Back](#)
 12. This is a point made firmly by John Wenham in *Christ and the Bible*, p. 146–147. [Back](#)
 13. *Origen De Principiis (Concerning Principles)*, pref. 4. He used the title “New Testament” six times in *De Principiis*. [Back](#)
 14. *Origen De Principiis*, pref. 4, ch. 3:1. [Back](#)

15. From the Festal Epistle of Athanasius XXXIX. Translated in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV. p. 551–552. This is what he wrote: “As the heretics are quoting apocryphal writings, an evil which was rife even as early as when St. Luke wrote his gospel, therefore I have thought good to set forth clearly what books have been received by us through tradition as belonging to the Canon, and which we believe to be divine. [Then follows the books of the Old Testament with the unusual addition of the Epistle of Baruch.] Of the New Testament these are the books . . . [then follows the 27 books of our New Testament, and no more]. These are the fountains of salvation, that whoever thirsts, may be satisfied by the eloquence which is in them. In them alone is set forth the doctrine of piety. Let no one add to them, nor take anything from them.” [Back](#)
16. Athanasius, *Festal Epistle XXXIX*. [Back](#)
17. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk. III, ch. 3:3. “This is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth.” [Back](#)
18. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, p. 285. [Back](#)