



# Books That Didn't Make the Bible and Why

## SESSION 1

*How did Christians decide which books got into the Bible? And what about all the ones that didn't? Should we care about them?*

### Introduction

Before we can say too much about “the books that didn't make it,” we need to look at the process by which any book became a part of the Bible. The process was a lengthy one, beginning almost as soon as there were Christian books and finally ending in the fifth century, when there was almost universal agreement about which books made up the New Testament. During those four hundred or so years, some books were like Ping-Pong balls, back and forth, on the list and off the list, depending on the person making the choices.

### The Development of the New Testament Canon

First, a necessary definition: The word *canon* comes from a Greek word meaning “standard of measurement.” When we use it about the Bible, we mean the books that are the standard by which we measure all others. The canon, today, is the approved list of books of the Old and New Testaments, which we find in our Bibles.

The earliest Christian communities probably felt no need to have a New Testament canon, or accepted collection of writings about Jesus. Jesus and his disciples were a “people of the Book.” Their book, their canon, was of course the Hebrew Scriptures that we call the Old Testament. That part of the canon was settled. The Hebrew Scriptures told the story of God's mighty acts of salvation through the centuries. They also, so the early Christians believed, prophesied the coming of God's Messiah.



The early church still had the words of Jesus to remember—they were handed down orally through the church. The church also felt the activity and the authority of the Spirit working through them. The most potent example of this was at Pentecost (Acts 2), but there are dozens of other examples in Acts and in the letters of Paul, particularly. Finally, the earliest church did not expect to need a canon. They expected that Jesus would return at any time and establish the kingdom of God in all its glory, and there would be no need for written records.

It was only when the first generation of Christians began to die that the church realized it had better have some written records. The process of writing the New Testament was not a conscious one, with the

whole church involved. Leaders wrote letters. Here and there, the life and sayings of Jesus were collected and written down by specific individuals and communities. Other leaders wrote sermons or tracts that were widely circulated among the churches. There were dozens of gospels and acts. Some of them are listed in the sidebar “Books That Didn’t Make It.” So who decided which ones got into the Bible? And how did they decide?

## The First Steps

Probably the first step toward the formation of Christian Scripture was the collection and publication of the letters of Paul. Other letters were written at about the same time as, or shortly after, Paul’s letters, but they did not receive the same early attention. Then came the Gospels. They were written in the period between AD 65 and AD 90–95 (accepting early dates for Mark and John). We know that by AD 150, the Gospels were read liturgically in the worship service. This was an important step. If a book was read in worship, it was accorded higher status than one that was not read in worship.

## Marcion

Marcion was a Christian preacher who came from northern Asia Minor to Rome and (about AD 150) took a critical step toward the formation of the New Testament. Marcion was the great exponent of Paul’s teaching, and he built his canon on the letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. He also edited those works to take out all the Jewish ideas and ideals. He rejected all the other Christian writings as “too Jewish” and also rejected the Hebrew Scriptures. The collective wisdom of the church said, “no, that’s not right.” But when you say no, you also have to say what will bring a yes. What brought a yes was the acceptance of the Hebrew Scriptures that we call the Old Testament and the recognition that there were four Gospels.

## The Gnostics

Gnosticism was a movement in the early church that did not believe the God of the Old Testament, the creator God, was the Father of Jesus Christ. Behind that God was an “unknown God” who was the ultimate power in the cosmos. Gnostics also believed that Jesus was not truly human and did not truly suffer. He only “seemed” to be human. From the Greek word for “seemed” comes

the name for this belief—Docetism. The reaction of the church can be found in the statements of the early creeds: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.” This firm belief also influenced the selection of books to “make it” into the Bible. The church said clearly that there are limits within which one can speculate and still be Christian. Those limits were found in the teachings of the bishops and in the Gospels and other writings of the apostles. This step both broadened the development of the canon and set limits on what teachings the books should include.

## Some Practical Steps

There was also a group of writings from orthodox Christians, whom we today call the Apostolic Fathers. These were writers of the second and third generations, people who did not know Jesus or Paul personally but whose writings made a vast difference in the life of the church. Some of their writings were also considered to be Scripture by some churches in some places but were ultimately left out of the canon. Here’s how that happened. Fairly early, church leaders began to recognize differences in the books. Some books, such as the Gospels and Paul’s letters, were to be read in church as part of the worship service. Others were good books but were reserved for private reading at home, much as we read books of theology or devotional material today. Most of the Apostolic Fathers fell into this second category. Much as we might enjoy reading *1 Clement* or *Barnabas*, for example, they are not a part of the canon.

Another practical consideration was the development of the codex, or bound book. When all books were on scrolls and the size of scrolls made including only one book to a scroll (generally), it was easy to “play around” with which books were to be considered Scripture. One simply moved a scroll from one pile to another. But when bound books came into common use, collections of authoritative books were more permanent. More than one book could be included in a collection, which meant people had to make conscious choices about what they included as authoritative, or canonical.

## The Acid Test

The Emperor Diocletian (who ruled 284–305) helped push the process along. He embarked on an empire-wide persecution of the church. Two key elements in

## SOME BOOKS THAT DIDN'T MAKE IT

*The Gospels of*  
*Thomas*  
*Philip*  
*Mary Magdalene*  
*the Hebrews*  
*the Ebionites*  
*Bartholomew*  
*Nicodemus*  
*Basilides*  
*Truth*  
*the Nazarenes*  
*the Egyptians*

*The Secret Gospel of Mark*  
*The Apocryphon of James*  
*The Infancy Gospel of James*  
*The Infancy Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*  
*The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*  
*The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy*  
*The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*  
*The Assumption of the Virgin*  
*The History of Joseph the Carpenter*

*The Acts of*  
*Peter and the Twelve Apostles*  
*John*  
*Peter*  
*Paul*  
*Andrew*  
*Thomas*  
*Paul and Thecla*  
*Andrew and Matthias*  
*Barnabas*  
*James the Great*  
*Peter and Andrew*  
*Philip*  
*Pilate*  
*Thaddeus*

*The Ascents of James*  
*The Martyrdom of Matthew*  
*The Passion of Paul*  
*The Passion of Peter*  
*The Preaching of Peter*

the persecution were the imprisonment or execution of clergy (eliminating leadership in the church) and forcing the surrender of the Scriptures (elimination of authority). When the army came around and demanded the sacred books, the question became a very pointed one: for which books are you willing to die? Some Christians handed over the writings of heretics, some gave up disputed books or books of devotion, but the faithful did not, hand over the books we now call Scripture. For those books they were willing to die.

### It's a Long Road

Even with all the events that pushed the church toward a canon, the issue was still not an easy one. There were different lists of Scripture in different churches. James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation were in and out of various lists. There were even some questions about the Gospel of John, because the Gnostics loved it. (In fact, the first biblical commentary of which we know was written by a Gnostic writer on the Gospel of John.) Other books, such as *Barnabas*, the *Didache*, the Shepherd of Hermas, and *1 Clement*, were considered

Scripture by some churches at some times.

It was not until the Easter Letter of Athanasius of Alexandria in 367 that we have an official list of the books that we today consider the New Testament. And even then, other parts of the church had different lists.

### Why Didn't They Make It?

They didn't make it for a variety of reasons. The Shepherd of Hermas, for example, was widely known to have been written too late to be considered by one of the apostles. The books listed in the sidebar were, many of them, too fanciful. They were "popular paperbacks of the day," analogous to the works of, say, Barbara Cartland or Louis L'Amour today. They dealt with many of the questions we ask today; for example, what did Jesus do as a little boy? Or what happened to the Twelve? What were their lives like? People read them but didn't take them as seriously as they did what later became the New Testament. Other books explored the meaning of Jesus but did so in ways that pushed the envelope too far. The *Gospels of Truth*, *Philip*, and *Mary Magdalene* are good examples of this kind of book. The

## THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

The Apostolic Fathers lived during the generation after the apostles. They may have been taught by the apostles or were associated with apostolic churches. Their books were read at home; at times, some were even read in church and considered as Scripture by some local communities. The writings of the Apostolic Fathers include

*1 Clement*

*2 Clement*

Letters of Ignatius of Antioch

Polycarp, *To the Philippians*

*Martyrdom of Polycarp*

*Didache* (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)

*Barnabas*

*Diognetus*

Shepherd of Hermas

The Fragments of Papias

*Gospel of Thomas* stands in a class all its own. It contains teachings of Jesus, some of them found in the canonical Gospels, and some that sound very strange compared to those Gospels. But it has no narrative, no account of the crucifixion and resurrection. We will look at *Thomas* in a little more detail in the next session.

## What about the Apocrypha?

The Apocrypha are those books that appear (in some Bibles) between the Old and the New Testaments—the ones we used to think belonged only in Catholic Bibles. What about them? What should we do with them?

The term *apocrypha* is a Greek adjective meaning “hidden,” referring to this collection of books. Originally it was a title of honor, referring to special or secret teachings. The early Fathers of the Church used the term in this way.

The New Testament writers were familiar with these books and both quoted and referred to them. The early

church treated them as canonical, on the same footing as the books of the Old Testament. Jerome, who translated the Scriptures into Latin, included them in the Bible but insisted they should not be used “for confirming the authority of church dogmas.” They continued to be a part of the Bible for Roman Catholics and for Greek Orthodox churches.

The Protestant Reformers took the view of many in the early church that these books were not canonical. The Reformers (to oversimplify) put all their authority eggs in the Bible basket, so it became imperative to clearly define what was Scripture. Martin Luther listed them as not canonical yet useful for reading. The Calvinist view, on the other hand, is that the books should be rejected because they have no authority in the church. The Westminster Confession (1647) says, “The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are not part of the Canon of Scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be in any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.”

Modern study of these books, however, has changed attitudes in Protestantism, and many versions of the Bible again include the Apocrypha. This includes only the Old Testament Apocrypha.

The books commonly listed as Apocrypha include

History—1 and 2 Maccabees

Romantic Tales—Tobit, Judith

Psalms—The Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151

Wisdom—Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom of Solomon

Apocalyptic—2 Esdras

There are also additions to the books of Esther, Jeremiah, and Daniel. Books that don't fit easily into any classification include 3 and 4 Maccabees, 1 Esdras, and Susanna.

## About the Writer

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