Who decided what books are in the Bible?

Apologetics · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/who-decided-what-books-are-in-the-bible/

The books of the Bible were not arbitrarily chosen by a single person or council; they were recognized over time by the people of God as those writings that bear divine authority. The process of “canonization” was not the Church creating Scripture, but the Church discerning and receiving the books God had already given (Luke 24:44; 2 Pet 3:15–16). In other words, the canon is discovered, not invented.

From the beginning, God’s people treated certain writings as uniquely authoritative. In the Old Testament, the Law, Prophets, and Writings were received as Scripture within Israel (e.g., Josh 1:8; Dan 9:2). By the time of Jesus, this body of Scripture was already well established (Luke 24:44). Jesus and the apostles consistently affirmed these writings as the Word of God (Matt 5:17–18; John 10:35).

The New Testament canon developed in a similar way. The apostles and their close associates wrote with recognized authority, and their writings were circulated among the churches (Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27). Already within the New Testament itself, we see this recognition taking place: Paul’s letters are referred to as “Scripture” alongside the Old Testament (2 Pet 3:15–16). This indicates that the early Church did not wait centuries to recognize authoritative writings; the process began immediately.

How were the books recognized?

Early Christians used several consistent criteria in recognizing canonical books:

- **Apostolic origin** — Was the book written by an apostle or a close associate of the apostles? (e.g., Luke, Mark)
- **Orthodox teaching** — Does the book align with the “rule of faith,” the teaching handed down from the apostles? (Gal 1:8–9)
- **Widespread use** — Was the book broadly received and used in the churches across different regions? (Col 4:16)
- **Spiritual authority** — Does the book bear the marks of divine inspiration and edify the Church? (2 Tim 3:16)

These were not imposed later but reflected how the early Church already functioned in practice.

What Role Did Church Councils Play?

Later church councils did not determine the canon but confirmed what had already been widely recognized. For example, regional councils such as Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397) listed the same New Testament books used today. These councils functioned as formal acknowledgments, not creative authorities.

It is important to note that different Christian traditions have slightly different Old Testament canons. Protestant traditions generally follow the Hebrew Bible (39 books), while Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions include additional books (often called the Deuterocanonical or Apocryphal books). However, all mainstream Christian traditions agree on the 27 books of the New Testament.

Theological Perspective

Ultimately, the canon reflects God's providence. Scripture is "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16), and the same Spirit who inspired the writings also guided the Church in recognizing them. This does not mean the process was instantaneous or without discussion, but it does mean that the final result is not a human construction. As Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27)—the people of God recognize the Word of God.

Key Scriptures to Study

Core teaching passages

2 Timothy 3:16–17 — Scripture is God-breathed and authoritative
2 Peter 3:15–16 — New Testament writings recognized as Scripture
Luke 24:44 and John 5:39–40 — Jesus affirms the established Old Testament canon

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: "Didn't a council like Nicaea decide the Bible?"
Response: No. The Council of Nicaea dealt with Christological issues, not the canon. The core New Testament books were already widely recognized long before that council.

Common Objection: "Weren't some books left out for political reasons?"
Response: Books such as the "Gnostic gospels" were excluded not for political reasons but because they lacked apostolic origin, contradicted established teaching, and appeared much later

(often 2nd century or beyond).

Common Objection: “Why do different traditions have different Old Testament books?”
Response: The difference centers on whether to include the Deuterocanonical books. Protestant traditions follow the Hebrew canon, while Catholic and Orthodox traditions include additional writings. This difference does not affect the New Testament or the core message of the Gospel.

Common Objection: “If humans recognized the canon, doesn’t that make it human?”
Response: Recognition is not the same as creation. Just as scientists discover natural laws rather than invent them, the Church recognized the books God had already inspired.

Why This Matters

If the Bible were merely a collection of human-selected writings, its authority would be uncertain. But if the canon reflects God’s providential guidance, then we can trust that the books we have are the ones God intended His people to receive.

Practically, this means believers can read Scripture with confidence—not wondering whether something essential is missing or wrongly included. The same God who revealed His Word also preserved and delivered it to His Church.

Recommended Resources

- *The Bible Project* — “Who Wrote the Bible?” podcast
- F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*
- Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisited*
- Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Biblical Canon*
- Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*