



How Did We Get the Bible?

A worthwhile question

The book that stands at the centre of our lives as Christians is the Bible. In the Belgic Confession, we confess that God

"makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word, as far as is necessary for us in this life, to his glory and our salvation."

(Art. 2)

Further, we confess that "this Word of God did not come by the impulse of man, but that men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Spirit ... therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures."

(Art. 3)

Article 4 then gives a list of the sixty-six books we accept as canonical, that is, authoritative. We confess in Article 5 that we receive these books *"for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith."*

Having grown up in a setting where the Bible is so central, the thought may never cross our mind as to how we got the Bible. It would seem to be self-evident. We should realize, however, that it is not self-evident. We see this, for example, in the way the Belgic Confession takes the time to list the books considered the Word of God in contrast to the apocryphal books. We also may come across people who question why we don't accept, for example, a book called *"The gospel of Thomas."* We also will come across people who claim to accept the Bible but then have additional books, like the Book of Mormon. What are we to make of those who claim God speaks to them today?

For the answer as to how we got the Bible we need to turn to the early centuries of the Christian Church. A review of events at that time will give us an understanding of why only the sixty-six books of the Bible are called God's Word.

The Bible during the time of the Lord Jesus and the apostles

While we are used to the term Bible, this is not a term found in the Bible itself. The word "bible" comes from the Greek word for books. The term Bible indicates that it is a collection of books. The name "Holy Bible" indicates this is a small library from God. Terms we come across in the Bible are "the Scriptures" and "holy Scripture" (e.g. Luke 24:27; John 6:39; 2 Tim 3:15, 16).

It only takes brief reflection to realize that the mention of the Scriptures in the New Testament refers to what we call the Old Testament. The New Testament did not yet exist. The Jews referred to these Scriptures according to the three main sections. The first part was referred to as the Law (Torah) of Moses, as Moses wrote the first five books. The second part was referred to as the Prophets. This included the books from Joshua to Kings, as these were seen to contain prophetic explanations of the history of Israel. The third part was called the Writings. Often this was called by the largest book in this section, the Book of Psalms (see Luke 16:31; 24:27, 44). This covered all the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. We don't know at what time in history this list of books was established. It must have been well before 200 BC, as these books were translated into Greek, in what has become known as the Septuagint because it was the work of some seventy translators.

The early Christian church simply accepted these Scriptures. This is not surprising in light of the fact that the coming of the Lord Jesus was the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Our Lord said this specifically on various occasions. It is also shown in the gospel accounts as events in the life of the Lord Jesus are said to be fulfillment of various prophecies. It was a characteristic of gospel preaching to show from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ (e.g., Acts 18:28).

As for the books of what we call the New Testament, we have only one passing reference to at least some parts gaining the same status as the Old Testament Scriptures. This is found in 2 Peter 3:16, where Peter refers to the writings of *"our dear brother Paul."* Peter states that Paul's *"letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures..."* This reference is significant. It shows us that the apostles did not deliberately set out to produce writings of equal value to the Scriptures. Rather, it was the case that their writings gained respect and status equal to that of the Old Testament Scriptures. The church recognized that, while the writings of the apostles were truly human writings, in the end *"men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit"* (2 Pet 1:21).

Peter's reference to Paul's letters indicates that the churches had begun to share the various letters. There is even a specific instruction to do so at the end of the letter to the Colossians. We read in Colossians 4:16,

"After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea."

The existence of many manuscripts is evidence that the writings of the apostles were copied and circulated. There is no evidence, however, that there was a complete list of books by the time the apostles passed away.

Controversy leads to a list

The acceptance of the writings of the apostles is evidenced in the writings of the next generation of church leaders. These writings often quoted the different gospels and the letters of the apostles. Three of the early leaders of the church, Clement, Polycarp, and Ignatius, at one time or another refer to all the books of the New Testament with the exception of Mark, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and 2 Peter.

It was a series of controversies in the second century AD that stirred the development toward a specific list of what we call the New Testament. In the first place, there was the controversy around 140 AD caused by Marcion. He contrasted the God of the Old Testament to the Father who had sent Jesus into the world. He rejected the Old Testament as Holy Scripture. Of the New Testament books, he kept only edited versions of the gospel of Luke and the letters of Paul. Second, some years later, the church had to deal with Montanus. He taught that there was ongoing revelation, especially through him.

These two controversies led the churches to begin to make lists of books considered Holy Scripture. It began to write down a list in contrast to Marcion's reduced list. In contrast to Montanus, who suggested that there was ongoing revelation from God, it also made a list to indicate that the age of writing Scriptures had ended with the apostles. In other words, the Scriptures are a closed, completed book and not open ended.

One of the oldest lists that has been found is called *The Muratorian Fragment*. A copy of this list was discovered in a library in Milan around 1740 by a librarian called Muratori.¹ It is called a "fragment" since it is missing the beginning. Its origin has been dated towards the end of the second century. It lists most of the New Testament books, giving a brief description of their contents. We see this, for example with respect to the gospels. Since the beginning of the document is missing, we do not read about Matthew and Mark. It begins with the gospel of Luke. It also includes an elaboration on the fact there are four of them. The fragment states,

The third book of the Gospel is that according to Luke. Luke, the well-known physician, after the ascension of Christ, when Paul had taken with him as one zealous for the law, composed it in his own name, according to (the general) belief. Yet he himself had not seen the Lord in the flesh; and therefore, as he was able to ascertain events, so indeed he begins to tell the story from the birth of John. The fourth of the Gospels is that of John, (one) of the disciples ... And so, though various elements may be taught in the individual books of the Gospels, nevertheless this makes no difference to the faith of believers, since by the one sovereign Spirit all things have been declared in all [the Gospels]: concerning the nativity, concerning the passion, concerning the resurrection, concerning life with his disciples, and concerning his twofold coming; the first in lowliness when he was despised, which has taken place, the second glorious in royal power, which is still in the future.

Certain books are rejected. For example, it mentions letters written to the Laodiceans and the Alexandrians forged in Paul's name to further the heresy of Marcion. Various other writings are mentioned that may be read but should not be read publicly to the people in church, for they are not in the same category as the prophets or the writings of the apostles.

Completion of a process

It would be another two hundred years after the controversies caused by Marcion and Montanus before the process of drawing up a list of books would be completed. It was clear that the early church accepted only books from the age of the apostles. Most were written either by an apostle or one closely connected with an apostle (e.g., Luke and Paul; Mark and Peter).

In a letter of Athanasius, written in the year 367 AD, we have the earliest list of the twenty-seven books as we have them today.

It was at a council held in the North African city of Carthage in 397 AD that the church concluded a process of many centuries. It is to be noted that at this council it was more a matter of taking note of the books that had gained acceptance in the churches over the centuries rather than having to make a decision.

This Council decreed that *"aside from the canonical Scriptures nothing is to be read in church under the name of Divine Scriptures."*

Conclusion

The gradual process that led to the acceptance of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament shows the guiding of the Holy Spirit. The church found itself in possession of these writings. Over the centuries, these rose to the top and they stayed there. It was not so much a case that the church had to make a decision which books to accept but it simply had to take note of the books that the churches had been using over the centuries. This was already evident in the second century and was confirmed by developments over the next two centuries. In this respect, we can see a parallel to the books of the Old Testament. We never read of a decision to accept them. Rather, the church simply found itself in possession of these books.

That the establishment of the canon of Scripture was guided by the Spirit is captured in Article 5 of the Belgic Confession.

It is stated that *"we believe without any doubt all things contained in them ... especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God..."*

The process by which the church received these books underlines it was not a matter of making a decision but a matter of taking inventory of what the Spirit had given to the church.

This historic review also helps us understand why we do not accept the apocryphal books. The fact the Belgic Confession had to spell this out was because over the centuries the church had allowed these books to gain status in the church and base certain doctrines on them (e.g. purgatory, the

perpetual virginity of Mary)² even though they had clearly been rejected by the early church. The apocryphal books had already been rejected by the Jews in Old Testament times, as well as the early church.

Finally, the historic review also reinforces that the canon of Scripture is closed. When people today ask why we don't accept books like the gospel of Thomas, why we reject those who add to the Bible, such as the Mormons, or why we will not accept ongoing revelation of the Spirit, we can point to the way the Spirit guided the church through this process in the early centuries to the sixty-six books we have today. Only they "are holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith."

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Endnotes:

¹ See: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/muratorian.html>

² See for example the Decisions of the Council of Trent concerning the Canonical Scriptures in P. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 79-81.