

A (Very) Brief History of the Bible



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JEWISH SCRIPTURES

Creation

Our word-saturated world renders it difficult for us to conceptualize the level of orality and lack of literacy that prevailed in antiquity. Only a small percentage of the population could read or write (basically scribes, those whose job it was to do so) and works were not written down without compelling reasons. This context must inform our reconstruction of the formation of the books that make up the Hebrew Bible. The complexity of composition defies simple points on a timeline. Imagine the following analogy: A professor puts together a book using class notes that his teacher took while in graduate school, in a class from yet another professor. This book goes through multiple editions, then is translated from German to English, after which it is revised by still another author. Who wrote this book? Which form is the official one? Our little example might span decades, but the books of the Hebrew Bible were composed, edited, augmented, and reshaped over centuries, sometimes over a thousand years. Books that were completed after the exile likely preserve traditions hundreds of years older. The dual tensions of composition in antiquity were to preserve as much as

possible, but to innovate and update as necessary. With those caveats in mind, I will touch on a few points of the Bible's formation.

Two poems of victory, the "Song of Deborah" preserved in Judges 5 and the "Song of Moses" in Exodus 15, give us our oldest parts of the Jewish Scriptures. The archaic Hebrew of these songs and other features indicate that these go back to the formative period of Israelite history, around 1200-1000 BCE.

Solomon's reign (960-920 BCE) is a likely time for some earlier traditions to be put into writing for the first time. The bureaucracy he established and the efforts to build up his kingdom would have required scribes and records, and his ties to Egypt (he married the Pharaoh's daughter) would have provided a means for him to do so. Some of the earliest psalms come from this period, and possibly some legal and narrative material now in the Pentateuch.

Though other books contain earlier traditions, Amos claims the status of the oldest book in the Bible, written in the early- to mid-eighth century BCE (788-750), followed by Hosea. Prophetic pronouncements mark an important stage in the formation of the Bible—by claiming divine authority for their words, the prophets marked their pronouncements as authoritative "thus says Yahweh." These oracles would have been written down later by disciples. The statement "two years before the earthquake" (Amos 1:1) suggests that this earthquake was seen as fulfilling Amos' predictions of judgment, which motivated people to write down his oracles. Hosea and Amos both preached in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The impending destruction of the Northern Kingdom could have motivated scribes and priests to put their traditions in writing. After the destruction of Israel, many would have fled south to Judah, introducing the Southern Kingdom to the writings of the North. Isaiah was an influential prophet in Judea; his ministry covered a span of over forty years (about 740-698 BCE) in the context of regional wars that led to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom Israel. Given his status, it is likely that his oracles were written down during his lifetime and worked into the book that bears his name by later followers.

Another development important to the idea of scripture involved the attribution of laws to God. Taking ancient Near Eastern laws similar to the code of Hammurabi and then adding "Yahweh says" was an innovation that increased the authority of those laws. Josiah's reforms in 622 BCE also marked a key point in the development of the Bible. The Deuteronomist may have embellished the event, but Josiah placing himself and his people under the authority of the "Book of the Law" found in the temple was a large step towards the status of sacred authoritative text.

Zephaniah preached a message of loyalty to Yahweh during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BCE); Nahum interprets the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE to demonstrate Yahweh's control

over history, and Habakkuk prophesied immediately before the first Babylonian deportation of 597 BCE. An early version of the Deuteronomistic History was likely composed during Josiah's reign, and the Bible makes mention of multiple sources now lost to us, such as the Annals of the Kings of Israel (see 1 Kings 15-16).

These developments lead us to the great literary activity of the Babylonian exile, where a large portion of the Hebrew Bible was composed or edited in a mere half a century. Ezekiel was composed in Babylon at the beginning of the exile. Though Jeremiah was active just before and in the beginning of the exile, his book was likely compiled during and shortly after the exile. We are fortunate to have an unusually clear understanding of this book. We know that Jeremiah was commanded to write down his oracles and deliver them to the king (chapter 36). Chapters 1-25 seem to parallel this early form of Jeremiah, which was dictated to Baruch his scribe. Archaeologists may have found bullae possibly belonging to Baruch and have the signature and even fingerprint of one of the biblical authors (Though unfortunately this bulla's authenticity has been questioned). Thus an early form of Jeremiah existed in about 604 BCE (King Jehoiakim burned the scroll delivered to him, but Jeremiah redictated the material to Baruch). It is rare that we can discern the composition of a biblical book in such detail. Other parts of Jeremiah, such as duplicate passages and material organized by catch-words, suggest a long process of editing after Jeremiah's lifetime, and the significantly different form of the Greek version provides evidence for multiple editions of the book.

One of the greatest writers of the exile remains anonymous, as he took up the name of the prophet Isaiah. Historical indicators make clear that Deutero-Isaiah (40-56) was written toward the end of the exile. We know that the Deuteronomistic History was updated during the exile, and most scholars also date much of the Priestly material in the Pentateuch to the Exile, though the final form of "P" is postexilic.

If much was written during the exile, the postexilic period is when things really start to come together. We can date Haggai with pinpoint precision--he writes during the drought of 520 BCE. Zechariah was written around the same time, 518 BCE. Based on a careful reading of Jeremiah, it has been suggested there was a Deuteronomistic redaction of Jeremiah that took up Jeremiah's mantle to confront the Zion theology of Haggai and Zechariah, preserved most clearly in the "temple speech" of Jeremiah 7 (DtrJer likely expanded a speech by Jeremiah). Third Isaiah was also written sometime around the construction of the temple in 515 BCE. Recent scholarship has also argued that the Pentateuch was largely composed in the postexilic period, that it is at this time that earlier disparate traditions were woven together to form a national narrative and ritualistic guidelines. The "book of the Law" that Ezekiel read was likely a Priestly form of the legal material in the Pentateuch.

As you can see in the timeline below, the books of Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, and the Song of Songs are difficult to date, falling somewhere in

the window of the fifth to the third centuries BCE. The book of Psalms has one of the longest histories of composition, with songs that date to the time of Solomon and with the final form of the book still in flux in the second century.

As we finish up the Hebrew Bible with Daniel, we are once again on rock-solid dating. Drawing upon older traditions as virtually all books did, the final form of Daniel was composed in the midst of the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, in Jerusalem in about 165 BCE. Thus the Hebrew Bible was written during a period of over a thousand years.

Copying

As the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls make clear, the boundaries between composition and copying of the scriptures remain fluid. Jeremiah provides an excellent example of this fluidity: the form of the book copied in the Septuagint is one-eighth shorter than the version we have in Hebrew and actually preserves an earlier edition of Jeremiah.

The books of the Bible, like all books, had to be copied by hand, a letter at a time. Thus on top of centuries of editing, the Bible endured further millennia of transcription before arriving at the manuscripts available to us today.



To the left is an image of our oldest witness of the Hebrew Bible, copied before many of the books of the Bible were written! It dates to the last quarter of the seventh century BCE (625-600) and contains the Priestly Blessing found in Numbers 6:24-26. Look carefully at the letters, which are an older form of Hebrew (the modern Hebrew alphabet is actually Aramaic or square script).

(Image source: [The Israel Museum, Jerusalem](https://www.israelmuseum.org/en/objects/1000000000000000000))

In our discussion of the copying of the Jewish Scriptures, we will touch on three forms of the text of the Hebrew Bible: the Masoretic Text (MT), the Septuagint (the LXX), and the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP). By forms of the text, I mean that each of these versions has distinct readings and characters, words, or phrases that are in one form but not another.

Masoretic Text

Most modern editions of the Jewish Scriptures are based on the extraordinary work of medieval scribes called the Masoretes. These families from about 600-1000 CE perfected a long

tradition of meticulous copying of the biblical texts. The Masorah refers to the system of vowel signs, accent markings, and marginal notes to communicate how to read the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible. (Hebrew does not have vowels, so markings are placed around the consonants. So “David” would be written “DVD,” with markings below and above to mark the “a” and “i” sounds.) The meticulous care of the Masoretes can be demonstrated by notes that indicate how many times a particular word or combination of words appears in the entire Hebrew Bible, which words only occur once, and even what the middle word is of each biblical book. Such measures ensured the accurate copying of the manuscripts. The Dead Sea Scrolls vindicate the work of the Masoretes in large part; manuscripts over a thousand years older than those annotated by the Masoretes are virtually identical to their later descendants (there are also DSS MSS, “Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts,” that align with the LXX and SP).

Below is an image of Leningradensis, the manuscript of the Hebrew Bible underlying most modern translations. It was copied in 1009 CE by Aaron ben Asher.



(Image source: [Pekka Pitkänen's Old Testament Studies Site](http://www.ancienthebrew.com/pekkapitkanen/))

Septuagint

The Septuagint (LXX) refers to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made in the second and third centuries BCE. It has its own complex textual history, with many revisions, many of which brought the text closer to that of the Hebrew. The Septuagint is a valuable witness to the text of the Hebrew Bible, but first scholars need to penetrate the translation itself. The translation of some books is wooden to the point of being bad Greek; translators of other books felt free to update and change the text (Isaiah is an example). The Septuagint became the Old Testament of Christianity, so the most famous copies of the Septuagint are the great Christian bibles of the fourth century CE. Our oldest fragments from the LXX are among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Samaritan Pentateuch

The Samaritans, the descendants of the scattered northern tribes and transplanted Assyrians, follow a religion close to but distinct from Judaism. Their worship centered on Mount Gerizim, near Shechem. They recognized only the Pentateuch as scripture. Copies of the Samaritan Pentateuch differ from the MT, and forms of this text have been found among the DSS (without the idiosyncrasies of the SP, such as the focus on Mt. Gerizim).

Dead Sea Scrolls

To say that the Dead Sea Scrolls are the most important find for our understanding of the text of the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism is not an exaggeration. The first scrolls were discovered by a Bedouin boy looking for his lost goat, and eventually about 900 manuscripts were brought to light, 200 of those containing biblical text. They also contain extra-canonical texts, commentaries, and fascinating works such as rewritten biblical books (the Temple Scroll is adapted from the Pentateuch, but put into first person from God's own perspective!). These manuscripts date from the second and first centuries BCE, and therefore are over a thousand years older than our oldest previously known copies. One of our oldest scrolls, a fragment from Daniel (4QDan^b), was copied within *decades* of when the book was written. These manuscripts attest to a time when the text of the Hebrew Bible was more fluid, though about 45 percent of them still align with the text preserved in the Masoretic tradition; about 3-4 percent match the Hebrew behind the Septuagint, and 6.5 percent with the Samaritan Pentateuch.

Below is a picture of the Great Isaiah Scroll, one of the best-preserved manuscripts among the scrolls, and dated to about 120 BCE.



**Isaiah Scroll (1QIsaa) Written in Hebrew - Qumran, Cave 1. Ca. 120 BCE Parchment
© Photo The Israel Museum, Jerusalem**

Canon

“Canon” (from a Greek word meaning “rule” or standard”) refers to an authoritative collection of texts; in this case, which books belong in the Bible and which are out? The path of the biblical books gaining the status of authoritative scripture can be outlined as follows:

- Law and prophets in the eighth century BCE
- Josiah’s Deuteronomy
- Law and prophets during the Babylonian Exile
- Until the Hellenistic religious reforms, biblical books gain increasing authority
- In Maccabean times, the concept of scripture evolves
- After 70 CE (the destruction of the Second Temple), numbers of scriptural books are given.

Now let's unpack that.

Law and prophets in the eighth century BCE

We have touched upon the fact that from about the eighth century BCE, prophets claimed to speak the words of Yahweh, and laws were also attributed to God. This innovative claim of divine authority obviously increased the status of oracle and law. Prophetic pronouncements and divine law put into writing laid the foundation for scripture and would become some of the earliest sacred texts and collections.

Josiah's Deuteronomy

Josiah based his religious reforms on an early form of part of Deuteronomy (the “D” source). As best we can tell, this text was written specifically for this reform, but it is significant that Josiah himself covenanted to follow its teachings and bound his people to do the same. Everyone and everything is subject to this law: “Keep these words ... in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). This is powerful rhetoric, and the official establishment of this text as a binding document of divine provenance represents an important step towards the biblical texts being viewed as scripture.

Law and prophets during the Babylonian exile

The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple turned Judean society upside down and placed them in the midst of the powerful and alluring Babylonian culture. The Jews needed a way to maintain their distinct cultural identity and traditions. Bereft of king, state, and temple, they turned to their texts—the law provided their cultural identity. They turned to their cultic traditions and prophetic pronouncements as the core of their religious observance, and these factors increased the status of these texts tremendously.

Until the Hellenistic religious reforms, biblical books gain increasing authority

The Persians authorized the laws of their subjects, and this seems to be what is going on in the book of Ezra. Ezra read a copy of the Torah, which was likely some form of the Priestly legal traditions in the Pentateuch. This was another step toward scripture. Until the second century, religious texts continued to gain greater authority.

In Maccabean times, the concept of scripture evolves

All the previous factors increased the authority of religious texts significantly, but it was in the crucible of the Hellenistic Religious Reforms of Antiochus Epiphanes IV that scripture

emerged in its full form. This development meant that the authority is in the text, the book itself, rather than just the divine law or prophetic word. After 175 BCE, exegetical literature developed and there began to be quotations of and allusions to the biblical books. The first “canon” lists also develop during this time, such as in the prologue of Ben Sirach.

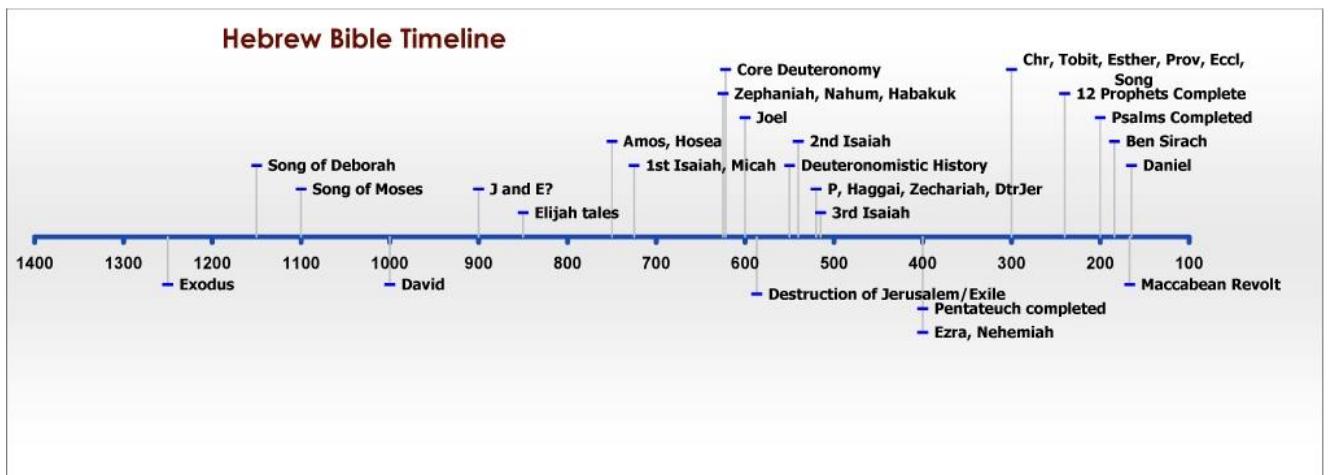
After 70 CE (the destruction of the Second Temple), numbers of scriptural books are given

After another cultural cataclysm, the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, scripture gained even more importance and authority. At this point the text of the Hebrew Bible became fixed (we no longer see the variation evident in the DSS), and specific lists were given of which books belonged in the Bible and which did not. The Jewish historian Josephus mentioned a master copy of the Hebrew Bible in the temple, which suggests an official stand on canon (*Antiquities* 3:38, 5:61), and stated that twenty-two books were sacred (*Against Apion* I:36-47):

- five of Moses: Genesis-Deuteronomy
- thirteen prophets: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Job, Esther, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Lamentations, Ezekiel, XII (Hosea-Malachi), and Dan
- four other books: Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes

Rabbinic discussions debate the status of a few books here and there, such as Ecclesiastes and Esther, but the canon seems to have been mostly in place by the first century CE.

Of course, given that the Septuagint contains different books than the Hebrew Bible, and that different religious traditions adopted each of these, each community has needed to determine its own canon.



Jewish Literature

(According to Erich Zenger, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* [4th ed.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001])

Note that most of these books draw from earlier sources

Text	Date (BCE)
Song of Deborah (Judges 5)	1050-1000, or even 12 th cent (Oxford Bible Commentary)
Song of Moses? (Ex. 15)	11 th or 12 th cent BC?
Psalms	earliest 12-10 th century
*Exodus 34	900
Elijah tales	9 th cent.
Amos and Hosea	mid 8 th cent
1 st Isaiah, Micah	end 8 th cent.
J and E ¹	900-722?
Core Deuteronomy (12-26)	622
Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakuk	end 7 th century
Joel	end 7 th /beg. 6 th ? (Soggin)
Ezekiel, Jeremiah	beg. 6 th cent
Deuteronomistic Hist	

¹ The dating of the elements in the Pentateuch is highly debated. Current scholarship questions whether the evidence allows us to postulate distinct sources J and E, suggests that the Priestly material looks more like a redactional layer than a source. In summary:

1) It is difficult to argue there was a "Yahwist Source" (J); instead we should speak of "Narrative Cycles"

2) Redactional work took several steps; most of this process was likely during/after the Deuteronomistic and Priestly stages

3) "P" should be seen not so much as a Priestly Source but a redactional layer (commentary or complement to older sources) So even though the DH is a great starting point, recent research has called key points into question. So the distinct older sources of the DH are gone, reduced to older traditions, and as far as dating goes, the end has become the beginning (with the Priestly source being one of the earlier steps instead of the last). D seems to have the most lasting power. I like Ska's views of the Pentateuch coming together as a national epic necessitated by disputes after the Babylonian exiles returned to Judea post 539. (Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006])

(Joshua-2 Kings, rest of Deut)	mid 6 th cent
2 nd Isaiah	mid 6 th cent
P, Haggai, Zechariah	520-518
Deuteronomistic Jeremiahc.	520
3 rd Isaiah	end 6 th cent (Soggin)
Ruth	5 th cent.
Completion of Torah	400
Job	6 th cent. (4 th ?)
Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Esther, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs	4 rd -2 nd cent.
12 prophets complete	c. 240
Psalms	c. 200 (completed)
Jesus ben Sirach	c. 175
Daniel	c. 150 (167-165)
Judith	150-100
1-2 Maccabees	c. 100
Wisdom of Solomon	c. 30

NEW TESTAMENT

Creation

The New Testament as we have it did not exist for over three hundred years, though all books were written within a century of Jesus' death. Paul's letters were likely the first to be collected, followed by the gospels in the end of the second century. Intriguingly, it seems the first canon was put together by Marcion of Sinope, considered a heretic by the proto-orthodox! (and his New Testament had a radically different character than ours—a version of Luke without chapters 1-2 and a collection of Paul's letters with all the pro-Judaism elements excised). For most of the writing process, the authors were unaware they were “writing scripture”.

With that framework, we can go back to the beginning. I have a hunch that though Jesus' sayings and stories of his deeds were shared during his life, the first words ever written about him were carved by the Romans: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. It is important to distinguish when traditions were shared orally and when they were put into writing. Literacy was extremely uncommon in the time of the New Testament—as a rule, you could write if it was your job to do so; reading was somewhat more common. Intensifying the unlikelihood of putting traditions about Jesus in writing was the belief that the Kingdom of God was going to return at any moment—why put things in writing when there were people to hear the stories from, and when the End was imminent?

Thus it makes sense that the first letter we have, 1 Thessalonians, addresses concern that members of the community started dying... something obviously unexpected if Paul had to write a letter! But we are getting a bit ahead of ourselves. What was *before* our first book of the New Testament?

We can only speculate about Christian writings that did not survive. We know that we do not have all of Paul's letters (1 Cor 5:9 and 7:1 refer to a lost letter). Did he write any to Jews? Did the Jerusalem Church have any written traditions?

We can say something about the earliest Christian writings, however, as they are embedded in our current New Testament. The earliest of these were almost certainly what are called *testimonia*—collections of passages of Jewish Scriptures that Jesus' followers understood as referring to him. After Jesus died, his stunned followers would have turned to their scriptures for meaning. Did his death take God by surprise? What meaning could that death have? Why weren't the Jews accepting him as the Messiah? These collections explain why scriptures such as Psalm 110 or 22 or Isaiah 53 appear in multiple places. These traditions were also incorporated into what was likely the earliest narrative—the story of Jesus' death, or Passion Narrative. A written account to of Jesus' death would have been needed for both worship and missionary purposes, so was likely penned early.

The sayings and deeds of Jesus (including miracle stories and an apocalyptic discourse) would have also quickly found their way to papyrus, as well as early hymns to Jesus used in worship (for example, Phil 2:6-11, Rev 11:17-18, 22:17, and the core of John 1:1-18). One of our earliest references to Jesus states that Christians sang hymns to Jesus “as to a God” (Roman governor Pliny to the emperor Trajan in about 112 CE). One of the most important but debated sources in the New Testament is the hypothetical sayings source called “Q” that most scholars believe was used by Matthew and Luke (the alternative is that Luke simply used Matthew). The author of the Fourth Gospel also used sources, such as a “Signs Gospel” and sources for the discourses in the latter part of the work.

Now we move to the books we actually have. As stated above, the letters of Paul (the ones scholars agree were written by him, since the authorship of about half of the letters attributed to Paul are in question!) are our earliest extant documents. 1 Thessalonians most likely takes pride of place as our earliest complete book, written in 49-50 CE. Paul wrote letters mostly to house churches he founded in order to address concerns. Philemon was written to an individual, and Romans was written to a Church he did not found, explaining his beliefs and approach and asking for assistance. Following 1 Thessalonians came Galatians, Philemon, Philippians and 1-2 Corinthians, written in about 54-58 as Paul traveled. Fascinatingly, Philippians and 2 Corinthians are likely composite letters formed out of several Paul wrote (isn't literary detective work cool!?) and we know of at least one lost letter to the Corinthians. Romans is both Paul's most careful and latest letter, which is why it has been called his “gospel”.

Of the letters scholars doubt Paul wrote, 2 Timothy has the most chance of being close to Paul—written either by Paul himself or someone who knew him. So that would date to the 60s, either early or late depending on authorship.

Though the gospels have traditions that go back to Jesus (as well as additions and adaptations that do not), Mark was likely the first gospel ever written, in about 69 CE. A close analysis reveals composite elements without the framework you would expect if he were working from an earlier gospel. It is important to note that all gospels were anonymous. Perhaps Mark was prompted to write his gospel to encourage believers to remain faithful until Jesus returned, an event that in his view could happen at any moment. As a teaser, look at Mark 16—the gospel most likely ended at 16:8! Verses 9-20 were added by a later scribe; note how much they sound like the other resurrection narratives and how abrupt the shift from 8-9 is. We will get back to textual criticism in a bit.

Matthew was written sometime around 80-85 CE, Luke shortly after. Matthew and Luke both used Mark as a source—they had an interesting relationship with the earlier gospel, since they revered it enough to use it, but obviously thought they could do better! The existence of the “Q” sayings source hinges on whether Luke knew and used Matthew.

Though separated in current Bibles, Luke-Acts are written by the same author and should be considered together as a two-volume work. Luke is the only gospel to incorporate the first person, suggesting that the author was connected to the events personally. This is not as straightforward as it seems, however, as many scholars conclude that the “we” passages come either from an earlier source or literary convention.

The later epistles are difficult to date, but seem to be responding to developments in Christian history toward the close of the first century and opening of the second. 1 and 2nd Peter were written by different authors, 1 Peter in perhaps 70-90. Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians are called the “Deutero-Paulines”, as their authors claimed Paul’s identity, usually to advocate positions with which he would have disagreed! These were written in the 80s and 90s, as were Hebrews and James. Hebrews does not claim to be written by Paul but was later attributed to him; both Hebrew and James bear affinities with Jewish Christianity (though Hebrews also takes pains to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity to Judaism in every way).

Revelation, though the last book of the New Testament, was not the last book written. It was composed in about 92-96; intriguingly its author John (probably not John Jesus’ disciple) was the only one with Aramaic as a first language.

John is the odd gospel out, with a strikingly different character than Matthew, Mark and Luke. Perhaps most significantly, it is only in John where Jesus is clearly equated with God. John was written toward the end of the first century, around 90-95. It has quite a complex history of composition, with John 21 being added by a different individual. The letters of John were written by someone in the same community and very familiar with the gospel, in around 100.

1 Timothy and Titus, also attributed to Paul, almost certainly were not written by him. Significantly, these books are more negative toward women and presuppose a more structured Church organization than found in Paul’s genuine epistles. They were likely written sometime between 80-100.

Jude was written at the end of the 1st century, and was used as a source for the final book written, 2 Peter. This short book presupposes the apostolic generation is dead, demonstrates awareness of both 1 Peter and Jude, and considers the collection of Paul’s letters to be scripture. As a point of interest, the following books that did not make it into the New Testament were written before 2 Peter: 1 Clement, Shepherd of Hermas, the letters of Ignatius, Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians, and the Didache.

This overview clearly shows that the New Testament is not a single book, but rather a complex anthology. We have two more steps to review before we come to the New Testament as we have it now—copying and canonization.

Copying

As any introduction to New Testament Criticism explains, we do not have any original manuscript of a New Testament book. We only have copies of copies of copies... We have about 5700 manuscripts of the Greek New Testament in part or whole. That sounds impressive, right? The problem is that the vast majority of those come from after 1000 CE, which means they are all copies of the same earlier manuscripts. From the period during which most variant readings entered the tradition, we have less than ten fragments. And remember, that is total, across all books. Not all books are equally represented... Matthew is attested in 23 papyri (the material of the earliest manuscripts), Mark only 3! Before the time of Constantine in the early 300s, we have a few short of fifty. This tragic shortage is due in significant part to persecution, especially by the Roman emperor Diocletian and his subordinate Galerius, who starting in about 303 tried systematically to eradicate Christianity including confiscating and destroying its texts. What can be done is to examine each point of variation and try to determine which reading is earliest and can explain the others. Also, though there are hundreds of thousands of differences between the manuscripts, “The vast majority of these hundreds of thousands of differences...don’t matter at all” (Ehrman, *New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, p. 20).



Papyrus 52, the earliest currently known manuscript of the NT. A section from the Gospel of John 18, dated to about 125 CE.

Once again, numbers can be deceiving. Though the vast majority of variants do not matter beyond confirming the fallibility of the scribes, dozens do make a meaningful difference. In fact, the addition, omission, or changing of few words can change the meaning of an entire book. Does the Gospel of Mark contain a resurrection narrative, or not (Mark 16:9-20)? A

difference of a few words can shift the portrayal of Jesus—did he really plead, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34), and did he heal the leper with compassion, or anger (Mark 1:41)? Important theological issues are also at stake: Did an angel comfort Jesus in his struggle in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43-44)? Is it hard to enter the kingdom of God if you trust in riches, or just generally? (Mark 10:24). And with the omission of a few phrases, the entire theology of vicarious Atonement can be removed from Luke-Acts (Luke 22:19-20).

With the textual variation in perspective, I will present a brief overview of the transmission of the New Testament.

One of the most fascinating questions of textual criticism is whether we have, among all our thousands upon thousands of variants, the original readings as penned by the authors. Or are the exact, original words forever lost? Evidence such as Church Father quotations suggests the latter to be true, at least to some degree.

For example, scholars have made a strong case that we do not have the original text of the Gospel of Mark, and that it changed even in the ten or fifteen years between when it was written and when Matthew and Luke used it to write their gospels! This makes sense, because every time a text was copied, the scribe would be tempted to correct perceived errors, thereby introducing *new* errors. And these “errors” could be theological—for example, a strong tendency in copying is harmonization, meaning to smooth out differences between similar accounts.

We have too little evidence to understand fully the history of NT transmission. Most of our earlier manuscripts have come from Egypt, but that does not mean they originated there. The arid heat acts as nature’s preservation chamber, so to assume Egyptian provenance would be like claiming all our food comes from the fridge! A few interesting hints to some sort of authoritative example are that all the manuscripts we know of abbreviate words considered holy in quite a consistent way. You will also be surprised to know that scriptures in book format (called a codex) rather than in scroll form seems to be a Christian innovation! Before Christianity codices were seen as lesser and temporary, like our spiral notebooks. We can do more than speculate, but perhaps early Christian manuscripts were mimicking particularly influential exemplars from Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome or Alexandria.

Our manuscripts attest to several approaches to copying the New Testament books. There was a tradition of very careful copying. This approach could be called academic—keep the copy as close to the exemplar (the manuscript a scribe is copying from) as possible, nothing added or taken away. Our evidence for this careful, scholarly approach to copying is centered in Alexandria, Egypt. With several known exceptions, this textual type seems to be the closest representative of the earliest text.

Another group of manuscripts and variant readings with claim to early origins has been called the “Western” type of text. Perhaps this approach could be called pastoral—incorporate readings not original to the NT books but of theological value, and smooth out differences between similar books such as the gospels.

There is another text type that is between Alexandrian and Western, but describing it in more detail gets really technical so it isn’t important at an introductory level.

The final type of text is important, because it has influenced English Bibles more than any other tradition. This has been called the “Byzantine” text type, and accounts for the vast majority of our approximately 5700 Greek manuscripts. It more than any other text type seems to be the product of deliberate revision, though this revision was a long process.



Vaticanus, the most famous copy of the NT, showing Hebrews with a marginal note scolding a scribe for changing the earlier text.

So, to summarize: The details of the early Christian texts were first copied remain a mystery, though it is important to remember how wild and diverse this earliest period was. It is a debated question whether we have the resources to reconstruct the NT autographs, or whether the original text will remain forever lost to us.

The texts that would become the New Testament were being circulated in the late first and early second century among texts that would not make it into the NT. And valued oral tradition was shared alongside these texts. These documents, especially the gospels, were being translated into other languages such as Latin, Syriac, and Coptic. Because these texts did not yet enjoy authoritative, scriptural status, scribes felt justified in “correcting” the text—changing content based on how they felt the texts should read. In this early period, two tendencies emerge—the careful, scholarly approach of what would become the Alexandrian text, and what is known as the “Western” text where words were omitted, rearranged, and even incorporated from other sources to enrich the text. And in addition to these intentional changes, every manuscripts contains numerous careless errors that you would also commit if you copied books by hand.

Starting in the third century we have manuscripts that start attesting to certain forms of textual transmission, and we have regional leaders such as Origen of Alexandria who help us understand what the NT text looked like in different times and locations. The persecutions of Diocletian and Galerius destroyed countless manuscripts, contributing to the scarcity of our early evidence.

What became the Byzantine text type perhaps resulted from efforts to consolidate surviving readings among manuscripts after the legalization of Christianity under Constantine. This approach seems to have come from scribes looking at all available texts and working them into one full, flowing narrative. So for example if there were two different readings in two manuscripts, scribes would combine them into a third. This is called conflation. This was the text type of Constantinople, and was a very pleasing text because it contained the best of all others. Therefore it was this textual type that was copied countless times by medieval monks, which is why it comprises over ninety percent of our surviving manuscripts. Thus it is not enough to say that we should follow a certain reading because most manuscripts contain it.

And for religious purposes, the later texts are satisfactory. It is still worthwhile knowing which readings go back to our earliest evidence, and which were added later. Things get especially interesting when these differing readings change the meaning of passages or even books of the Bible in important ways. And this is why an understanding of textual criticism is worthwhile for every reader of the Bible.

Canonization

The final step of how the New Testament came to be involves the story of how the current twenty seven books, no more or less, came to be deemed the authoritative New Testament. The term “canon” refers to a definitive, authoritative, and usually closed collection of sacred texts.

Christianity was born with a “Bible in hand” as it were, since Jesus and his followers venerated the Jewish scriptures. It is interesting to note that the canon of the Jewish scriptures was also not set until the end of the first century CE.... The book of Jude quotes from the Assumption of Moses and the Book of Enoch, for example, and the Qumran community had other books besides the current canonical Jewish Scriptures (it is worth noting the New Testament books also allude to the Apocrypha).

First and foremost, however, early Christians appealed to the words of Jesus. Far into the second century, “scripture” always referred to the Jewish scriptures and words of the Lord (Jesus). It is important to appreciate how gradual the coming together of the New Testament was. “The history of the NT canon, then, was a process extending from the composition of Christian literature in the 1st and early 2nd centuries, through the spread, use, and progressive esteem of these writings in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, to the determination of a fixed list of authoritative Christian scripture in the 4th and 5th centuries.” (Harry Gamble, “Canon [New Testament]”, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* I.853)

Each book that made it in to the New Testament had its original intended audience. Paul certainly had no idea he was writing scripture when he dashed off letters to resolve concerns in modern Asia Minor and Greece! Each gospel writer seems to have written primarily for his respective local community, though the author of Luke presupposes a wider audience.

Smaller collections came together before the NT as a whole... a collection of gospels (sometimes with Acts), a collection of Pauline letters, and a collection of Catholic (general) letters. Those groupings leave out only Revelation, which has its own long canonical history.

The letters of Paul were known as a collection in the early 2nd century (by Ignatius, Polycarp, and the author of 2 Peter). This collection came together likely through a combination of informal exchange between Churches and the efforts of one or more individuals who felt strongly about Paul’s work. They were not quoted from much at all, however, perhaps because of their appropriation by Marcion.

As best we can tell, it was the “heretic” Marcion who compiled the first New Testament! He revered a gospel (a copy of Luke without the first two chapters) and a collection of Paul’s letters (minus the Pastorals and excised of any pro-Jewish elements). He vigorously rejected the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament). We cannot tell to what degree the orthodox New

Testament was a reaction against Marcion's work, but it seems likely that he played some influence.

Oral tradition thrived beside the canonical gospels, and a variety of other gospels were written in the second century, ascribed to Thomas, Philip, Peter, and others. At first a community would only use one Gospel—Mark was used by the communities of Matthew and Luke, who then wrote their own gospels to replace them. And it worked, especially in the case of Matthew, which became by far the most popular account of Jesus' life. Putting multiple gospel accounts side by side was more problematic than collecting the letters of Paul, since such proximity invited comparisons. This led to either preferring one gospel above the others, or harmonizing them. The most popular harmony was produced by Tatian, who copied almost every word of the four gospels into one united work, his Diatessaron (compiled in about 160-175; sadly no manuscript remains, only influence on later translations). Justin Martyr might also have used a gospel harmony.

The other tendency was to use only one gospel—Irenaeus in about 180 laments that the Jewish Christians prefer Matthew, Marcionites prefer Luke, and the Gnostics use either Mark or John. His vehement insistence that the only obvious approach is to use *four* gospels rather than one suggests that approach was intended precisely to combat the idiosyncratic interpretations of the single gospels—the unity softens the rough theological edges of each. Modern readers of the NT would be surprised to learn that the Gospel of John was little used by the proto-orthodox, probably because the Gnostics valued it so highly.

The later letters in the New Testament, called the “Catholic Epistles” because they were written to general audiences, were the latest to be gathered into a collection. Only 1 Peter and 1 John were much used in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, and Jude enjoyed only local popularity until well into the 4th century.

Though Luke and Acts were written as two volumes of the same work, Luke was accepted earlier and more widely than Acts, which only gained importance in the late 2nd century, perhaps because conflicts with other Christian groups increased the need to appeal to a consistent “apostolic tradition”. Revelation was accepted in the West by the 2nd century, but remained controversial in the East for hundreds of years, partly because of debates over Chiliasm/ Millennialism (the idea of a thousand year reign of Jesus on earth).

Emphasis on canon lists can be misleading in that they give the impression that canonization was a top down process with leaders calling the shots on which books were in and which were out. In reality, these lists mostly confirmed which books were accepted in the writer's region. The Church historian Eusebius' classification of the New Testament books in about 325 is tremendously illuminating and illustrates this point.

Eusebius divides the books into three categories: 1) universally acknowledged, 2) disputed but widely read, 3) spurious. Interestingly, James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2-3 John, which of course eventually made the cut, Eusebius identifies as disputed. Perhaps most interestingly of all, he puts Revelation in BOTH categories 1 and 3! That is, it is widely accepted in some areas (Western Christianity), but rejected in others (the Eastern Church). We can conclude from Eusebius' survey that most Christians would have some books they read frequently, others they question, and yet others they feel should not be used. Another category would be books that are accepted, but not often consulted! (Acts would be a good example of this).

You will note that he fails to give advice where it is most needed. He does not say, "This book is considered spurious by some but really it should be accepted"; he stops after describing its general standing with the Christian community.

The important fourth-century manuscripts of the New Testament Sinaiticus attests to the diversity of Christian canons—it includes both the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas as official parts of the New Testament!



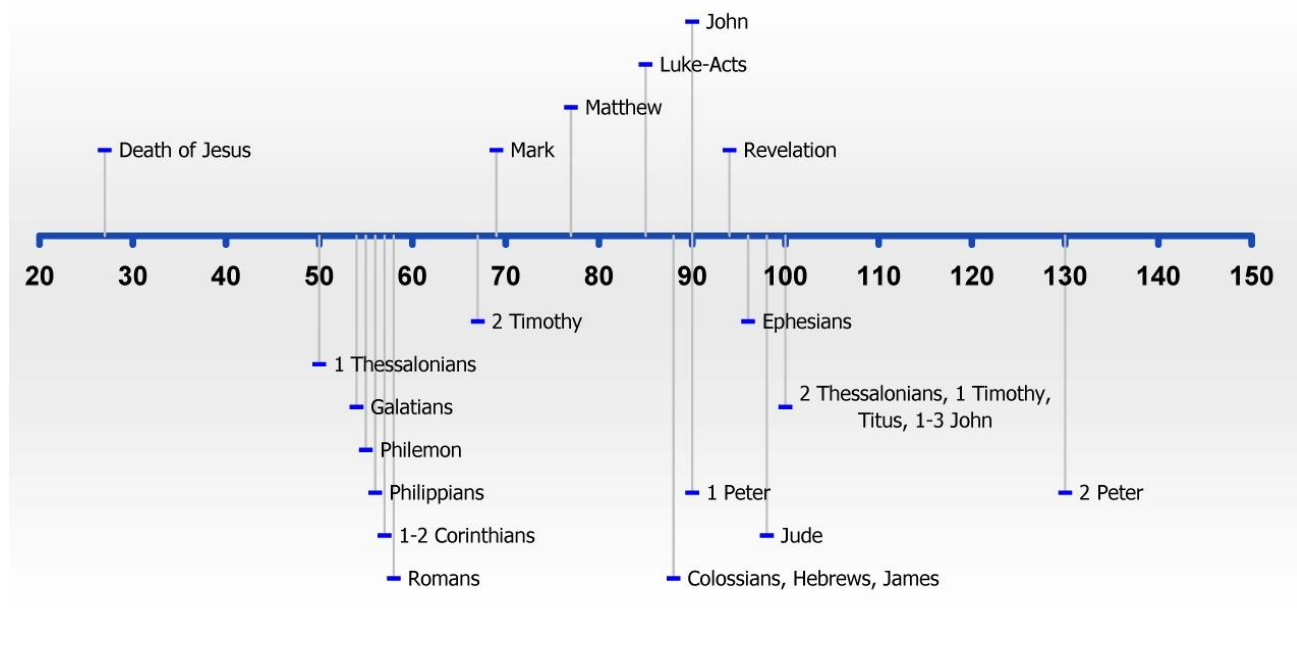
The books of the Nag Hammadi library, considered heretical by the proto-orthodox. The most famous of these is the Gospel of Thomas.

It was not until decades later that a Christian leader gives a canonical list that matches our New Testament exactly. The bishop of Alexandria Athanasius writes in 367 an Easter letter to his clergy. After listing the 27 books of the New Testament he writes, "In these alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed. Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away from them." In 397 a meeting of North African leaders approved the current NT canon in Carthage, but even that doesn't mean such acceptance was universal across all Christian communities.

In retrospect, it can be seen that the criteria for canonization were:

- 1) *Antiquity*: It could not have been written recently (e.g. the vote against the Shepherd of Hermas in the Muritorian Canon)
- 2) *Apostlicity*: It had to be associated closely with an apostle (though it is important to note that except for Paul, who wasn't even one of Jesus' apostles, this claim doesn't seem to be confirmed!)
- 3) *Accepted Widely*: This seems to have been the most important factor, with letters and councils confirming the status quo, and some liminal books going back and forth until they were widely accepted enough to make it in.
- 4) *Agreement with the "Rule of Faith"*: The books needed to be seen as orthodox—in other words, agree with the theological views of the Church leader judging the text! This is why Serapion at first accepted the Gospel of Peter, but then rejected it when he was informed it could be read as denying Jesus' physical form (Docetism).

Compositon of the New Testament Books



Christian Literature

(According to Raymond Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* [New York: Doubleday, 1997])
Apostolic Fathers based on Ehrman's Loeb editions and Clayton Jefford's *Reading the Apostolic Fathers*

Lost Sources

Writings of the Jerusalem Church?
Other letters by Paul, including perhaps some to Jews

Sources Embedded in Present books

Testimonia Collections (very early 30s)
Pre-canonical Passion Narrative (30s)
Miracle stories
Controversy stories, etc.
Sayings source in Matthew and Luke (Q)
Hymns
John's Gospel of Signs and Discourse Sources

Book	Date (CE)	Province
1 Thessalonians	c. 50	Corinth
Galatians	54-55	Ephesus
Philemon	55	Ephesus
Philippians	56	Ephesus
1 Corinthians	56/57	Ephesus
2 Corinthians	mid 57	Macedonia
* <i>Didache</i> 1-10, 16	50-60s?	<i>Palestine?</i>
Romans	57/58	Corinth
2 Timothy	late 60s?	Rome?
Mark	68-73	Rome?
1 Peter	70-90	Rome
Matthew	80-90	Antioch
Luke	c. 85	Syria?

Acts	c. 85	Syria?
Colossians	80s	Ephesus
Hebrews	80s	Jerusalem? Rome?
James	80s-90s	Palestine?
Revelation	92-96	Asia Minor, author fr. Palestine
Ephesians	90s	Ephesus?
John	90-95?	Ephesus
<i>1 Clement</i>	<i>mid 90s</i>	<i>Rome</i>
Jude	90-100?	Palestine?
<i>*Shepherd 1-24</i>	<i>90-100?</i>	<i>Rome</i>
2 Thessalonians	end 1 st cent. ?	
1 Timothy	80-100	
Titus	80-100	
1 John	c. 100	
2 John	c. 100	
3 John	shortly after 100	
<i>Ignatius</i>	<i>c. 110</i>	<i>Antioch, Smyrna, Troas</i>
<i>Polycarp to Philippians</i>	<i>110-120?</i>	<i>Smyrna</i>
<i>Didache</i>	<i>110-120</i>	<i>Antioch?</i>
<i>Papias</i>	<i>110-140</i>	<i>Phrygia</i>
<i>Shepherd</i>	<i>100-150</i>	<i>Rome</i>
<i>Quadratus</i>	<i>c. 125?</i>	
<i>Barnabas</i>	<i>c. 130</i>	<i>Alexandria?</i>
2 Peter	130s	Rome?
<i>2 Clement</i>	<i>140s?</i>	<i>Corinth? Egypt?</i>
<i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i>	<i>c. 155</i>	<i>Smyrna</i>
<i>Epistle to Diognetus</i>	<i>150-200</i>	<i>?</i>

Both of these summaries come from my online courses through the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Anyone can take these courses. If you are interested, see:

<http://fridaycenter.unc.edu/cp/catalog/religious.html>