

BIBLE CANON: What is the Problem?

Over the centuries Christians have disagreed about which texts constitute Scripture, and about what the contents of the bible should be. This is the problem of biblical canon, also known as the problem of canonicity.

On the surface it looks like a straightforward question. But actually, it is a set of different, overlapping problems. Clarifying the scope of the issues is the first step towards beginning to resolve the problem of canonicity.

1. Old Testament Protocanonicals

A core of Biblical canonical texts is provided by the [Protocanonical](#) list of Old Testament books. This is a list of 39 biblical books, which almost all modern Christians accept as canonical. The list is enumerated as 24 books in the Jewish [Hebrew Bible](#), and the first century writer [Josephus](#) even recorded the list as 22 Books.

The table below shows why the set of books can be numbered differently. It shows that Christians and Jews counted the books differently because they separated and joined biblical books, in different ways. (See also [Bible Canon in Jewish Encyclopedia](#)).

Christian	Jewish	Josephus
Genesis		
Exodus		
Leviticus		
Numbers		
Deuteronomy		
Joshua		
Judges		Combined book
Ruth		
1 Samuel	Combined book	Combined book
2 Samuel		
1 Kings	Combined book	Combined book
2 Kings		
1 Chronicles	Combined book	Combined book
2 Chronicles		
Ezra	Combined book	Combined book
Nehemiah		
Esther		
Job		
Psalms		
Proverbs		

Ecclesiastes		
Song of Songs		
Isaiah		
Jeremiah	Combined Book	
Lamentations		
Ezekiel		
Daniel		
Hosea	Combined book	Combined book
Joel		
Amos		
Obadiah		
Jonah		
Micah		
Nahum		
Habakkuk		
Zephaniah		
Haggai		
Zechariah		
Malachi		
39 Books		

When this set of 39 (or 24 or 22) Old Testament books is described as canonical, it is often contrasted with non-canonical books, which are described as [Apocryphal](#) (or [Pseudepigraphical](#)). There are at least fifty texts in that category, which (with the exception of Deuterocanonical

Books, on which see Section 3) almost all Christians and Jews agree in dismissing as non-canonical. (See [Old Testament Pseudepigrapha](#)).

Within Christianity, an Old Testament of Protocanonicals is sometimes described as a [Protestant Old Testament](#). That can be a little misleading, as Catholics and Orthodox communities also accept the Protocanonicals. However, Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments also accept additional books, whilst Protestants accept ONLY the protocanonical books into the Old Testament. (See [Thirty Nine Articles](#), #6).

2. Old Testament versions: Septuagint vs Masoretic Texts

Although almost all Christians accept the Protocanonical books, there is a separate question to be asked about which version of those books should be accepted.

In the earliest days of Christianity there were (at least) two versions of many Protocanonical books. There was a Greek [Septuagint](#) version and a Hebrew [Masoretic](#) version.

There can be considerable differences between the versions. The Septuagint version of the [Book of Job](#) is about 1/6 shorter than the Masoretic version. Differences can also be seen between Septuagint and Masoretic versions of [Genesis](#), [Exodus](#), [Samuel](#), [Kings](#), [Jeremiah](#), [Ezekiel](#), [Esther](#) and [Daniel](#).

Until relatively recently, the majority of scholars believed that the Hebrew Masoretic text was the 'original' and therefore the 'authentic' version of Scripture. So, the Greek Septuagint version was often dismissed as just a bad translation of it. However, archaeological discoveries, such as the [Dead Sea scrolls](#), may now be suggesting that the Septuagint represents an alternative, 'original,' version of the text. (See [Septuagint or Masoretic Text: which is the true version of the bible?](#)).

If the Septuagint does preserve an alternative version of the bible, then that raises a question about canonicity. Protestants take the Hebrew text as canonical. Orthodox take the Septuagint version as canonical. (See [Coptic Orthodox: On the Use of the Septuagint](#)). Catholics have used both versions, but since the fourth century they have mainly followed the Hebrew version (in the Latin [Vulgate Bible](#)).

This means that even if Christians agree that the Protocanonicals are canonical books, they must still address the separate question of which version of those books should be included in their bibles.

3. Old Testament: Deuterocanonicals

The question of [Deuterocanonical](#) books refer to two separate sets of issues: one relates to 'books' and one relates to 'passages.'

The question of *Deuterocanonical books* is a question about whether 7 specific books should be included in the Old Testament: [Tobit](#), [Judith](#), [Baruch](#), [Sirach](#), [Wisdom](#), [1 Maccabees](#) and [2 Maccabees](#).

The question of *Deuterocanonical passages* is a question of whether certain passages (from the Septuagint) should be included within Protocanonical books. It refers to 3 passages in the book of Daniel ([Prayer of Azariah and Canticle of 3 Children](#), [Susannah and the Elders](#) and [Bel and the Dragon](#)). And it refers to [around 6 passages](#) in the book of Esther. (Those passages may be counted differently, depending on how they are divided).

Modern Christians who accept the Deuterocanonical books, typically also accept the Deuterocanonical passages. This means that when modern Christians ask about the Deuterocanonicals they are generally asking a single question of ‘deuterocanonicity.’

This was not always the case in previous centuries. Some historical figures rejected a Deuterocanonical book, whilst accepting a Deuterocanonical passage. For example, Origen rejects some Deuterocanonical books (see Eusebius, [Ecclesiastical History 6.25](#)) but his book of Daniel included Deuterocanonical passages. (See his [Letter to Africanus](#)).

Catholic Bibles accept the 39 Protocanonicals + the 7 Deuterocanonical books (and the 9 Deuterocanonical passages). So, a [Catholic Old Testament](#) contains 46 books. It can be tempting to distinguish between a Protestant and a Catholic bible in terms of the Deuterocanonicals, but that can be misleading. Orthodox bibles also tend to accept the Deuterocanonicals. (See [Armenian Bible](#)). However, a Catholic Old Testament accepts ONLY the Protocanonicals and Deuterocanonicals, whilst Orthodox bibles accept additional books.

4. Orthodox Old Testaments

Orthodox Old Testaments typically add (at least) two extra books to the Protocanonicals and Deuterocanonicals: [3 Maccabees](#), and [1 or 3 Esdras](#). (See [Orthodoxwiki: Old Testament](#)).

However, there is disagreement amongst Orthodox Churches. For example, the Ethiopian [Orthodox Tewahedo Canon](#) contains additional canonical books of: [2 or 4 Ezra](#), [Jubilees](#), [Enoch](#), [4 Baruch](#) and [Josippon](#). And, although it includes 3 books of Maccabees, ([Meqabayn](#)) they differ in content from the Deuterocanonical books of that name.

This means that an Orthodox Old Testament can be described as [roughly 48 books](#). But different communities could vary, according to their own specific traditions. (See [Canon Lists: Old Testament Table](#)).

As with the Deuterocanonicals, (see previous Section), there are also issues about additional passages within Protocanonical books. For example, a [Book of Odes](#) and/or a [Psalm 151](#) may be included with the Protocanonical book of psalms. A [Prayer of Manasseh](#) may also be part of the Protocanonical book of Chronicles. (See [Russian Synodal Bible](#)).

The varying traditions of Orthodoxy raise a number of distinct questions about canonicity, which are different to those discussed by Catholics and Protestants.

5 .New Testament

Almost all modern Christians accept a [New Testament of 27 books](#).

Gospels & Acts	Pauline Epistles	Catholic Epistles	Revelation
Matthew	Romans	James	Revelation
Mark	1 Corinthians	1 Peter	
Luke	2 Corinthians	2 Peter	
John	Galatians	1 John	
Acts of the Apostles	Ephesians	2 John	
	Philippians	3 John	
	Colossians	Jude	
	1 Thessalonians		
	2 Thessalonians		
	1 Timothy		
	2 Timothy		
	Titus		
	Philemon		
		Hebrews	

The seven books marked in red were variously disputed in the first few centuries of Christianity. (See [Antilegomena](#)). By the end of the fourth century they were mostly accepted, although the book of Revelation continued to be queried for centuries by communities in the East.

In the Early Church era, some additional books were also thought to be canonical. For example, [St. Irenaeus](#) (d.202) quoted the [Shepherd of Hermas](#), as Scripture in [Against Heresies Bk 4, 20.2](#). (See [textual comparison](#)). Other texts which were sometimes cited, include: the [Acts of](#)

[Paul](#), the [Apocalypse of Peter](#), [1 Clement](#), [Didache](#), [Epistle of Barnabus](#), the [Gospel of the Hebrews](#). (See [New Testament Apocrypha](#)).

Some of those documents can even be found within the covers of ancient bibles. The fourth Century [Codex Sinaiticus](#) included the Epistle of Barnabus and the Shepherd of Hermas. The Armenian bible also accepted a [third letter of Paul to the Corinthians](#).

This raises a potential question of canonicity for modern Christians. How do we know that the Early Church wasn't too restrictive, and over-zealously ruled out books which should in fact count as Scripture?

6. Queries about Apostolic Authorship

We know that one of the Early Church criteria for determining New Testament canonicity was whether a document was written by an Apostle. (See Bruce Metzger: [The Canon of the New Testament](#), p.254). This is why arguments about the status of the [Book of Hebrews](#), tended to be raised as issues of whether or not the book was written by the Apostle Paul.

Modern Scholarship has analysed the vocabulary and textual styles of the New Testament documents, and it is increasingly questioning whether the [Pastoral Epistles](#) (ie [1 Timothy](#), [2 Timothy](#) and [Titus](#)) could be genuinely written by St Paul. (See [Authorship of Pauline Epistles](#)). It is beginning to look as if they could be [Pseudepigraphical](#) literature, ie falsely claiming to be by St Paul.

If documents such as the Pastoral Epistles were originally accepted into the New Testament on the criterion of Apostolic authorship, but we now have reason to think that the documents may have been falsely claiming, or mistakenly implying, Apostolic authorship, does that mean that they should now be ejected from the New Testament?

7. Queries about later additions

Modern scholarship has also queried whether some parts of the gospels are original.

For example, the [story of the adulterous woman](#) ([John 8,3-11](#)) does not appear in some of the oldest manuscripts, such as [Papyrus 66](#) (which dates to around the year 200) and in [Papyrus 75](#) (which dates to the mid third century). This suggests that the story is not an *original* part of John's Gospel. Does non-originality mean that it is non-canonical? Should that story be ejected from the bible?

The same question arises with the [End of Mark's Gospel](#). Many of the most ancient manuscripts end at [Mark 16,8](#). (See [Codex Vaticanus](#)). This means that the last eight verses of Mark's Gospel ([Mark 16,9-16](#)) are a later addition. Should those 'non-original' verses be automatically classified as non-canonical, and ejected from the bible?

There is precedent for ejecting non-original texts from the bible. The [Johannine Comma](#) used to be part of [1 John 5, 7-8](#), until it was realised that it is a later addition to the bible. Almost all modern bibles have now removed that text.

If some non-original texts are now deemed non-canonical (and removed from the bible), should all non-original texts be removed?

If so, are Christians' beliefs about canonicity always going to be just one archaeological discovery away from being completely overturned? For example, if a 'first draft' of Luke's Gospel turned up, missing half the content of what we now know as Luke's Gospel, would that immediately make half of Luke's Gospel to be non-canonical?

8. New additions?

Some people believe that new documents should be added to the traditional Canon of Scripture.

In the Nineteenth Century, [Mormons](#) came to believe that the [Book of Mormon](#) (and [other Texts](#)) constitute Canonical Scripture.

Also coming to prominence in the Nineteenth Century were a range of documents which purport to detail hitherto unknown matters, such as Jesus' hidden life in India. (See [Strange New Gospels](#)). If documents such as those turned out to be authentic, should they be added to the bible as new gospels?

More recently a panel of scholars met to review newly discovered ancient documents, and they decided that ten of those texts should be added to the New Testament. This led to the 2013 publication of [A New New Testament](#). Should Christians now discard their traditional New Testaments and start using that new version?

These are questions of canonicity, which press the issue of whether the canon is closed.

9. Conclusion

The problem of canonicity can be over-simplified, to seem as if it just a question about which is the true bible: a Protestant bible of 66 books, or a Catholic bible of 73 books (or an Orthodox bible of 75+ books).

But the problem is not just an issue of *books*. It is also a question about the *versions* of books (ie Septuagint vs Masoretic), and it is also a question about *passages* within those books (eg Deuterocanonical passages and non-original passages). It is also a question about whether, and to what extent, a modern 'editing' of Scripture could ever be appropriate, adding or removing texts.

The question of canonicity is the critically important problem of how to resolve those kinds of questions about Scripture. After all, if Scripture is meant to determine (to some extent) the content of Christian faith, and Christians cannot determine what counts as Scripture, then how can they know what should be the content of their Christian faith?