

# BIBLE CANON: What is the Early Church Evidence?

Christians have historically argued about the contents of the bible. (For details, see [Bible Canon: What is the Problem?](#)). One way to try to resolve matters is to look at evidence from the Early Church, especially the 'Canon lists' which record the contents of ancient bibles.

In what follows we will look at 28 pieces of evidence from the Second to the Fourth Century. As far as possible we will look at which [Protocanonical](#), [Deuterocanonical](#) and [Apocryphical](#) books of the bible are listed in each source. The sources are mainly cited from [Bible-researcher.com](#), as that site gives texts in English and in the original language.

## 1. Second and Third Century

Evidence of biblical canon lists start emerging in the second century.

**Evidence 1:** [The Muratorian Fragment](#) (c.170). This does not include an Old Testament. Its New Testament included 23/27 books, omitting Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter. It mentions the [Deuterocanonical](#) book of Wisdom, but places it amidst New Testament books. (See [Fragment](#)).

**Evidence 2:** [Melito of Sardis](#) (c.170) cited the Old Testament as just the Protocanonicals, but with the exception of the book of Esther. There are no details about the New Testament. (See [Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 4.26](#)).

**Evidence 3:** [Origen](#) (d.253) is reported by [Eusebius](#) (d.339) as having an Old Testament which consisted of the Protocanonicals (omitting the [12 books of Minor Prophets](#)) and including 3 of the Deuterocanonicals: Baruch Chp.6 (the Letter of Jeremiah) and the two books of Maccabees. Origen's New Testament included 22/27 books, omitting Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and James, which were all listed as 'disputed.' (See [Ecclesiastical History 6.25](#)).

However, Eusebius' summary may not be entirely accurate. For example, Origen elsewhere quoted Deuterocanonical Tobit as if it were Scripture. ([Against Celsus Bk 5 Chp 19](#)).

## 2. Sources from 300-360

**Evidence 4:** [Codex Claromontanus](#) is a sixth Century manuscript with a Canon list which Metzger dates to c.300. (See [The Canon of the New Testament](#) p.310). Its Old Testament contains all the Protocanonicals and Deuterocanonicals, but its New Testament only contains 23/27 books (omitting 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philipians and Hebrews). It also included 4 Apocrypha in its New Testament: the [Shepherd of Hermas](#), [Epistles of Barnabas](#), the [Acts of Paul](#) and a [Revelation of Peter](#). (See [Claromontanus Extract](#)).

**Evidence 5:** [St Eusebius of Caesarea](#) (c.324) cited Melito (evidence 2) and Origen (evidence 3) for an Old Testament canon. His New Testament included 21/27 books, excluding James, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude and Revelation. (See [Ecclesiastical History Bk 3, chp 25](#)).

**Evidence 6:** St [Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem](#) (c.350) cited the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals plus the Deuterocanonical book of Baruch. His book of Daniel also included Deuterocanonical passages such as the story of Susanna. (See [Catechetical Lecture 16, #31](#)). His New Testament was 26/27 books, omitting the book of Revelation. (See [Catechetical Lectures 4, #33-37](#)).

**Evidence 7** St [Hilary of Poitiers](#) (c.360) cited the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals plus Deuterocanonical Baruch, chp.6 (the Epistle of Jeremiah). His book of Daniel includes Deuterocanonical passages such as the story of Susanna. (See [On the Trinity, Bk 4, #8](#)). He also noted that that some people add Deuterocanonical Tobit and Judith to the Canon. (See [Exposition on the Psalms, #15](#)).

**Evidence 8:** The [Cheltenham/Mommsen list](#) (c.360) recorded the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals, but it omitted Ezra and Nehemiah. It also added Deuterocanonical Tobit, Judith and 1 and 2 Maccabees, as well as an apocryphical Psalm 151. Its New Testament was 24/27 books, omitting James, Jude and Hebrews. (See [Fragment](#)).

## 3. Sources from 361-380

**Evidence 9:** the [Council of Laodicea](#) (363) cited the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals plus Deuterocanonical Baruch. The New Testament was 26/27 books, excluding the book of Revelation. (See [Canon 60](#), although its authenticity is disputed).

**Evidence 10:** [St Athanasius of Alexandria](#) (c.367 ) referred to the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals, excluding Esther; and including Deuterocanonical Baruch. The New Testament contained all 27 books. (See [Epistle 39, #4-5](#)). Athanasius's Book of Daniel also included Deuterocanonical passages, such as the story of Susanna. (See [Against the Arians Bk.1, chap. 4, #12](#)). There may have been local resistance to Athanasius' list, as its translation into Coptic occasioned the adding of the Apocryphal Epistles of Clement. (See Metzger, [The Canon of the New Testament](#), p.225).

**Evidence 11:** [St Gregory of Nazianzus](#) (c.380) cited the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals, excluding Esther. His New Testament included 26/27 books, excluding the book of Revelation. (See [On the Genuine Books of Divinely Inspired Scripture, Bk.1, Chp.1, #12](#)).

**Evidence 12:** [Amphilocius of Iconium](#) (c.380) cited the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals, apart from Esther, which was described as ‘disputed.’ His New Testament was 22/27 books with 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation described as disputed. (See [Iamblicus for Seleucus](#), although note that its [authenticity](#) is disputed).

**Evidence 13:** [The Apostolic Constitutions](#) (c.380) said that the Old Testament consisted of the Protocanonicals plus Deuterocanonical Judith and 1 and 2 Maccabees. It also included an Apocryphical 3 Maccabees. The New Testament was cited as 26/27 books, omitting Revelation but adding an apocryphical Epistle of Clement ([Canon 85](#)).

## 4. Fourth Century: 382-399

**Evidence 14:** [Pope Damasus](#) and the [Council of Rome](#) (c.382) cited the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals and the Deuterocanonicals, although there is no mention of Baruch. The New Testament included all 27 books. (See [Decree of Galasius](#). However, this is a sixth century document which is recording a fourth century council, so its authenticity has been disputed).

**Evidence 15:** [St Epiphanius of Salamis](#) (c.385) cited the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals plus Deuterocanonical Baruch. The New Testament included all 27 books. In different places, in the same work, he seems to refer to Deuterocanonical Wisdom and Sirach as both disputed and as canonical. (See [Panarion 8.6 and 76.5](#)).

**Evidence 16:** [St Jerome](#) (c.391) cited the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals, and he listed all 27 of the New Testament books. He explicitly rejects each of the Deuterocanonical books, except for the Book of Baruch. ([Prologue Galeatus](#)). Jerome also seems to quote the Deuterocanonical book of Wisdom as Scripture in [Epistle 58](#) (c.395), and in 402 he denied that he rejected the Deuterocanonical passages in Daniel ([Apology Against Rufinus, Bk 2, Chp.33](#)). In 407 he wrote that the Council of Nicaea had said that the Deuterocanonical book of Judith was Scripture. (See [Commentary on Judith, Preface](#)). These apparently conflicting claims make it difficult to interpret St Jerome’s views on the canon.

**Evidence 17:** The [Synod of Hippo](#) (393) cited the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals (omitting Lamentations) and including the Deuterocanonicals, but without mentioning Baruch. The New Testament included all 27 Books. The records of this Council are incorporated into the Third [Council of Carthage](#), 397. (See [Canon 34](#)). They are repeated again in the [Council of Carthage \(419\)](#). However, there is an ambiguity in the Council’s reference to ‘two books of Esdras’. This could be a reference to the Protocanonical books of Ezra + Nehemiah. Or it could be a reference to a joint Protocanonical book of Ezra/Nehemiah and to an additional Apocryphal book of Ezra (See [1 Esdras](#)).

**Evidence 18:** [St Augustine of Hippo](#) (c.397) repeats Evidence 17. (See [On Christian Doctrine, 2.8](#)).

## 5. Sources c. 400

**Evidence 19:** [St John Chrysostom](#) (c.400) cited an Old Testament of Protocanonicals which excluded either Esther or the Song of Songs (on differing lists), but it including some Deuterocanonicals. However, there are questions about the authenticity of the text. (See [English Summary](#), or [Latin/Greek vol.56, p.314ff](#)).

**Evidence 20:** [Rufinus of Aquileia](#) (c.400) cited the Old Testament as consisting of the Protocanonicals, although there is no mention of Lamentations. His New Testament contained all 27 books. (See [Exposition of the Creed](#)).

**Evidence 21:** [Pope St. Innocent I](#) (c.405) cited the Old Testament as the Protocanonicals and the Deuterocanonicals, although he omitted mention of Lamentations and Baruch. The New Testament contained all 27 books. (See [Letter to Exsuperius](#)).

**Evidence 22:** the [Bryennios List](#) (within [Codex Hierosolymitanus](#)) is either the most ancient piece of evidence (c.100-150), or a potentially irrelevant medieval list. (For the latter view, see: [Luke Stevens, The Bryennios List](#)). It records the Old Testament as just the Protocanonicals, albeit omitting Lamentations.

## 6. Ancient Bibles

The contents of ancient bibles is informative. But it can also be misleading, as not everything within a bible is necessarily canonical. For example, the first edition of the [King James bible](#) (1611) contained [14 texts which were not considered canonical](#).

**Evidence 23:** the [Peshitta](#) (2nd to 5th Century) contained an Old Testament of the Protocanonicals and some Deuterocanonicals. And the New Testament initially contained 19/27 Books (omitting James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1 and 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation. Differing editions and versions had variable content. (See [Syriac Versions](#)).

**Evidence 24:** [Codex Vaticanus](#) (4th Century) contains an Old Testament of the Protocanonicals and the Deuterocanonicals, apart from the 2 books of Maccabees. Its New Testament contained 22 out of 27 books, lacking 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon and Revelation. (See [Codex Vaticanus: Contents](#)). Its New Testament omissions may have become detached, rather than having never been included.

**Evidence 25:** [Codex Sinaiticus](#) (4th Century) contains most of the Protocanonicals and Deuterocanonicals, but its text is fragmentary, making it difficult to know for sure what was originally included. It's New Testament contains all 27 books plus, additionally, the [Shepherd of Hermas](#) and the [Epistle of Barnabas](#). (See [Codex Sinaiticus: Contents](#))

**Evidence 26:** [Codex Alexandrinus](#) (4th or 5th Century) contains an Old Testament of all the Protocanonicals and the Deuterocanonicals, as well as some Apocryphal texts. Its New Testament includes all 27 books. (See [Codex Alexandrinus: Contents](#)).

**Evidence 27:** [Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus](#) (4th or 5th Century). Its Old Testament includes some Protocanonicals and some Deuterocanonicals, but the manuscript is too fragmentary to draw precise conclusions. It has parts of all 27 of the New Testament books. (See [Codex Ephraemi: Description](#)).

**Evidence 28:** [Codex Amiatinus](#) (c.700). This is one of the oldest physical examples of what St. Jerome's [Vulgate Bible](#) (c. 404) probably looked like. Its Old Testament contains the Protocanonicals and Deuterocanonicals, except for Baruch. It contains all 27 New Testament books.

## 7. What Does it all Mean?

Generations of Catholic and Protestant polemicists have appealed to the evidence above to prove particular versions of the bible. Protestants have argued for a bible which consists of the Protocanonicals (alone) + the New Testament. Catholics have argued for a bible which consists of the Protocanonicals + Deuterocanonicals + New Testament.

Catholic polemicists used to note that Jeremiah and Lamentations are often joined together. (See [Codex Amiatinus](#)). And Baruch was often included under the name of Jeremiah. (For example, St Irenaeus quotes Baruch as Jeremiah, [Against the Heresies Bk 5, chp 35](#), as does St Augustine, [City of God, Bk 18, chp.33](#)). If citations of Jeremiah can be interpreted as including Lamentations and Baruch, then a Catholic bible emerges in evidence 14 (Pope Damasus ), 17 (Synods of Hippo and Carthage), 18 (St Augustine), 21 (Pope Innocent I), and possibly 26 (Codex Alexandrinus).

However, this argument is potentially undermined by Evidence 28 (Codex Amiatinus), which shows that Vulgate bibles containing Jeremiah, did not always contain Baruch. This can be seen clearly in [Codex Toletanus](#) (also known as [Biblia Hispalense](#)) c.950, where there is a note at the bottom of the table of contents saying that the Church has declared Paul's Epistle to the Laodicians to be non-canonical, and so it is removed (*ab ecclesia in canone non relatam*); and that the book of Baruch should now be added (literally 'desired'). (See [Contents](#) p.2)

Protestant Polemicists used to argue that if Lamentations can be assumed within Jeremiah then evidence 20 (Rufinus) and 22 (Bryennios List) describe a Protestant bible. Evidence 16 (Jerome) may also describe a Protestant bible, but the breadth of Jerome's views make it difficult to draw a firm conclusion.

Ultimately, neither the Catholic nor Protestant polemicists did justice to the full breadth of the evidence. Both tended to fall into the fallacy of selectivity (ie [Cherry Picking](#)); as they each tried to justify their differing conclusions by appealing to a narrow cross section of the total evidence.

Perhaps a more appropriate response to the totality of the evidence would be to recognise the diversity which it represents? Rather than trying to find in the evidence, a *developed doctrine* of a biblical canon, perhaps it would be more honest to recognise that the evidence shows a *developing of doctrine* taking place?

If this is so, then it means that it is a potential misuse of the evidence to try and extract a doctrine of biblical canon from pieces of Early Church evidence. The ancient evidence may well be an important ingredient in an eventual answer, but history alone cannot resolve the problem of the Biblical Canon.