

# The Development of the Bible

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Many Christians tend to have the idea that the Bible somehow just appeared, without ever considering the historical process that brought the anthology of writings we call the Bible together across 2,000 years of history. And even when that historical process is considered the question often arises as to exactly when the Bible was written.

While a logical question, it is more difficult to answer than it would at first appear. As with many issues related to Scripture, there are assumptions and considerations that often influence the answer beyond the evidence itself. How this particular question is answered will depend to a great extent on how one views the Bible, including such issues as the nature of Scripture, theories of inspiration, etc. Even phrasing this as “written” raises issues, because that does not consider that much of Scripture, including the Gospels, probably were circulated in the community of Faith as **oral tradition** or as separate pieces of written tradition long before the Bible took shape as a collection of books.

That makes it difficult to speak of a specific time when the Bible was written, or even of a specific time when many of the individual books were written. A better way to phrase the question is, “What was the span of time during which the Bible developed.” This acknowledges that the modern concept of “author,” and the subsequent question of “when did s/he write” may not be the most appropriate to apply to Scripture. It also acknowledges the well-known descriptive statement: “The Bible was not just written; it grew.” This does not at all lessen the dimension of inspiration that most Christians associate with Scripture. But it does allow the dynamic of a community of Faith to have some role in producing Scripture as their testimony to God’s revelation in their ongoing history. Inspiration in this view is not what God does for a person at a point in time, but what God does within the community of Faith across time in order to enable them to bear faithful witness of his revelation to and among them (see [Revelation and Inspiration of Scripture](#)).

As far as the span of time involved, the earliest traditions that are incorporated into Scripture, probably oral traditions, likely date to the time of Abraham around 1800 BC. Probably the first written parts of Scripture were short pieces of poetry, such as the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, dating to the time of the exodus around 1300 BC. There are also several references to Moses writing about various aspects of the exodus in this period, including some of the “laws” for the community.

However, it is likely that the Bible actually began to take shape as Scripture later as the earliest written traditions began to be collected into books about the time of Solomon, around 1000 BC. The Old Testament in roughly the form that we know it did not emerge until after the return from Babylonian exile around 500-450 BC. The first of the three parts of the Jewish canon, the Torah (what Christians would later call the Pentateuch), was authoritative for the community long before the time of Jesus. The Prophets were mostly in place by the second century BC, and the Writings (Psalms, Job, Chronicles; see [Canons of the Hebrew Bible](#)), would achieve that status not long after. The entire Old Testament canon, without any of the apocryphal books, did not reach an “official” codified form in Judaism until the Council of Jamnia in AD 90. This was largely a Jewish response to Christianity that was producing new writings (what we call the New Testament) to add to what was already authoritative in Judaism.

Likewise the New Testament underwent a similar process of development, although in a much shorter time frame. The first letters of Paul were written around AD 45-50, the first Gospel (Mark) around AD 60, and the last of the canonical Epistles around AD 90-100. However, the New Testament did not emerge as an entire body of collected writings until well into the third century AD. Even then, some of the books were

debated (for example, Hebrews, James, the Revelation) and some sections of the church used books that were not accepted in other areas (*The Didache*, *The Epistles of Clement*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, etc.).

So although the New Testament took shape over roughly 50 years and was virtually complete by the early second century AD, it took another two to three centuries for the church to begin defining the canon of the New Testament. However, the Christian canon was not “officially” closed until the tensions that erupted during the Reformation led to the exclusion of the Apocrypha by the emerging Protestants, which in turn led to the Catholic Council of Trent in AD 1546 that officially defined the Catholic canon including the apocryphal books. It is this debate over the basis of authority between the Catholic/Orthodox traditions and the Protestant tradition that has led to two similar yet different canons of Scripture for these two traditions.

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