

As far as the New Testament is concerned, there were many virtuous books and letters written in the first few centuries of the Church and there was much debate about which of them could be treated as canonical. Individual Church councils gave support to various lists but it would not be until the Council of Trent, in 1546, that the present books of the Bible would be irrevocably fixed.



## Apocryphal Books

Much has been made recently in TV documentaries and newspaper articles, not to mention films like the Da Vinci Code, that purport to tell about some secret history of Christ. In particular, the content of many other Gospels are discussed and portrayed as undermining the foundations of the Church. Such claims make for good publicity and, more importantly, a source of income for the authors and film producers but, in fact, such books are of very little value except to scholars.

The Catholic Church calls books which make a false claim for divine authorship 'Apocryphal' books and there are many of them: Narratives, Apocalypses, Gospels, Acts, Psalms, Letters. The Protestant Churches use the word the 'Pseudepigrapha' for them. The early Church examined the claims of all these books in detail and rejected them. There was certainly nothing secret about them to the early Christian communities.

It may be of interest to know, however, that some of these books are the source of many items of information we often talk about (that is not to say they are all true). For example:

- the **Acts of Thomas** is where we get our belief that India was evangelised by that apostle
- the **Book of Adam and Eve** and the Ethiopic **Book of Enoch** are where we know about the fall of the wicked angels and the expulsion of Satan from Heaven by Michael
- a **Gospel of Thomas** relates extravagant stories about Jesus as a child turning other children into animals, killing one child and bringing him back to life
- the **Gospel of James** reveals the names of Mary's parents as Anna and Joachim
- the **Martyrdom of Isaiah** states that the first Isaiah was sawn in half by the evil king Manasseh.



# Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

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### Not a Book, More a Series of Books

*Understanding how the Bible came to its present form*



### Questions for Reflection

1. In what sense can we say God is the author of the Bible?
2. What about all the other Jewish and early Christian books I've read about and seen discussed on TV (like the Book of Enoch and the Gospels of Thomas and Peter), why aren't they in the Bible?
3. In discussions about the Bible I've heard books described as Deutero-Canonical, Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal, but what do these terms mean?
4. There seems such a contrast between the books of the Old and New Testaments, what is the unifying theme?

## What Kind of Book is the Bible?

The Bible is not a single book, at least not in the sense of being written by a single human author. The biblical books, or more accurately scrolls, were written by different people over different time periods.

One analogy is to compare the Bible to a newspaper. The advantage of this comparison is to recognise its unity of purpose and variety. God sets the agenda like a newspaper magnate, the biblical writers carry out this agenda in the way they report and interpret events, in much the same way as an editor and journalists do. The Biblical books consist of many different types (genres) of writing – myth, history, story, law, prophecy, poetry, wisdom, biography, letters, mystical. Newspapers contain equal variety: reporting of politics, sports etc. but also news commentary, astrology, finance, gossip columns, weather and so on. No analogy is perfect, however, and while newspapers are produced as a unity over a daily or weekly period, the Bible consists of a series of different books written over many hundreds of years.

Another analogy, therefore, that is often adopted is that of a series of books in a library, within a particular section or subject. The advantage is that this recognises how books are written over different periods of time. But this analogy is not perfect either, because many biblical books were themselves written over many years by several different people, as will now be explained.

## Who were the Biblical Authors?

Usually when books are written the name(s) of the author(s) are given. Occasionally, nom de plumes are adopted (e.g. George Eliot). Even when a name is ascribed to a book or set of books, it is sometimes disputed (e.g. Shakespeare's plays). In addition, very often a book may really be the work of a compiler or redactor. A compiler will collect the work of other people and present it as a kind of compendium (e.g. the Psalms, Proverbs) while a redactor will modify the writings of other people, and maybe add his own material, in order to present his own particular message. Thus, when considering the authorship of the biblical books all of these factors must be considered.

It must be accepted that we do not know the authors of many of the biblical books. The first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch or Torah, used to be ascribed to Moses. However, studies of the literary styles, repetitions and contradictions indicate strongly the work of redaction, with several sources for these books. One famous study, for example, proposed a Documentary Theory, whereby these books are a mixture of a 'Yahwistic' source of information (where God is called Yahweh), an 'Elohistic' source (where God is identified by the word Elohim), a Priestly source concerned with religious matters, and a Deuteronomistic source added after the exile of the Jews in Babylon. The Deuteronomistic source is also believed to be central to the books of Joshua to Kings, although there are references in the Bible to other sources, now lost (e.g. The Book of the Annals of



Solomon, the Annals of the Kings of Israel and Judah). The prophetic books, bearing the name of individual prophets, were probably not written by the prophets themselves, certainly not in the form we have them now, but are the product of redaction. Possibly they contain a core of material originally recorded by the prophets themselves but most of the material was probably written by disciples of the prophets or writers in subsequent times.



In the New Testament there may be safer ground, certainly with St. Paul's letters, but there is no absolute certainty about the authorship of several other writings, like the letter to the Hebrews or the letters of John (John the Apostle or another John?), or even the Gospels of Matthew and John.

## How the Biblical Books Became the Bible.

If the Bible is really a series of different books, how and when did these books come together in the form of a single book?

The key to understanding the formation of the Catholic Old Testament is to appreciate that it is essentially the Jewish scriptures, the TeNaK, plus a few additional books.

The TeNaK is so called because it consists of :

- the **T**orah (the first five books)
- the **N**ebiim or prophets. These in turn are considered in two sections by the Jews: the 'former' prophets, basically the historical books like Samuel and Kings, and the 'latter' prophets, the book bearing the names of the individual (classical) prophets.
- The **K**etubim or writings, basically other books accepted by the Jews as genuinely inspired by God (canonical).

The Torah and Nebiim collections were accepted as canonical from the 5th century BC, after the Jewish exile in Babylon. The Ketubim was not closed by the Jews until the 1st century AD.

The difference between the Catholic OT and Jewish TeNaK came about because the early Church used a Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures made in the early centuries BC that included the Ketubim and other books. These other books were Tobit, Judith, Maccabees, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus and Baruch, together with parts of Daniel and Esther. The Church calls these other books 'Deutero-Canonical' but they are not accepted as canonical (that is, divinely inspired) by the Protestant churches who call them 'Apocryphal'.