

How We Got the Bible: Why Certain Books Were Excluded and Why We Can Trust the Canon

For many believers, the Bible feels like a single, unified book handed down directly from heaven. In reality, it is a carefully preserved library of writings produced over more than fifteen centuries, across multiple cultures, languages, and historical moments. Yet despite its diversity, Scripture speaks with remarkable unity because Christians believe God guided its formation.

Understanding how the Bible came together strengthens our confidence in why we can trust it today.

1. The Formation of the Biblical Canon

The term *canon* refers to the authoritative collection of books recognized as Scripture. The canon did not appear overnight. It developed gradually as God's people recognized which writings carried divine authority.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament canon was largely settled within Judaism before the time of Jesus. These writings were used in worship, preserved by scribes, and widely accepted across Jewish communities. By the first century, the core of the Hebrew Scriptures was firmly established.

The New Testament

The New Testament canon emerged over the first several centuries of the early church. As the apostles wrote letters, gospels, and pastoral instructions, Christian communities copied, circulated, and used them in worship. Over time, the church applied several key criteria to determine which writings were truly inspired:

- **Apostolic origin or connection**
- **Consistency with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles**
- **Widespread acceptance among Christian communities**

These criteria helped distinguish authentic apostolic writings from later or questionable texts.

2. Why Books Like Enoch and Thomas Were Not Included

Many ancient religious writings circulated in Jewish and early Christian communities. Some were valued for teaching or historical insight, but they were not considered Scripture.

The Book of Enoch

The Book of Enoch is an ancient Jewish work that predates Jesus. Although it is quoted in the New Testament book of Jude, it was never part of the Hebrew canon and was not widely accepted among early Christians. Its theological themes, particularly regarding angels and apocalyptic visions, diverged from the teachings found in canonical Scripture. For these reasons, it was not included.

The Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas is a second-century collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. It is not a narrative gospel and contains teachings aligned with early Gnostic movements. Scholars agree it was not written by the apostle Thomas. Because it lacked apostolic authority, contradicted core Christian doctrine, and was not embraced by the broader church, it was excluded.

General Reasons for Exclusion

Across the early church, books were rejected for reasons such as:

- Uncertain or false authorship
- Theological inconsistency
- Limited regional acceptance
- Association with heretical movements

These texts remain historically interesting, but they do not carry the authority of Scripture.

3. Who Determined the Canon

A common misconception is that a single council decided the contents of the Bible. In reality, the canon was recognized through centuries of consensus among Christian communities.

Key Influences

- **Jewish councils and scribal traditions** helped solidify the Old Testament.
- **Early Christian bishops and regional councils** articulated which writings were already widely accepted.
- **Church fathers**, such as Athanasius, listed the twenty-seven New Testament books that are still recognized today.
- **Later councils**, such as the Council of Trent, reaffirmed the canon in response to theological debates.

These councils did not create the canon. They simply acknowledged what the church had already embraced.

4. Why We Can Trust the Bible Today

Apostolic and Prophetic Authority

The books of the Bible were written by individuals who were either prophets, apostles, or close associates of apostles. Their writings carry firsthand testimony of God's work.

Consistency Across Communities

The books recognized as Scripture were those used broadly across diverse Christian communities, not just in isolated regions.

Theological Unity

Despite being written over many centuries, the Bible maintains a coherent message about God, humanity, sin, redemption, and the person of Christ.

Historical Reliability

The Bible is supported by extensive manuscript evidence, archaeological discoveries, and early church testimony.

The Guidance of the Holy Spirit

Christians believe the formation of the canon was not merely a human process but one directed by God through His people.

5. What About the “Lost Books”?

Texts such as Enoch, Thomas, Mary, Barnabas, and others are valuable for understanding early Jewish and Christian thought. They shed light on debates and beliefs circulating in the ancient world. However, they were excluded from the canon because they lacked apostolic authority, contradicted established doctrine, or emerged too late to be considered eyewitness testimony.

They are historically important, but they are not inspired Scripture.

6. The Canon Is Not a Conspiracy

Modern claims that the church suppressed certain books to control doctrine do not align with historical evidence. Early Christianity was diverse and geographically scattered. The books that became Scripture were already widely used long before any council met. Excluded books were rejected because they failed to meet the criteria of authenticity and doctrinal consistency—not because they threatened institutional power.

Conclusion

The Bible we have today is the result of God speaking through prophets and apostles, the faithful preservation of Scripture by His people, and centuries of Spirit-guided discernment. Books like Enoch and Thomas are valuable historically, but they were rightly excluded because they lacked apostolic authority and theological alignment with the rest of Scripture.

The canon is intentional, reliable, and trustworthy. It stands as a testament to God's faithfulness and the enduring witness of His people.