

## **Study Guide #13: What is the Bible?**

### **Introduction**

We believe the Christian Bible represents the teachings of Jesus and constitute the inspired and authoritative guide for all faith and practice in our lives. This includes both the Old and New Testaments.

### **Question #1: What is the Old Testament?**

**Answer:** Depending upon how you count them, the Old Testament is a collection of 39 books of the Jewish canon of Scriptures. In the Jewish canon they are counted as 24 books, but the difference is that the Jews combine some of the books so that there are fewer of them. However, the content is exactly the same. The Jewish canon places the books in a different order, with having 3 major divisions: (1) the Law (Torah); (2) the Prophets; and (3) the Writings.

### **Question #2: Why do Christians accept the Old Testament if it's a *Jewish* collection of books?**

**Answer:** We accept the Old Testament as authoritative Scripture for 2 basic reasons. *First*, Christianity arose within Judaism because Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament). So it's only natural that if the followers of Jesus accepted the Jewish Scriptures, other Christians also ought to accept them. [NOTE: See Explorer I, Study Guide #12 for the evidence that Jesus was the Messiah.] *Second*, Jesus Himself accepted them as authoritative Scriptures. In Luke 24:44-45, He referred to the 3 divisions of the Jewish Scriptures and called them "**Scriptures**" (cf. Luke 24:27). The only difference was that He referred to the Writings section as the Psalms, undoubtedly because it's the largest book in the Writings section. Also, in Luke 11:51, Jesus referred to all of the martyrs in Biblical history when He said, "**from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah**" (or Zacharias). Abel was the first martyr recorded in Genesis 4, and Zechariah (or Zacharias) was the last one mentioned in the Jewish book of Chronicles (II Chronicles 24:20-21 in the Christian Old Testament). In the Jewish Bible, Genesis is the first book of Scripture, and Chronicles is the last one.



Hebrew Scripture Scroll

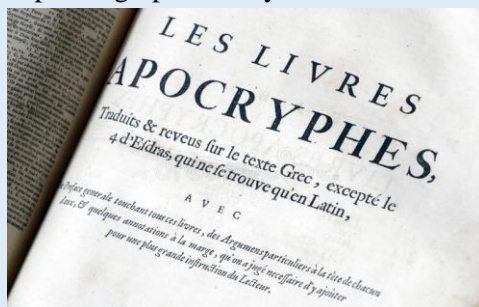
### Question #3: What does the word “canon” mean, and when was the Jewish canon of Scriptures determined?

**Answer:** The word “canon” comes from a Greek word for “rule” or “measure.” As applied to the Scriptures, the canon is the collection of writings that constitute the *rule* by which we *measure* or evaluate all spiritual truths. In other words, the canon is what is used to test or judge whether someone is teaching the truth or error.

Early and strong Jewish tradition says that the Jewish canon was collected under the authority of Ezra, the priest and scribe who led many Jews back to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Captivity ended in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (the 400s B.C.). First-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote that the Jewish canon of Scriptures was completed at the time of Persian King Artaxerxes, who died in 424 B.C., and that nothing had been added, subtracted, or changed since that time.<sup>1</sup> The first known Jewish council to deal with the canon was the Council of Jamnia (in modern Israel) in about A.D. 90. Christian books were then circulating, so the council wanted to make a clear distinction between the sacred books of Judaism and Christianity. This council affirmed the canon that Josephus identified, clarifying that the book of Esther was indeed part of those Scriptures since there was some doubt about it because it doesn’t include a word for “God.”

### Question #4: The Roman Catholic Church has some additional books in their Old Testament. What are those extra books?

**Answer:** Roman Catholic Bibles contain all of the Jewish canon of Scriptures (like Protestants do), and depending upon how you count them, an additional 7 to 12 books. The difference between the 7 and the



Apocrypha

12 depends upon whether a particular Catholic version of the Bible separates all of the additional material into different books or combines several with the existing Jewish books. The Eastern Orthodox Church, and most other non-Protestant churches, also contain additional books in their Old Testament, although not *exactly* the same ones as the Roman Catholic Church does.

These extra books are called “deuterocanonical” books, which comes from 2 Greek words meaning “second canon” because they were written from about 250-50 B.C., and thus represent an addition to the Jewish canon. Sometimes they are also called the “Apocryphal” books, from a Greek word meaning “hidden.”

### Question #5: What are the major arguments used to include these extra books?

**Answer:** The major arguments are (1) they were part of the Septuagint, the 1<sup>st</sup> Greek translation of the Jewish Bible (completed in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century B.C.), which was the Bible of the 1<sup>st</sup>-century A.D. Christian

---

<sup>1</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, Book 1, par. 8.

Church; (2) the New Testament writers usually quoted from the Septuagint when they quoted from the Old Testament; and (3) several Early Church Fathers considered them canonical.

### **Question #6: What are the major arguments against including these extra books, and what is your position on this issue?**

**Answer:** We agree with Protestant Christians in rejecting all of the various deuterocanonical books. *First*, no 2 manuscripts of the Septuagint have been found containing the exact same extra books—which implies that there was no widespread agreement even among those who translated the books. *Second*, the New Testament writers quoted from the Septuagint because they also wrote their own books in Greek. So it was only natural that they then quote from the Greek translation of the Old Testament. *Third*, several Early Church Fathers do not constitute the entire Church, or even the Church as a whole. Even Jerome (d. 420), who translated the Bible into Latin, which was the basis for the official Roman Catholic Bible, rejected all of the deuterocanonical books. He included one of them in his translation only under great pressure. A large majority of church leaders until the Catholic Council of Trent are on record as opposing these extra books. There were some regional church councils that included some of them in the canon. But none of the ecumenical church councils did so. [NOTE: An *ecumenical* Church council was a council of church bishops representing all of the geographical areas of Christianity—the entire Church.]



Jerome

*Finally*, Christianity grew out of Judaism, and the Jews as a whole never accepted any of the deuterocanonical books as part of their canon. Jews would not accept a book not originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and they recognized no more prophets after the 5<sup>th</sup>-century B.C. Moreover, we already noted that Jesus Himself accepted the Jewish canon of Scriptures (the 3 divisions), which did not contain any of these extra books. See Question #2.

### **Question #7: Why are the 2 sections of the Christian Bible called the Old and New Testaments?**

**Answer:** The first known designation of the Bible into the Old Testament and the New Testament originated from Melito (d. ca.180), the bishop of Sardis in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Originally, the English word “testament” meant “covenant,” an agreement between 2 parties. [NOTE: Today that word is almost exclusively used to denote an official testament or will that a person has drawn up to show how his estate should be divided after his death.]

The Old Testament primarily concerns the covenant relationship between God and the nation of Israel and/or Judah. It details what kind of relationship God desired to have with them and how often the Hebrew people deviated from God’s desire. Eventually, the northern kingdom of Israel moved so far away from God that He allowed its people to be defeated and then dispersed by Assyria in 722 B.C. The southern kingdom of Judah eventually rejected Jesus as the Messiah, which led to the creation of the Christian Church and Judah’s destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70. The New Testament concerns the covenant relationship

between God and the followers of Jesus as it existed in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. [NOTE: The people of the northern kingdom of Israel who were left there (not dispersed) intermarried with non-Hebrews and became known as Samaritans. The dispersed people lost their identity through intermarriage and became known as the 10 Lost Tribes of Israel.]

### **Question #8: How was the New Testament written, and why do Christians accept it as authoritative Scriptures?**

**Answer:** Review Explorer I, Study Guide #6 for the evidence that the New Testament documents were written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. They are considered part of the Christian Scriptures because Jesus ordained His 12 closest disciples as apostles and sent them out in His name with His authority to heal the sick and teach His truth. The Greek word for “apostle” means “the sent out ones.” In this way, they were official ambassadors for Jesus. Just as a nation’s ambassadors *officially* speak for their country, the apostles’ teachings were considered the *official* teachings of Jesus. In this way, Jesus prepared for the writing of the New Testament to be equally authoritative along with the Jewish Scriptures—because whatever spiritual things they wrote would be considered as if Jesus Himself had personally taught them.

### **Question #9: How was Paul an apostle of Jesus when he wasn’t even converted until after Christians believe Jesus returned to heaven?**

**Answer:** It’s true that Paul wrote at least 13 books of the New Testament because he was considered to be an apostle of Jesus, even though his circumstances were unusual. He was converted from being a Jewish persecutor of Christians to a Christian after his experience on the road toward Damascus, Syria. According



Apostle Paul

to the story, recorded 3 times in the book of Acts (Acts 9:1-9; 22:6-16; 26:12-18), Jesus supernaturally appeared to him from heaven and called him to be an apostle. Acts 26:17, when Jesus said He would send him to the Gentiles, the Greek word for “**send**” is the verb form of the word for “apostle.” In other words, Jesus said, “I now apostle you.” In II Peter 3:15-16, the apostle Peter (one of the original 12) obviously accepted this apostleship of Paul because he declared that Paul’s writings were also Scripture. [NOTE: The strongest Christian tradition is that Paul also wrote Hebrews (which would make it the 14<sup>th</sup> book he wrote), although

there is still some doubt about who the author was. See Question #10 for the acceptance of New Testament books.]

### **Question #10: When were the New Testament books fully accepted as canonical Scripture?**

**Answer:** Remember that there was no printing press in Christian areas of the world until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, so each document had to be copied by hand, which is why we call them manuscripts. There was also no email, telephones, telegraph, or fax machines. Thus, it was a slow and expensive process to get these documents copied and distributed to the rapidly expanding Christian population. We also know from strong

Christian tradition that Christians would not accept a book as part of New Testament Scripture unless they were convinced it had been written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle. The idea behind a close associate of an apostle was that the apostle would have approved the document before it was copied and distributed. Before the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (300s), the same 27 books of every Christian's New Testament today were accepted as having apostolic authority and thus part of the Scriptures. The first Church council that we actually have a written record of that confirmed these 27 books and letters was the Third Council of Carthage in 397.

### **Question #11: What is so special about the Christian Bible? Why else should we consider it to be the authoritative Word of God?**

**Answer:** The ultimate answer to these questions is the fact that Jesus accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as the inspired Word of God and prepared the world for a New Testament to also be included in that Word. Since the historical-legal investigation into Jesus has revealed Him to be God (see Explorer I, Study Guide #11), we can accept anything He called Scripture.

From a purely historical perspective, the entire Christian Bible is unique in that more than 40 different writers wrote its individual books over a period of about 1,500 years. [NOTE: The earliest writer was undoubtedly Moses, but there's a debate about whether he wrote in the 1400s B.C. or the 1200s B.C. We accept the earlier date, but even if the later date is more accurate, that would make the Bible's writing extend to more than 1,300 years.] The fact that this number of individual books from more than 40 writers was preserved and collected into the Bible over this amount of time is historically very remarkable. Moreover, no other book has been the focus of so much animosity; it has been banned, confiscated, and burned at different times in the Christian Era. Yet almost 6,000 Greek manuscripts of New Testament documents, for example, have been discovered, dating as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. This amount of manuscript evidence far exceeds any other documents in human history. In addition to these facts, the entire Bible tells a coherent story. This makes it all the more remarkable, if not downright miraculous! [NOTE: See Explorer I, Study Guide #6 for a review of the manuscript evidence.]



The Holy Bible

No other book in history matches the Christian Bible's record concerning its preservation, collection, and coherent message. The closest to it would be the Hindu Veda. However, it wasn't written down probably until the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. and not completed until about A.D. 1100. Moreover, the Veda has not faced the same level of animosity that the Christian Bible has.