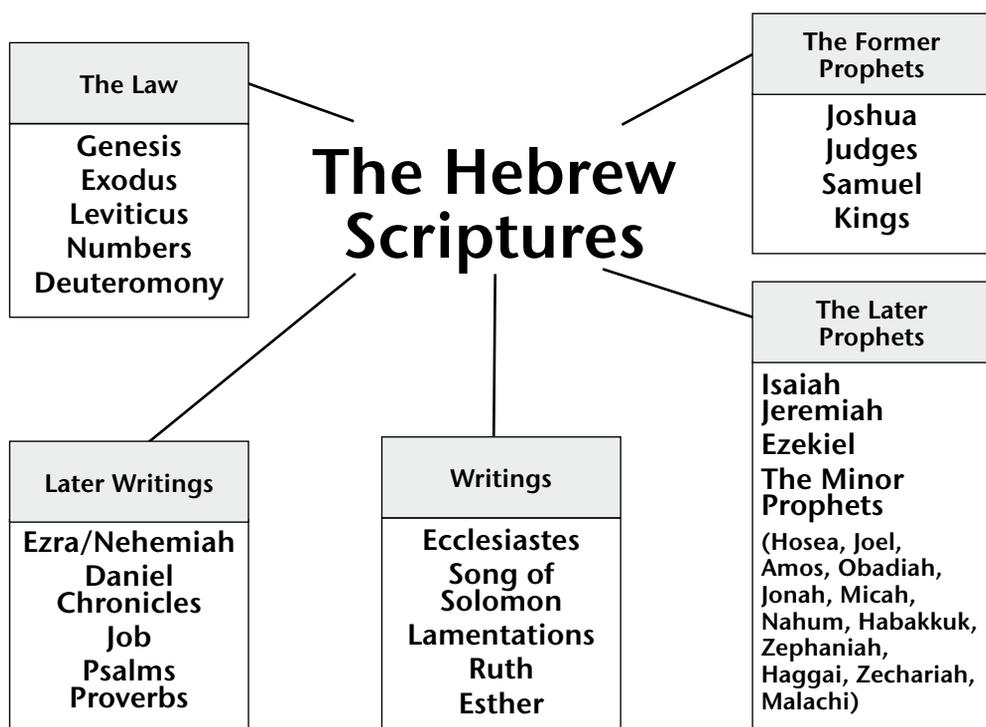


How Did We Get the Bible?

The Hebrew Scriptures

At first there were just the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew Scriptures are the same as the Christian Old Testament, but arranged under three headings – Law, Prophets and Writings. This is more of a chronological arrangement, reflecting the three stages in which the Scriptures were gathered together. First came the Law of Moses, then the work of the prophets and finally the miscellaneous writings. They group some of the books together that the Christian Bible splits up. Samuel, Chronicles and Kings are each one book, rather than two; and all the minor prophets are brought together in one book. Thus the Hebrew version has 24 books, where the Christian Old Testament has 39.

The oral tradition



The early Church used the Jewish Scriptures, probably singing from the Psalms and reading the passages to see how they pointed to Jesus. But in addition they told stories of Jesus' life on earth, and shared memories and favourite quotes. These were spoken memories – an oral tradition – which was passed on from group to group, from one eyewitness to another. In the early days the Church was restricted to a fairly limited geographical location, many of the eyewitnesses were still alive, and the followers believed strongly that the return of Jesus was imminent. For these reasons, they probably did not feel the need to write the accounts down.

The first accounts

After a while, however, the Church began to spread throughout Asia Minor. Similarly, it became apparent that the Lord's return was not going to be quite as quick as had been anticipated and the original eyewitnesses began to die off (or were killed). Thus it became urgent that these stories and recollections should be gathered together, so that new converts would have something to tell them about the story of Jesus. So various people began to write down their own accounts, drawing on a range of material and their own observations.

In the post

At the same time, well-known figures such as Paul, Peter or John began to write to different churches helping them to solve problems and offering spiritual advice. There were other documents by respected figures in the Church – leaders such as Irenaeus and Polycarp. These letters, which contained a lot of valuable teaching and insight, were collected and copied and passed around the early Church.

True or false

So far, so good. But then there began to be other documents circulated, fake 'gospels' full of fantastic details and strange stories. Some of these were written by opponents of Christianity in order to discredit it, or by people who wanted others to follow their own brand of false Christian teaching. Others were written by well-meaning supporters who had, perhaps, let their imagination get the better of them. Much of the material in these 'gospels' focused on the early years of Jesus, particularly his childhood and upbringing about which so little was really known. One of these invented gospels gave him a wife and a family, others showed him performing miracles in his childhood, including turning his schoolfriends into birds and murdering his teacher.

So, the scriptures available to the Christian Church looked like this:



The Church was faced with a difficult and urgent question: what was the official teaching? What were the 'approved' documents?

The reading list

In response, various Church leaders began to draw up their lists of approved and recommended reading. Again there were problems, because Christianity was still an evolving faith with no centralised leadership, so many of these lists reflected the personal preferences of local Christian leaders. The earliest surviving list is a vivid example of this. It was issued by Marcion in AD 144. Marcion was very anti-Jewish, so his list omitted the entire Old Testament and every Gospel except for Luke (and even then he edited bits out he didn't like). He did include some letters of Paul (but then again, Paul was Greek, so that made him OK).

Other lists followed, each including their own selection. Gradually a consensus emerged and most lists included the four Gospels, the book of Acts and the letters of Paul. However, there was a lot of debate about some of the other letters, especially about James, Jude, Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Revelation.

**Details, Details...
Books that Missed Out**

Many of the books which were rejected can still be read today.

They include:

- Genuine letters from early church leaders such as Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp.
- Anonymous writings such as the Didache and the Shepherd of Hymas. These were felt to be genuine teaching, but not helpful enough to be included.
- Fake ‘gospels’ and ‘acts’, such as the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of the Egyptians, the gospel of Hebrews and the Acts of Paul and Thecla. These were rejected as fake, although some experts today argue that some real sayings of Jesus might be hidden among the unreal bits.

**Details, Details...
The Apocrypha**

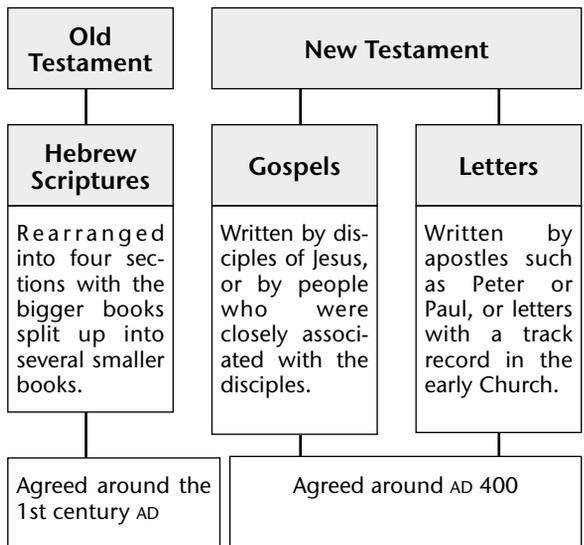
Your Bible may have more books than the ones listed on p.14, in which case you probably have an Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholic Bible. These Bibles have what is called the Apocrypha, and the books in question sit between the Old and New Testaments. They were written after the time of the last prophets, but before the advent of Jesus, and include such books as Maccabees, Esdras, Wisdom, Tobit and Ecclesiasticus. You might also have an extra few chapters of Daniel. These books are viewed by the Catholic Church as authoritative, but at a lower level than the other books of the Hebrew Scripture. When the Protestant Church split from the Catholic Church during the Reformation (around 1530), it rejected these works.

The main criterion on which books were admitted into the collection of Christian writings lay in their authorship. Books that were agreed to have been written by an apostle, or by a close associate of an apostle, were generally admitted. Books which had question marks against their authorship were often included in the ‘disputed’ sections. Books which were definitely not written by apostles were rejected.

All this came to a head in AD 376. That was the year that Bishop Athanasius wrote an Easter letter to the churches in his region, in which he listed his idea of what constituted ‘Holy Scripture’. His list of books – the same as we have in our Bibles today – was eventually confirmed by two councils, one in Rome in 382 and one in Carthage in 397. It eventually became the list; the official, approved, recognised documents. Even then there was some debate and Revelation only just made it into the finished collection.

Thus the Bible that we have today ‘grew’. No single person decided on its contents; instead it is the result of agreement and consensus and debate. But it is worth remembering that the early Church did not have a Bible as such; the collection of books that we know as the Bible was not agreed until around 400.

So, the Bible as we know it is made up of the following sections:



The Big Picture

The events and times of the Bible

Creation and the early times

God creates the heavens and the earth. He creates a world that is good. He creates men and women. They are given a garden to inhabit and only one rule to obey. However, they give into temptation and choose to turn away from God. They are exiled from the garden. Sin and evil pollute God's creation.

Humanity starts to spread throughout the earth and with its spread comes the spread of evil. Adam and Eve's eldest son kills his brother. Eventually God decides to wipe out all of humanity and start again. Well ... not quite all. Noah is a good man and he and his family are saved from the flood. Noah is given the task of repopulating the earth. God vows never to destroy humanity again.

The patriarchs

The problem of evil is not eradicated, however, and now God begins a new scheme. He decides to work through a nation, a chosen people. As the father of these people he chooses Abraham. God promises Abraham that his descendants will be a great nation – the Jews – and they will have a land to inhabit – the land of Canaan. He also promises that all of humanity will be blessed by one of Abraham's descendants.

Abraham, in his old age, fathers a son, Isaac. Isaac fathers twins, Esau and Jacob, and the line progresses through the younger son. Jacob has twelve children – one of whom, Joseph, ends up in Egypt. In the end, this son is joined by the rest of the clan, who flee to Egypt to escape famine. Jacob changes his name to Israel, and it is by this name that the people will henceforth be known.

In Egypt, the descendants of Abraham start to multiply and, a few hundred years further on, there is some good news and some bad news. The good news is that part, at least, of the promise has come true – Abraham's descendants have become a nation. The bad news is that the entire nation is in slavery.

The exodus

God raises up a leader – Moses – who commands the Egyptian leader to let the Israelites go. After a series of plagues on the Egyptians, the Israelites are freed. The Israelites make their way back to the land that God had promised their ancestor Abraham. On the way God gives them commandments and detailed instructions on how the Jews should behave as a nation and how they should worship their God.

At the very borders of the promised land, however, their

