

How We Got the Bible

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[0 : 00] Welcome to the Providence Podcast.

My name is Chris Oswald, Senior Pastor at Providence Community Church. Thank you for joining us for yet another podcast. I got an email, actually it was a base camp ping, from a young lady at our church asking about the process of canonization.

How did we get the Bible we have? Where did it all come from? And I thought, well, I did try to answer her question. I did respond, but afterward I thought, you know, I ought to go ahead and just do a podcast on this.

This is a topic that comes up from time to time in most conversations. Well, not in most people's lives, in various conversations with non-Christians, with skeptics, with Catholics, and so on and so forth.

So I thought, you know, let me go ahead and just kind of write down some thoughts on this and record a podcast about how we got our Bible. So let's go ahead and get into that question, how we got our Bible.

[1 : 12] I'm going to talk about this by going through four phases that extend from, let's say, 50 A.D. all the way to 396 A.D. And those four phases are in chronological order, the composition of the book, the circulation of the book, citation of the particular scriptures in other writings, and canonization, where there was some kind of formal acknowledgement of, yeah, these books that are in the Bible are the right books.

So I'm going to actually work backwards. I'm going to start with the canonization councils and then work backwards all the way to where we get to composition. So first of all, the word canon, you know, we talk about canonization.

Well, what does that mean? Well, it just comes from the Greek word, which is also canon, and it means measuring stick or rule. That's what the word means. So right away we see this word being used in the early church for the scriptures, implying that they understood the scriptures to be the rule of life, the way we measure truth and error, so on and so forth.

Now, the official canonization of the New Testament took place during a few formal councils in northern Africa in the late 300s, the very late 300s. But I'm going to start with the Synod of Laodicea, which was a formal church council that took place in 360 AD in, you guessed it, Laodicea.

And we have records of that council that include the following statement. Now, this is 360. Let no private psalms nor uncanonical books be read in church, but only the canonical ones of the New and Old Testament.

[2 : 54] And then after listing the books of the Old Testament, it says, these are the books of the New Testament. Four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The Acts of the Apostles. Seven Catholic epistles, namely one of James, two of Peter, three of John, one of Jude. Fourteen epistles of Paul, one to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, one to the Ephesians, one to the Philippians, one to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, one to the Hebrews, two to Timothy, one to Titus, and one to Philemon.

So that's 360, and you can already hear, you know, a pretty exhaustive list of the New Testament books. Now, moving forward in time to the 390s, there were two councils that sort of formally declared what ought to be in the Bible.

And we don't really have any records of the first council that took place in 393. We just know it took place in Carthage. And I'm sorry, the first one took place, I believe, in Hippo. And the second took place in Carthage.

And at the second meeting in Carthage in 396 AD, they read some of the minutes from the previous council. And then they went on to make a statement that was very similar to the one made in Laodicea some 30 years ago.

[4 : 15] This is the statement we have from that council. Besides the canonical scriptures, nothing shall be read in church under the name of divine scriptures. Moreover, the canonical scriptures are these. And then you get a list of the Old Testament.

So that's when most people would tell you is the formal kind of affirmation of the canon was around 396 AD.

But really, this goes back way further than that. There's a document called the Muratorian canon or the Muratorian fragment that can be dated to 170 AD.

And that list includes 22 of the 27 New Testament books. I know it lacks James and 2 Peter. I don't know what else it lacks. But most notably in the Muratorian fragment or Muratorian canon, there's a very strong statement against the use of several known forgeries of Paul's works.

And so early on already, you're seeing a lot of discrimination taking place about what should and should not be in the book of Scripture. They were very strong in saying, you can't use this, you can't use that, and so on and so forth.

[5 : 43] So that's a bit about the canonization process. It was finalized in the late 300s, but seems to have been fairly agreed upon by Orthodox Christians well before that. The Bible has had many attackers over the years, and it always leaves them in the dustbin of history, even going back to someone like Marcion very early on.

And, you know, one day our great-grandchildren will read about those foolish 21st century heretics who sought to reframe the Bible on sexuality and gender and so on and so forth.

The Bible has stood as it stands now for a very long time. So that's canonization, and we move back before canonization to a period of time I refer to as citation.

We see early on in the early writings of the early church fathers these same Scriptures being cited as Scripture.

We have plenty of stuff from Origen, and he is 185 AD to 254 AD, from Irenaeus, which is 130 to 202 AD. And we can just keep going back chronologically.

[6 : 47] Justin Martyr, he was from 100 to 165 AD, and he has a list that references much of the New Testament as we now know it. Going back even further, we have Polycarp, who was a disciple of John.

His birth date is thought to be 69 AD, and he lived to 155. And we see Polycarp citing the writings of Paul and calling them Scripture.

And then before Polycarp, well, born before Polycarp, but contemporary with Polycarp, a friend of Polycarp, we have Ignatius, who also is said to have been a disciple of John.

Ignatius ultimately gets arrested in Antioch, which is where he lived, and gets transferred to Rome and fed to lions. That's the church history story. So whenever you see a picture of Ignatius, you'll often see a lion, and you'll know why.

But in the writings of Ignatius, which again, this is all first century stuff, we have just dozens and dozens and dozens of citations to various Scriptures, citations of various Scriptures that we now have in our New Testament as Scripture.

- [7 : 59] Matthew, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, did I say Romans? Galatians, just looking through the list here. Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, 1 Peter, 1 John. So even in the first century, a guy like Ignatius was citing the books we now have in our New Testament as Scripture.
- So this is really important to understand, just that we have this long record. Yeah, the canonization happened a long time ago, 396. But well before that, you had early canons, like the Muratorian canon, and then you have these citations that go even further back into time, closer to the time of Jesus, in which you have these early church fathers quoting Paul, for instance, but not just Paul, and saying that these quotations are Scripture.
- We can go even further back while we're talking about citations and talk about the Didache, which is one of the earliest books that we have. We found this book, this fragment, in the 1800s, actually.
- So it's a relatively new discovery, but it's one of the earliest pieces of church writing, maybe the earliest, and suggested dates for the Didache range from 60 to 80 AD.
- [9 : 23] So now we're already getting really close to the time of composition for many of the New Testament books. And Didache is particularly fond of Matthew. There are over 30 citations or allusions or quotations of the book of Matthew in the Didache.
- But we can go even further back than that and go to 2 Peter 3, 14 through 16. Now remember, we're still talking about citations, places where early church fathers cited something in our New Testament as Scripture.
- And we actually have one of those in the Bible itself. In 2 Peter 3, 14 through 16, Peter writes, Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish and at peace.
- And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters.
- There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction as they do other Scriptures.
- [10 : 34] So you've got a reference from Peter, you know, right in the heart of the New Testament composition time, already saying that Paul's writings are Scripture.
- Okay, now, so we've gone through canonization. Let's say that's 396 through 170 A.D. And then we've gone through citation. And that gets us all the way up into the 60s.
- 60 A.D. or so would be Peter's writing. And now we move to the circulation phase. This is the third phase I would talk about if someone asks about canonization.
- Say, first, let's go backwards in time, canonization. Then citation, all these early church fathers citing Scripture. And then let's go to circulation. Now, by circulation, I mean the way that the documents themselves got moved out into the church.
- Every once in a while, you know, you'll—it's easy just to forget that— well, actually, I don't know how many people even know this— that very early on, during Paul's own lifetime, his writings began to be collected.
- [11 : 45] John Knox thought it was Onesimus who did this. Began collected by his contemporaries and published as a collection of Paul's writings.
- So they were moving around early, early, early on in the church and sought after in the early church as Scripture. I don't have a lot more to say about the circulation phase, except that we know—we have some sense of what was most widely circulated, because when we do our archaeological digs now and we find new manuscripts, it would sort of be like if, you know, say a thousand years from now, people were doing an archaeological dig of the United States.

Which books would be found most often? Well, you'd find a lot of Stephen King books, and, you know, you'd find a lot of Christian books for that matter. Point being, like, you can tell what was sought after and popular of a given era, even a thousand years later, by just the number of manuscripts you find in archaeological digs.

And when it comes to the Scriptures, we see that just really right from the beginning, these things were widely sought after, widely circulated, and seen widely as Scripture.

I guess the other thing to point to there is just that, you know, when Peter calls Paul's writings Scripture, he does so in what I would say is like a non-didactic way, meaning he isn't teaching the people that Paul's writings are Scripture.

[13 : 23] He is assuming they already believe that. He just references as they do to other Scriptures. The point of that comment isn't to teach the people that Paul's writings are Scripture.

The point of that comment is to say, you know, listen to Paul and don't listen to his detractors because they mess with all the Scriptures.

So he's already writing to an audience he thinks sees Paul's writings as Scripture. Okay, so that's canonization and then citation and then circulation, and now we're back to the start of it all, which would be composition.

The composition of the documents themselves. Every once in a while you'll hear someone like Joe Rogan or Bill Maher suggest that the New Testament was written in the second century, but no serious Bible scholars believe this.

Not even the heretical ones, the non-Christian ones like Bart Ehrman. I won't go through the dates of each book, but we have extreme certainty based on the citation evidence I've already mentioned that all the books in the New Testament were written in the first century, and I would argue mostly before 70 AD.

[14 : 39] The main point I want to make about the composition phase is that the letters themselves are of extreme quality and reveal what I would consider to be a miraculous level of complexity.

I taught on this a few weeks back when I showed you the chiasm found in Exodus 6, and we see similar levels of complex structuring in the New Testament.

Now, if you want to learn more about just the complex structuring, the complex architecture of the Scriptures, you can Google Biblical Chiasm Exchange, and there's a whole website that shares chiasms found throughout Scripture.

Chiasm is spelled C-H-I-A-S-M. And that whole website is just people posting chiastic structures they find in the Scriptures.

So when we're talking about composition, I think it's important to say that not only do we know when they were published, but just look at the documents themselves and understand they are of an unusual, what I would argue is miraculous quality.

[15 : 40] And another piece of that puzzle, another piece of the beautiful structuring and architecture of the Scriptures themselves, is just the extreme amount of Old Testament quotations and allusions and so forth you find in the New Testament.

If you Google Chris Harrison Bible Visualization, Chris Harrison Bible Visualization, you'll see a stunning graphic that shows the interconnectivity of the Bible from New Testament to Old.

And this is meaningful for two reasons. First of all, when you read the so-called Gnostic Gospels, because sometimes when we're talking about canon with a skeptic, they want to argue that there's a whole bunch of other ancient documents that the Church excludes for this or that reason.

And the answer is, is like, tell them to read one of them and then go read Romans. The architecture, the structure, the complexity, the sophistication you find in a book like Romans or even in a book like Ephesians just dwarfs these so-called Gnostic Gospels.

When you read those, you'll find them very flat, very one-dimensional, almost no interconnections with the Old Testament. They just don't read like true books of the New Testament read.

[16 : 59] Their structure feels very man-made, just a completely different quality of the document, of the writing itself.

The other reason I bring this, so to me that gives you more attestation to why these books are in the Bible and why other books aren't in the Bible, the sophistication, not even talking about doctrine, but just the sophistication of the writing, the constant allusions and reframing of the Old Testament, the type and archetype, all that stuff, man.

You don't see any of that in these Gospel of Thomas-type documents. But the other reason I bring that up is because you may have noticed that I haven't been addressing the Old Testament canonization process.

I've just been telling you about how we got our New Testament. Well, that's partly because the Old Testament canon has been agreed upon forever, well before Christianity, and also because we find the Old Testament canon completely referenced in the New Testament.

So that's one way to get at the Old Testament, beside the fact that it was already agreed upon before Christianity, and that is just read the New Testament and you'll find all the books of the Old Testament referenced there.

[18 : 24] And, you know, we're wrapping up here. This just leads to one final issue that I consider to be kind of a minor issue, but I get asked about it from time to time. And that is sometimes when we're talking with Catholic or Eastern Orthodox people, the Apocrypha will be brought up.

So what is the Apocrypha? Well, in short, it's a series of Old Testament books that appear in both the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles that do not appear in the Protestant canon of the Old Testament.

And here I'm talking about books like 1 and 2 Maccabees or Tobit. So these books are not in the Jewish Old Testament, known as the Tanakh. They were not affirmed by the original Hebrew scholar of the early church, Jerome.

And these books were actually just added, unfortunately, I think, for clarity's sake. They were originally added to some of the Bible just as, like, helpful reference books.

See, the books of the Apocrypha were written during the 400 silent years between the book of Malachi and the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist.

[19 : 38] And that period of time is known theologically to have been the silent period, the period in which there was no prophetic utterance occurring during that time.

The Jews would say that, yeah, that was it. Malachi was it. And that's what everyone believed up until not that long ago. Many Roman Catholic scholars, through the Protestant Reformation even, rejected the Apocrypha as Scripture.

Even the Roman Catholic Church made a distinction between the Apocrypha and the other books of the Bible prior to the Protestant Reformation. It's really only since the Council of Trent, which is, you know, 1546 through 1563, it's really only during that time when, as a reaction to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church doubled down on the Apocrypha and ratified those books as Scripture.

So the Apocrypha as Scripture is a relatively new idea. And once again, I would say, read those books and you'll see a different kind of quality there.

You also have with the Apocrypha just various doctrines being taught, which do not align with the rest of the theological message of Scripture. So that's the Apocrypha.

[21 : 00] So there you have it. Just a quick, quick as possible rundown on how we got our Bible. I like to work backwards from Canonization 396, sort of stick that pen in our timeline, and then talk about Citation, all of the many early church fathers who quoted the Scriptures as Scripture, going all the way back to, say, Ignatius in the first century.

From Citation, I go to Circulation and just remind folks that these letters, when they were hot off the press, it didn't take much longer for them to become widely accepted and sought after as Scripture.

A reasonable date for that would just be following the publishing and distribution of the book of Acts. And you'd have to decide when you think Acts was written. I think it was written before AD 70.

So I think that a lot of Paul's writings were already being republished and copied and sent out shortly after he would write them.

They were that self-evidently differentiated from all the other writings that were going around in those days. So that's Circulation. And then Composition.

[22 : 15] With Composition, just remember a few things. One, we have real clear evidence. These are early. These are first century documents written by the authors that they're ascribed to.

Two, the complexity of these documents are different than sort of their competing Gnostic versions.

The complexity of the real Scripture is three-dimensional, I would say, and the Gnostic documents are certainly one-dimensional.

They don't read much different than a children's book, to be honest with you. Okay, and then from also related to Composition, just remember that the really beefy relationship between the Old and New Testament is in itself an attestation of the Old Testament as settled canon at that time.

They were already quoting it like it was. And then I guess, you know, just if you're interested in the Apocrypha, I would just say, yeah, kind of an oddity of history in some respects, a relatively recent development in which the Church officially recognized the Apocrypha as Scripture.

[23 : 32] That would be the Council of Trent, which has to go down in history. It's just one of the worst Church councils of all time. But that's another issue. Well, there's another story to be told, namely how the Bible remained in existence during extreme times of social upheaval, the fall of Rome, the burning of libraries by the Goths, and so on and so forth.

So how did we keep the Bible? How did it stick around? And how do we keep finding manuscripts? And what about the Dead Sea Scrolls and so on? So that'd be another story to tell for another time.

But now you've got a little bit of information on why we have the Bible we have. Feel free to share this with people who are curious or refer back to this from time to time.

I will post these notes on Basecamp. And if you are interested in seeing them, you know, in print, you can certainly do that. All right, well, peace, blessings to you and yours.

I'm looking forward to worshiping with you again this coming Sunday. And I wish you well until then. God bless.