

Forming Sacred Scripture: Understanding How the Bible Came to Be

The Bible is the most studied document in human history, and the most published book ever.

Love for the inspired word of God has always led people to study not only what the text *says*, but also how the text *came to be*. There is a remarkable history of the formation and preservation of the Word of God, one which extends down right to the bible in your hands! In the course of this history, we can learn many things of not only scholarly interest, but also of devotional and apologetical importance.

The three main topics of tonight's talk:

- 1) How the various books of the bible were gathered into *one collection*. (The canon of Scripture)
- 2) How scholars have tried to obtain the best *text* possible for every book of the bible. (Manuscript history)
- 3) How the Bible has been *translated* into its various English editions that we use today. (Editions of the Bible)

1. The Canon of Sacred Scripture

Thesis: The teaching authority of the bishops of the Church (i.e., the episcopal magisterium) is the sole reason why Christians today possess the books of the Bible they do. There is no divinely inspired book of the Bible called "Table of Contents." To believe in Sacred Scripture requires belief in the teaching authority of the Church, not just at the time of the apostles, but into the fourth century A.D., a living magisterium of the successors to the apostles.

Stated apologetically: One cannot believe in *sola scriptura* without a *scriptura*. But there would be no *scriptura* without *Sacred Tradition* and *Magisterium*. The three have always gone together. That is why Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium are the basis for all Catholic doctrine. (See Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* & Vatican I, *Dei Filius*.)

The Bible has always been a collection of books, a library.

Bible (English) --> *Biblia* (Latin) --> *ta biblia* (Greek, "the books")

As Catholics, we profess that there are **73 books** which are the divinely inspired written Word of God:
— **46 books of the Old Testament & 27 books of the New Testament.**

These books were written over the course of many centuries, by many different authors, from many different places. This raises the question: How did they come to be united into one collection?

You are also aware that Catholics, Protestants and Jews disagree over the number of books in Sacred Scripture. The proper set of books in a collection is called a "canon." (*Kanon*, from Greek, "measuring stick.")

We must address the question of *The Canon of Scripture* in two parts:

- (A) Formation of the Old Testament canon
- (B) Formation of the New Testament canon

2. The Manuscript Authorities for our Present-Day Bible

- (A) The Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT)
- (B) The Greek Septuagint Text (LXX)
- (C) The Latin Vulgate
- (D) The Dead Sea Scrolls: What are they? What do they tell us about the text of the Bible?

Some physical evidence: manuscripts that we possess today for each authority, going backwards chronologically:

(C) The Vulgate of St. Jerome: produced in 401A.D (early fifth century)

Codex Fuldensis: Dated to 541-546 A.D. (150 years after the original)

Contains NT only, consisting of a harmonized Gospel (Diatesseron) instead of the Four Gospels, plus the 23 other NT books.

Codex Claromontanus V: Dated to fifth century A.D. (within 100 years of the original)
Contains NT only, with a pre-Vulgate Latin Gospel of Matthew, the remaining 26 books according to the Vulgate.

Codex Amiatinus: Dated to early 8th century A.D.: 300 years after the original.
Nearly complete OT and NT: missing only Baruch. Elaborated illustrated and in amazing condition. 19" x 13" x 7" thick, 75lbs. in weight, and required a herd of 2,000 cattle to make the vellum required!

We have many other manuscripts from the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries A.D. So our present-day evidence for the Vulgate text is much closer to the original than LXX or MT, but the Vulgate is a translation, not the original language.

(B) The Septuagint (LXX): produced from mid-third century BC to mid-second century BC

Codex Sinaiticus: Dated 325-360 AD (approx. 600 years after the original)

Available online! www.codexsinaiticus.org

Contains most of the OT (some portions of the manuscript have decayed) and a complete NT. May have been one of the fifty exemplar copies of Scripture commissioned by Emperor Constantine to be a "standard edition" throughout Christendom.

Codex Vaticanus: Dated fourth century A.D. (approx. 600 years after the original)

Nearly complete OT: lacks only Maccabees. NT from Matthew to Hebrews 9 (missing 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, & Rev.)

Codex Alexandrinus: Dated early fifth century A.D. (approx. 700 years after the original)

Nearly complete OT and NT.

(A) The Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT): no "original production date"

Leningrad Codex: Dated 1008 A.D.: eleventh century!

Oldest Complete Hebrew Bible.

Aleppo Codex: Dated mid-tenth century.

Available online! www.aleppocodex.org

Previously the oldest complete Hebrew Bible until portions were destroyed during the Aleppo Pogrom of 1947.

(D) The Dead Sea Scrolls: between 150B.C. and 68A.D.

The most significant manuscript discovery of the past several centuries! Discovered in caves in the Judean Desert between 1947 and 1957, in a region called Qumran. These documents turn back the clock on manuscript criticism by centuries! The Dead Sea Scrolls have also re-ignited the debate about whether the LXX or MT represents the "most original" reading of some passages.

3. Contemporary English Translations in use among Catholics:

(A) Douay-Rheims: a direct translation from the Vulgate

(B) Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (RSV-CE): Takes into consideration LXX, MT and Vulgate

(C) New American Bible: Takes into consideration LXX and MT, favors MT more regularly

Thus some reasons why different English Bibles read differently:

- Different underlying texts (Vulgate vs. LXX / MT)
- When authorities differ (e.g., LXX reads differently than MT), sometimes committees pick a "best reading"
- Translation isn't always easy or automatic: difficult passages require making judgment calls

Important Moments in the History of the Alexandrian Canon

BEFORE CHRIST:

Alexandria vs. Jerusalem (4th - 1st cent. BC)

Two canons emerge in Jewish usage: the Alexandrian canon (= 46 books) and the Palestinian canon (= 39 books).

The seven contested books are: **Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees**; also debated are parts of Esther and Daniel. Palestinian sensibilities disliked books that were *recently composed* (e.g., Maccabees) or *originally written in Greek* rather than Hebrew (e.g., Sirach).

Formation of the Septuagint (LXX)

King Ptolemy II Philadelphus (who reigned over Egypt 287 - 247 BC) organizes a scholarly team of seventy bilingual Jewish translators to create a single collection of Jewish sacred writings in Greek for the Great Library of Alexandria.

This translation becomes the Septuagint (LXX), so named from the seventy (Latin, *septuaginta*) translators. Many contemporary biblical scholars believe that Ptolemy's project only entailed a translation of the Pentateuch, not the entire OT; but within the next 100 years, the entirety of Hebrew Scriptures had been rendered into Greek. Because Greek was widely spoken by Jews who lived outside of Palestine, the Septuagint edition circulates widely.

FROM THE TIME OF CHRIST:

The Church did not simply inherit its Old Testament canon from the Jews, because the Jews were still debating the question of the canon by the time of Christ. There is a vast amount of literature on this subject. We will only identify key historical events.

Jewish Rabbinical Council of Jamnia (90 AD):

Definitively rejects the Alexandrian canon and the Septuagint translation, as part of a concerted policy to reorganize and strengthen Judaism after several major events: the Roman occupation, the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, and widespread Christian evangelization of many Jews.

Hereafter, the 39-book Palestinian canon becomes the definitive canon of rabbinic Judaism. The Hebrew text of these books becomes the Masoretic text tradition (=MT), which was preserved by scribes (*Masoretes*) with careful annotation systems.

Polemically-oriented new Greek translations emerge (2nd century AD):

Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion provide new Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures for Greek-speaking Jews, in an effort to replace the widespread usage of the Septuagint. We note Patristic complaints about the circulation of "altered" copies of Sacred Writ.

EARLY CHURCH TEACHING ON THE OT CANON:

The following all affirm the full Alexandrian canon of 46 books which we have today:

Synod of Rome, 382. Pope St. Damasus I, “De recipiendis et non recipiendis libris”

The Roman Synod considered the issue of the canon together with several other matters. Pope Damasus published his letter recapitulating the synod’s affirmations.

The African Church:

Synod of Hippo (393) & Synods of Carthage I-III (393, 397, 419) rule on the OT canon. St. Augustine was present at these synods. The African church thus achieved clarity, and uniformity with the recent teaching of Rome. Pope St. Boniface I (418-422) ratified the decision made by Carthage in 397 and sent the decision to the Eastern patriarchs in Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, establishing uniformity throughout the Church worldwide. In 419 the Synod of Carthage reaffirmed what Pope St. Boniface had proclaimed.

In his own writings, St. Augustine had already affirmed the 46 books of the Alexandrian Canon in *De Doctrina Christiana*, and expressed his sentiment that “as far as the Old Testament is concerned, the authority of the Septuagint is supreme” (DDC II.53).

Western Europe (Gaul):

St. Exuperius, Bishop of Toulouse asks Pope St. Innocent I several questions, including a question about the canon. Innocent I responds in his epistle “**Consulenti Tibi**” of **20 Feb. 405**, affirming the 46 books. This letter is sometimes called “Canon of Pope Innocent I.”

The matter of the OT canon was thus resolved in the West for over a millennium.

MEDIEVAL ECUMENICAL COUNCILS:

Ecumenical Council of Florence (1442)

This council attempted reunion with the Eastern Orthodox Church. In so doing, the council had to address the question of the OT canon because some Orthodox Churches kept a *larger* canon, including the books of 3 Esdras, 3 Maccabees, Psalm 151 and “The Prayer of Manessah.”

The council’s “Decree for the Jacobites” affirmed the 46-book Alexandrian canon as we have it today on 4 February 1442. It did not deem the matter worthy of anathematization.

Ecumenical Council of Trent: Fourth Session, 8 April 1546

In addressing the heresy of Martin Luther, Trent promulgated a solemn definition of the OT canon, anathematizing those who “knowingly and deliberately reject” the books found in the Vulgate.

→ **This is the final, definitive and infallible teaching on the matter of the OT canon.**

Source Texts Concerning the Formation of the Alexandrian Canon and Septuagint Translation

N.B.: Some of the book names may be unfamiliar because they follow the Septuagint naming convention (for examples Paralipomenon = Chronicles.) Also note that Lamentations, Baruch 1-5, and Baruch 6 are sometimes listed each separately from one another, sometimes grouped together, or sometimes treated as part of Jeremiah.

DS = Denzinger-Schönmetzer. *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 36th edition.

SCD = *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, ed. R.J. DeFerrari, an English translation of the 30th edition of Denzinger.

The numbering systems of DS and SCD are different, because the DS numbering system changed in the 32nd ed.

Pope St. Damasus I, “De recipiendis et non recipiendis libris”

(DS 179, SCD 84)

[From the acts of the Roman Synod. 382 AD]

“Likewise it has been said: Now indeed we must treat of the divine Scriptures, what the universal Catholic Church accepts and what she ought to shun.

The order of the Old Testament begins here: Genesis one book, Exodus one book, Leviticus one book, Numbers one book, Deuteronomy one book, Josue Nave one book, Judges one book, Ruth one book, Kings four books, Paralipomenon two books, Psalms one book, Solomon three books, Proverbs one book, Ecclesiastes one book, Canticle of Canticles one book, likewise Wisdom one book, Ecclesiasticus one book.

Likewise the order of the Prophets. Isaias one book, Jeremias one book, with Ginoth, that is with his lamentations, Ezechiel one book, Daniel one book, Osee one book, Micheas one book, Joel one book, Abdias one book, Jonas one book, Nahum one book, Habacuc one book, Sophonias one book, Aggeus one book, Zacharias one book, Malachias one book.

Likewise the order of the histories. Job one book, Tobias one book, Esdras two books, Esther one book, Judith one book, Machabees two books.

Likewise the order of the writings of the New and eternal Testament, which the holy and Catholic Church supports. Of the Gospels, according to Matthew one book, according to Mark one book, according to Luke one book, according to John one book.

The epistle of Paul [the apostle] in number fourteen. To the Romans one, to the Corinthians two, to the Ephesians one, to the Thessalonians two, to the Galatians one, to the Phillippians one, to the Colossians one, to Timothy two, to Titus one, to Philemon one, to the Hebrews one.

Likewise the Apocalypse of John, one book. And the Acts of the Apostles one book.

Likewise the canonical epistles in number seven. of Peter the Apostle two epistles, of James the Apostle one epistle, of John the Apostle one epistle, of another John, the presbyter, two epistles, of Jude the Zealot, the Apostle one epistle, see n.162 ff.

The canon of the New Testament ends here.”

Third Synod of Carthage III, 397 AD:

(DS 186, SCD 92)

Canon 36 (or otherwise numbered 47). “[It has been decided] that nothing except the Canonical Scriptures should be read in the church under the name of the Divine Scriptures. But the Canonical Scriptures are: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Josue, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, Paralipomenon two books, Job, the Psalter of David, five books of Solomon, twelve books of the Prophets, Isaias, Jeremias, Daniel, Ezechiel, Tobias, Judith,

Esther, two books of Esdras, two books of the Machabees. Moreover, of the New Testament: Four books of the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles one book, thirteen epistles of Paul the Apostle, one of the same to the Hebrews, two of Peter, three of John, one of James, one of Jude, the Apocalypse of John. Thus [it has been decided] that the Church beyond the sea may be consulted regarding the confirmation of that canon; also that it be permitted to read the sufferings of the martyrs when their anniversary days are celebrated.”

Pope St. Innocent I to St. Exuperius, Bp. of Toulouse, “Consulenti tibi,” 20 Feb. 405 AD:
(DS 213, SCD 96)

(7) “A brief addition shows what books really are received in the canon. These are the desiderata of which you wish to be informed verbally: of Moses five books, that is, of Genesis, of Exodus, of Leviticus, of Numbers, of Deuteronomy, and Josue, of Judges one book, of Kings four books, and also Ruth, of the Prophets sixteen books, of Solomon five books, the Psalms. Likewise of the histories, Job one book, of Tobias one book, Esther one, Judith one, of the Machabees two, of Esdras two, Paralipomenon two books. Likewise of the New Testament: of the Gospels four books, of Paul the Apostle fourteen epistles, of John three, epistles of Peter two, an epistle of Jude, an epistle of James, the Acts of the Apostles, the Apocalypse of John.

Others, however, which were written by a certain Leucius under the name of Matthias or James the Less, or under the name of Peter and John (or which were written by Nexocharis and Leonidas the philosophers under the name of Andrew), or under the name of Thomas, and if there are any others, you know that they are not only to be repudiated but also condemned.”

[N.B. by the unusual phrase. “the five books of Solomon.” Pope Innocent seems to mean those three books usually said to be “of Solomon.” namely Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, together with the other two “Wisdom” books: Ecclesiasticus/Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon.]

St. Augustine, 427 AD: “as far as the Old Testament is concerned, the authority of the Septuagint is supreme” (*De Doctrina Christiana*, II.53).

Pope St. Gelasius I, “De libris non recipiendis,” 495 AD: (DS 354, SCD 162)
Repeats the teaching of Pope St. Damasus I on the canon, and adds a list of apocryphal books which are not to be received by the Church.

Council of Trent, Fourth Session IV, 8 April 1546: (DS 1502, SCD 784)
“Of the Old Testament

The five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), Josue, Judges, Ruth, the four books of Kings, two of Paralipomenon, the first and second of Esdras (which latter is called Nehemias), Tobias, Judith, Esther, Job, the Davidic Psalter (in number one hundred and fifty Psalms), Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Canticle of Canticles, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Isaias, Jeremias, with Baruch, Ezechiel, Daniel, the twelve minor Prophets (Osee, Joel, Amos, Abdias, Jonas, Micheas, Nahum, Habacue, Sophonias, Aggeus, Zacharias, Malachias), two books of Machabees, the first and second.”

[The order of books copies that of the Council of Florence, held in 1442. There are only 45 books in the preceding list because Lamentations is presumed to be part of Jeremiah.]

Important Moments in the History of the New Testament Canon

(Only a brief sketch!)

Informal episcopal cooperation: Late first, and second century

Sacred writings are scattered all throughout Europe and Asia Minor. Local churches collect them, and read “the memoirs of the Apostles” (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 66-67) during the Mass.

The pious practice of exchanging works of apostolic writing between bishops begins. Bishops determine what is appropriate to be read during the liturgy. Episcopal cooperation both *gathers* texts and *weeds out* inauthentic material.

“Canonical lists” develop as an early way to keep everyone on the same page. The *Muratorian fragment* is an example of a Roman canonical list. It divided works into three categories:

- (a) Divinely inspired, thus suitable for being read at Mass.
- (b) Not divinely inspired, but useful for preaching and moral formation. They may be circulated but not read at Mass.
- (c) Heterodox, therefore not suitable for reading or circulation.

The explosion of Christian literature during the second and third centuries, and the rise of major heresies within the Church, prompts more formalized episcopal and scholarly cooperation.

Origen of Alexandria: Early third century

Priest of the diocese of Alexandria, and foremost Scripture scholar of his day, Origen attempts to catalogue all known writings claiming to be gospels, acts, epistles, etc. of apostolic origin. He attempts to find out something about the history of each text: From where did we get this text? Who wrote it? Is it authentic? Which dioceses are familiar with this text, and use it?

Origen divides the works into three categories:

- (a) Those “received by all”
- (b) “Disputed works” (Some bishops accepted the work, others did not)
- (c) Those “rejected by all”

Origen’s first two categories included:

Received by all

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
Acts of the Apostles
13 Pauline epistles (all except Hebrews)
1 Peter
1 John
Apocalypse of John

Disputed

Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews
2 Peter
2 & 3 John
James
Jude
Epistle of Barnabas
Didache
Shepherd of Hermas
Gospel of the Hebrews

The entire NT canon is already present in these two categories, with 4 non-canonical texts still disputed (in gray). Never did the all the world’s bishops affirm a non-canonical text.

Eusebius: Bishop of Caesarea: Early fourth century

Following Origen, Eusebius produces his own categorization of works in his *Ecclesiastical History*, polling bishops to find out how they viewed each text. Because of heresy and schism, Eusebius only considered the opinions of those bishops in communion with the whole Church.

He produced a similar three-fold list, but subdivided the “disputed” category into a better half (works broadly but not universally received as divinely inspired) and a worse half (works whose inspiration was doubted by many).

Received by all bishops

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
The Acts of the Apostles
All 14 Pauline epistles
1 Peter
1 John
Apocalypse of John

Received by most bishops

James
Jude
2 Peter
2 & 3 John

Received by few bishops

Epistle of Barnabas
Didache
Shepherd of Hermas
Gospel of the Hebrews
Acts of Paul
Apocalypse of Peter

(The first two categories contain only those books which comprise our canon today.)

Emperor Constantine ordered Eusebius to produce a “standard” edition of Scripture for the realm, which likely included Eusebius’ canonical list. 50 volumes were produced and distributed throughout the East.

St. Athanasius approved of Eusebius’ categorization of works in his *Epistola Festalis* of 367 AD.

Pope Damasus and St. Jerome: Late fourth century

Because neither of the recent ecumenical councils (Constantinople or Nicaea) had addressed the issue of the canon, Pope Damasus decided to hold the **Synod of Rome in 382 AD**. St. Jerome, whose prestige was well-known, was invited and consulted. The synod promulgated a canonical list identical to the one we use today.

This standardized the canon throughout the Western, European region of the Church

Synods of Hippo (393) and Carthage (393, 397, 419) and St. Augustine: Late fourth century

The synods of Hippo and Carthage promulgated the same canon of Scripture. Pope St. Boniface I (418-422) ratified the decision made by Carthage in 397 and sent the decision to the Eastern patriarchs in Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, establishing uniformity throughout the Church worldwide. In 419 the Synod of Carthage reaffirmed what Pope St. Boniface had proclaimed.

The Vulgate: End of fourth century

By the end of the fourth century, St. Jerome had completed his **Vulgate translation** of the Bible, which followed the canon promulgated by the Synod of Rome. This became the standard edition of the Scriptures throughout Christendom for well over the next millenium.

The Council of Trent:

Questions about the canon did not vex the Church again until the Reformation. Prompted by Luther’s rejection of certain books of the Old Testament, and skepticism about James, the **Ecumenical Council of Trent** infallibly decreed the traditional canon was correct in its fourth session, which issued *The Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures* on April 8, 1546.