

THE
BIBLE IS A
CATHOLIC
BOOK

JIMMY AKIN

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To the memory of my grandmother,
Rosalie Octava Beard Burns,
who gave me my first Bible.

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The Bible, the Word of God, and You

The Bible can be intimidating. It's a big, thick book—much longer than most books people read. It's also ancient. The most recent part of it was penned almost 2,000 years ago. That means it's not written in a modern style. It can seem strange and unfamiliar to a contemporary person. Even more intimidating is that it shows us our sins and makes demands on our lives.

No wonder some people hesitate to take the plunge and start reading the Bible!

But each of the things that can make it intimidating is actually a benefit:

- Because the Bible is so large, it contains a *great deal* of valuable information. If it were short, it wouldn't tell us nearly as much.
- The fact that it was written so long ago testifies to its timeless message. Its teachings aren't tied to just one time or culture. They have endured, and by reading Scripture we experience the joy of discovering the story of God's dealings with mankind.
- Finally, it's important that it reveals our sins to us. We need wake-up calls that shake us out of our feeble attempts

to rationalize what we're doing wrong. And Scripture is quick to assure of us God's love for us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The Bible is an inestimable gift from God. It's his word in written form—something each of us should cherish and study regularly.

Some groups of Christians try to claim the Bible for themselves. They make it sound like the Catholic Church is opposed to Scripture. Some even claim that the Church "hates" the Bible.

But as we'll see, all Christians owe an enormous debt to the Catholic Church, for it was through the Church that the Bible was given to the world. Jesus himself founded the Catholic Church. He appointed its first leaders, and they were the ones who—under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—wrote the books of the New Testament, which completed and became the capstone of all the scriptures that had come before.

The Holy Spirit then guided the Catholic Church to discern which books belonged in the Bible and which did not. This involved the crucial process of sorting the true scriptures from all of the false ones that existed.

The Catholic Church laboriously copied the scriptures in the age before the printing press, when every book—including lengthy ones like the Bible—had to be written by hand. It thus preserved these books through the centuries, unlike so many ancient works that have now been lost.

The Catholic Church is why we have the Bible today, and everyone should be grateful for the gift that, by the grace of God, it has given to the world.

The Bible is a Catholic book!

The Word of God Before the Bible

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

How the world began is a question people everywhere ask. It's a human universal.

Pagan cultures thought the world was made by their gods and goddesses. Some myths claimed that the gods reproduced sexually to make the elements of the world. Others held that there was a fierce battle among the gods, and the world was formed from the corpses of the losers. Mankind was then created as a slave race to relieve the gods of drudgery.

The book of Genesis set the record straight: The world was not produced by a multitude of finite gods. It was the creation of a single, great God—one supreme and supremely good Being who is behind everything.

Because of his infinite, unlimited power, he didn't need to use anything to make the world, as the pagans thought. He didn't need to mate with a goddess. He didn't need to battle other gods and make the world from their corpses.

He simply *spoke*, and the elements of the world sprang into existence: “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen. 1:3).

God made a good world, and to crown his creation, he made man—not to relieve him of drudgery but to serve as his representative, ruling over creation:

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good (Gen. 1:27–28, 31).

Through the ages, God continued to speak. Even when man fell into sin, he sent the prophets to correct him and call him back to communion with his Creator. Eventually, he sent his Son, Jesus, to redeem mankind and to proclaim his definitive word to us:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our Fathers by the prophets; but in these Last Days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (Heb. 1:1–2).

The Gospel of John reveals more about God’s Son and how the world was made:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning

with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made (John 1:1–3).

This reveals that Jesus—God’s Son—was the Word he spoke when he created the world and everything in it. When God said, “Let there be light,” it was through Jesus that this happened.

Because Jesus was there in the beginning—one of the uncreated, divine Persons of the Trinity—he is the original and supreme Word of God. All of God’s other words are shadows of him.

This is important to remember, because some today use the phrase “word of God” as if it just meant “the Bible.” Although the Bible is important, the word of God is not confined to or only found in it. First and foremost, Jesus Christ himself is the Word of God, and there are other expressions of it, only some of which are found in Scripture.

THE SPIRIT OF GOD

The Father and the Son are two of the divine Persons of the Holy Trinity, but what about the third—the Holy Spirit?

Theologians tell us that every time God performs an action in the world, all three Persons play a role. For example, to save mankind, God the Father sent the Son to redeem us, and he and the Son together send the Holy Spirit to draw us back to him and bring his grace into our lives. Consequently, it’s no surprise that we find the Spirit of God also took part in the creation of the world:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was

upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:1–2).

In the biblical languages, the word for *spirit* is the same as the word for *breath*, so Scripture indicates that God created by both his word and his spirit, or breath:

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth (Ps. 33:6).

Although the doctrine of the Trinity would not be fully revealed until the New Testament age, this passage shows how both the Son (the Word) and the Spirit were active in creation.

The image the passage uses is based on the fact that, when we speak, it is our breath that carries our words. In speech, our breath and our words are intertwined. They always go together, and so it is with God. When God sent prophets, it was the Holy Spirit who gave them God's word. The prophet Zechariah records how God's people refused to listen to the message that the Holy Spirit gave through the prophets:

They made their hearts like adamant lest they should hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore, great wrath came from the Lord of hosts (Zech. 7:12).

The Holy Spirit continued to be active in the New Testament era, even after Jesus' ministry. At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples:

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide

you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:12–14).

One of the ways the Holy Spirit communicates God’s word to us is in writing. The Latin word for *writing* is *scriptura*, and so the writings that the Holy Spirit produced are known as *Scripture*. St. Peter says:

First of all, you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Pet. 1:20–21).

St. Peter indicates that, although the human author was responsible on one level for writing a book of Scripture, on a more fundamental level it was the Holy Spirit working through them. The name for the process by which the Holy Spirit did this is *inspiration*. This word comes from Latin roots that mean “to breathe into” (*in* + *spirare*).

To say that a book of Scripture is inspired is to say that God has breathed the words it contains. This is the way the New Testament describes inspiration in Greek: it is God- (*theos*) breathed (*pneustos*). Thus St. Paul says:

All Scripture is inspired by God [*theopneustos*] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

To say that Scripture is inspired or God-breathed does not mean that the biblical authors were mere secretaries, writing down what they heard God dictate by an inner voice. The Holy Spirit worked through them in an organic way, using their minds, talents, and life experiences. When St. Paul says, “I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin” (Rom. 11:1), he is speaking of himself as a human being, and he is serving as a true author. The Second Vatican Council explained the process of inspiration this way:

To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more (*Dei Verbum* 11).

Today, we are fortunate to have Scripture, an inspired collection of writings that convey God’s word to us. However, it’s important to remember that this has not always been the case. In fact, for most of human history, God’s people *didn’t* have Scripture.

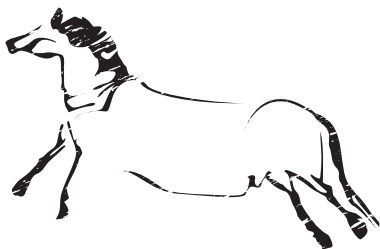
THE AGE OF THE SPOKEN WORD

Speech is a human universal, but writing is not. There was an age before writing had been invented.

Although we don’t know the exact date that writing began, we do have a pretty good idea of how it developed because archaeologists have discovered a trove of ancient drawings, artifacts, and inscriptions that reveal its history.

The earliest human signs were a kind of protowriting that consisted of pictures and markings that carried only a basic

meaning. We often can't tell what that meaning was, but sometimes we can. For example, we have cave paintings that clearly represent horses, stars, people, and spears. We also have artifacts with notches or knots that were used to count items.



*Recreation of a cave painting from the Ardèche valley in France,
35,000–30,000 B.C.*

The signs used in protowriting convey only a limited amount of information. They can't represent everything that we can communicate in speech. For this reason, speech was the primary means humans had to communicate with each other. It was the age of the spoken word—the first phase of human history.

God made himself known to man in this period. Genesis shows God giving the commission to have dominion over the earth and to rule and care for it on his behalf. It records him settling Adam in the garden of Eden, giving him the commandment regarding what he could eat, allowing him to name the animals, and being both just and merciful with him when he fell into sin. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) explains:

God, who creates and conserves all things by his word, provides men with constant evidence of himself in created realities. And furthermore, wishing to open up the way to heavenly salvation, he manifested himself to

our first parents from the beginning. He invited them to intimate communion with himself and clothed them with resplendent grace and justice.

This revelation was not broken off by our first parents' sin. After the fall, God buoyed them up with the hope of salvation, by promising redemption; and he has never ceased to show his solicitude for the human race. For he wishes to give eternal life to all those who seek salvation by patience in well-doing (54–55).

All this took place at the dawn of human history. God thus came to man and made his word known even before the development of writing.

THE AGE OF THE WRITTEN WORD

The archaeological record reveals when writing began. It didn't happen everywhere all at once, and forms of proto-writing continued to be used in many places. But in two locations—Mesopotamia and Egypt—the first systems of true writing appeared.

Around 3300 B.C., the Mesopotamians began to write on clay tablets using pictograms, or picture writing, and over the next few centuries these became progressively more sophisticated. By around 2600 B.C., they had developed into cuneiform, a system of wedge-shaped marks pressed into clay. These included symbols that represented the syllables of their languages, so anything you could say out loud you could now preserve in writing.

By 3100 B.C., the Egyptians had begun developing their own writing system, which eventually resulted in the hieroglyphs for which Egypt is famous. Before these were deciphered in the nineteenth century, it was thought they

were pictograms, but it turned out they were a sophisticated system that incorporated an alphabet, so anything you could say could be written down in full.

Writing didn't catch on everywhere. It took centuries for that to happen, and different peoples adopted it at widely different times. The earliest Chinese writing didn't begin until around 1300 B.C., the Mayans began to write around 300 B.C., and the Cherokee tribe in North America didn't have writing until 200 years ago!



Hieroglyphs (above) & Cuneiform (below)

What about the Hebrews? The earliest alphabet used by the Hebrews is known as the *Proto-Sinaitic script*. It is used in inscriptions found in the Sinai Peninsula, between Egypt and Israel. These inscriptions date to around 1600 B.C. Although scholars agree that this script was used to write a language that belonged to the same family as Hebrew, it isn't clear that Hebrew itself was being spoken at the time. Languages develop over centuries through a long, slow process, and we don't have clear evidence that Hebrew was being spoken until about 1000 B.C.

Just because writing existed didn't mean everyone understood it. Very few people at that time were capable of reading—often only government officials and priests could read. In fact, hieroglyphs have the name they do because they were used by the Egyptian priests, and so they counted as sacred (Greek,

hieros) carvings (*gluphai*). Even those who could read usually didn't write. That was a task performed by professional scribes. If a king or a priest—or anyone else—wanted something written down, he would have a scribe do it for him.



Proto-Sinaitic inscription

Though writing had been invented, most people were still, effectively, living in the age of the spoken word. The early events of Genesis all took place before writing was invented, and even though it was in use by the time of Abraham, he and the other patriarchs were operating in an almost exclusively oral environment.

In the Bible, the first mention of anyone writing something down doesn't occur until after the Exodus was underway. When God wanted a particular event remembered, he said, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua" (Exod. 17:14). It made sense for the Hebrews to use writing at this time because Moses grew up among people who could write. He had been raised in Pharaoh's household (Exod. 2:1–10), and Pharaoh was the ruler and chief priest of Egypt.

But how do we know about the things that preceded the Hebrews' use of writing?

TRADITION!

Any time information is passed from one person to another, it is an example of tradition. The word *tradition* comes from the Latin root *tradere*, which means "to hand over" or "to pass on."

Because our culture is highly literate, we focus on information being passed down in written form—in written tradition—and so we often overlook the way information is passed down in oral cultures, which is by oral tradition.

But that was the way most people got their information in the ancient world, and it worked well. From one generation to another, people would orally pass on the information that was needed—about their history, their land, their skills. The method worked well enough that writing didn't have to be invented for thousands of years, and it's why writing didn't catch on everywhere all at once. Peoples living near literate cultures could go hundreds of years without developing a literature of their own.

One reason oral tradition worked so well is that there were ways of transmitting it in a controlled, accurate fashion. Not just anyone could be a *tradent*—an authorized bearer of tradition. To qualify, a person had to have a good memory, good communication skills, and specialized knowledge of the subject on which he was an authority.

Tradents memorized information by putting it in a memorable form, like when a modern speaker learns the outline of his talk before he gives it in public. Often, ancient tradents would structure information using meter, rhyme, and melody, so that the lore they had to impart took the form of poetry or song. Famous examples include the ancient Greek rhapsodes, who memorized and then performed lengthy works like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

One way of structuring information was what scholars call a *chiasm*. This is a way of ordering information around key words or themes in a kind of inverted structure, like the steps of a pyramid. A simple example of a chiasm is Jesus' saying, "The last will be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16). This saying has the following structure:

A: The *last*
B: will be *first*
B': and the *first*
A': *last*

Chiasms are useful memory tools, because if you can remember the first half of the structure, you know what the second half will be. The example above is short, but ancient authors—including Homer—used longer, more complex ones to organize large amounts of information.

These techniques were used among the Hebrews. The book of Genesis is built around a series of chiasms,¹ and scholars have generally concluded that the oldest portions of the Old Testament are found in certain poems or songs, such as the Blessing of Jacob (Gen. 49), the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15), the Blessing of Moses (Deut. 33), and the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5). These are often held to represent ancient oral traditions that were eventually incorporated into Scripture.

The important thing is that before he began to inspire Scripture, God used and guided the traditions of his people through the long ages before the first biblical author began to write.

THE FIRST BOOKS OF SCRIPTURE WRITTEN

Eventually, God inspired the first biblical author. Precisely who this was is debated.

The books of the Old Testament generally don't say when they were written. Sometimes the authors will date specific things. For example, Isaiah tells us that the vision found in chapter six of his book was something he saw "in the year that King Uzziah died" (i.e., 740 B.C.), but that doesn't tell us when the whole book was issued.

The biblical authors were communicating a timeless message that was meant to last forever, but modern writers have been very curious about the exact times the individual authors wrote.

Because it deals with the creation of the world, the book of Genesis discusses the earliest events, but that doesn't mean it was written first. Genesis belongs to a set of five books, which also includes Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Together, they are referred to as the *Pentateuch* (Greek, *pentateukhos*, or "five books"). Because they are written to form a set, scholars have generally held that they, or most of them, were published at about the same time.

Historically, the common view was that Moses wrote them, which would place them either in the 1400s B.C. or the 1200s B.C., depending on when one dates the Exodus. But there are reasons to question this view.

Although Moses is the key figure in these books, and they do record traditions that go back to him, they never claim—as a whole—to be written by him. They also contain an account of his death (Deut. 34), and the final form of these books clearly came after Israel had a monarchy, for Genesis looks back on events "before any king reigned over the Israelites" (Gen. 36:31).

A theory known as the *Documentary Hypothesis* became popular in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to this theory, the Pentateuch is based on four documents (the Yahwist, Elohist, Priestly, and Deuteronomistic sources) that were written between the tenth and sixth centuries B.C. and later combined and published, perhaps around the fifth century B.C. In the last few decades, the Documentary Hypothesis has come under increasing criticism from both conservative and liberal scholars, and at present there is no consensus.

If the books of the Pentateuch weren't the first ones written, which book might have been? Some have pointed to the book of Job, whose central figure appears to live in the age of the patriarchs, before Israel became a nation. But even today we write books about revered figures from the past, so this doesn't tell us when Job was composed.

Some of the early biblical authors were prophets. Figures such as Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah all wrote in the eighth century B.C.

The Church doesn't have a position on precisely when individual books of Scripture were written or how they were composed. It leaves these matters to scholars. From a perspective of faith, the important thing is that God began to give his inspired word to man. The precise dates on which he did so are secondary.

THE CANON BEGINS TO FORM

Scholars frequently discuss a concept known as the *canon* of Scripture. This is based on the Greek word *kanôn*, which means a rule or measuring rod. It came to mean an authoritative standard, and so the canon of Scripture is the collection of writings that are divinely authoritative.

The Pentateuch was the first authoritative collection of books. These books tell how the people of Israel came to be, as well as God's law for Israel, so they became the core books of Scripture for his people and thus the first part of the biblical canon.

The importance of these books is indicated by their name in Hebrew. They are called the *Torah*—a word meaning “instruction.” They contain the fundamental instructions God gave Israel. Later, when the Old Testament was translated into Greek, they became known as *the Law*

(Greek, *nomos*), which is why they're referred to as the Law of Moses.

They became an authoritative collection early. This is shown by the fact that the Samaritans have their own Pentateuch. The Samaritans are descended from the ten northern tribes of Israel. They seceded and formed their own nation around 930 B.C., resulting in the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. They were conquered by the Assyrians around 723 B.C., and many were deported, but there is still a community of Samaritans in Israel. They worship Yahweh, the God of Israel, though they do so on Mt. Gerizim, in their own territory, rather than in Jerusalem.

They have a version of the Torah, known as the *Samaritan Pentateuch*, that includes the same books as the Jewish one and differs only in minor details. This indicates that it has an early date and was considered authoritative—canonical—from early times. It's also significant because the Samaritans accept as canonical *only* the five books of Moses. They don't accept the other books of the Old Testament, which suggests that the Pentateuch was the first group to be canonized and that the canon gradually expanded after this time.

NEW BOOKS OF SCRIPTURE COMPOSED

The ten centuries leading up to the time of Christ were an active period. It was when the Old Testament took shape.

The Pentateuch ends with the death of Moses, and the story of what happened next is continued in a series of historical books. The first, Joshua, tells of the conquest of the promised land. The book of Judges then records how God repeatedly delivered his people from oppression through a series of divinely chosen military leaders. Ruth focuses on

the life of a woman who was an ancestor of Israel's most famous king, David.

Israel's history continues in 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Each of these was originally a single book, but they are divided in two in modern Bibles. The books of Samuel tell the story of the last of Israel's judges, how the monarchy was established under King Saul, and how it was passed to King David.

The books of Kings cover the final stage of David's life and how Solomon succeeded him. Following Solomon's time, the nation split in two, with the ten northern tribes seceding and forming the kingdom of Israel, leaving the southern tribes as the kingdom of Judah. The story of these two kingdoms is then related, until Israel is conquered and deported by the Assyrian empire around 723 B.C. and Judah is conquered and deported by the Babylonian empire around 587 B.C., beginning the Babylonian Exile.

The books of Chronicles cover the same period as the books of Samuel and Kings, but they focus on the southern kingdom and provide a supplemental theological perspective on the events.

Ezra and Nehemiah, which were originally one book, cover events after the Babylonian Exile. They deal with the people's return to the land of Judah and the rebuilding of the temple.

Esther also deals with the Babylonian Exile, and it is often grouped with the historical books. However, according to Pope St. John Paul II, this book has "the character of allegorical and moral narrative rather than history properly so-called".²

God also began to inspire what are known as *wisdom* books. They are devoted to philosophical reflection and the worship of God. The book of Job is a meditation on

human suffering, while Ecclesiastes is devoted to the quest for meaning in life. The Song of Solomon celebrates the love of man and woman, and Proverbs offers practical advice for daily living. By far the longest wisdom book is Psalms, which is a collection of hymns.

The final type of book God inspired in the Old Testament period is *prophetic*. Several of these books are significantly longer than the others, so they are known as the *major prophets*. They consist of Isaiah, Jeremiah (together with the short book of Lamentations), Ezekiel, and Daniel. These prophets all relate to the Babylonian Exile in one way or another.

By contrast, the *minor prophets* are generally shorter. There are twelve such books, and they were originally collected in a single volume called *the Twelve*. However, in Christian Bibles they are listed separately. The minor prophets lived between the 800s and 400s B.C., meaning they covered the period both before and after the Babylonian Exile.

THE LAST OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS

The books we've covered so far are considered canonical by all Christians. They are often called *protocanonical* books because they were the first (Greek, *prôtos*) to achieve universal agreement about their status as Scripture. Other books, which took longer to be established, are called *deuterocanonical* books, because agreement on their status came second (Greek, *deuteros*).

In the Protestant community, it is common to hear people say that after Malachi—the last minor prophet—there were “four hundred silent years” in which God inspired no Scripture. However, this is not true. The inspiration of Scripture continued right up until the New Testament.

Two books written in this period are Tobit, which tells the story of God's mercy on a righteous man and his

family; and Judith, which describes how God used a righteous woman to deliver his people. Although sometimes grouped with the historical books, according to St. John Paul II, they, like Esther, “have the character of allegorical and moral narrative rather than history properly so-called.”³

Two books that are historical are 1 and 2 Maccabees. These chronicle how, after the Babylonian Exile, a priestly family known as the Maccabees threw off the yoke of pagan oppression. The basic story is told in 1 Maccabees, and 2 Maccabees provides a supplemental perspective, just as the books of Chronicles do for those of Samuel and Kings.

God also inspired wisdom literature in this period, resulting in the books of Sirach and Wisdom. The first is similar to Proverbs, whereas the second was written to help Jews respond to Greek ideas. Wisdom is likely the last book of the Old Testament period, being written in the first century B.C. or the early first century A.D.

Baruch is a prophetic work attributed to Jeremiah’s secretary of the same name and set during the Babylonian Exile (Bar. 1:1–4). The sixth and final chapter of the book—called the letter of Jeremiah—takes the form of a letter written by the prophet to the exiles in Babylon.

God sometimes inspired books that contained material he had already placed in other books. These could be condensed versions of the original. The most famous is Deuteronomy, which condenses and revises the laws given earlier in the Pentateuch. Thus its name, *Deuteronomy*, means “second law.” Chronicles and 2 Maccabees also condense and supplement material found in other books.

Sometimes God expanded on a previous work. This happened with Jeremiah. There was an original, shorter edition that was burned by King Jehoiakim, but God inspired a new

edition that contained the original material as well as much new material (Jer. 36).

God did something similar in the deuterocanonical period. He inspired expanded editions of Daniel and Esther. The first includes three additional sections. One (“The Song of the Three Young Men”) is a hymn sung by Daniel’s companions. The other two (“Susannah” and “Bel and the Dragon”) display Daniel’s wisdom and show how God delivered him. In addition, the expanded edition of Esther includes sections that bring out more clearly the role of God. (The Hebrew edition, strikingly, doesn’t contain explicit references to God.)

OTHER ANCIENT WRITINGS

The books of the Bible weren’t the only ones written in ancient Israel. There were many others. Some are even considered canonical in Eastern non-Catholic churches. These include:

- *The Prayer of Manasseh*, a prayer of repentance attributed to one of Judah’s kings;
- *1 Esdras*, which recounts the return of Jews following the Babylonian Exile;
- *3 Maccabees*, which deals with the situation of Jews in Egypt;
- *Psalm 151*, a psalm found in some versions of the Greek Old Testament.

Other influential works were also written during this time. They include:

- *1 Enoch*, a series of visions and narratives connected to the biblical patriarch Enoch; this work was influential enough to be quoted in the New Testament (Jude 14–15);

- *Jubilees*, a retelling of Genesis and part of Exodus;
- *The Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, which presents non-canonical visions of heaven and hell;
- *The Psalms of Solomon*, a collection of hymns.

The fact that these books weren't included in the Bible, despite their popularity in ancient times, shows the important role the Catholic Church would play in showing us which books belong in the canon of Scripture.

OLD TESTAMENT SOURCES

Tradition was an essential means for passing down information, especially in books like Genesis, which deals with the period before Israel was a kingdom.

It continued to be important as history progressed. Israel remained a largely oral culture, and tradition was the normal way information passed from person to person. Many of the Old Testament prophets did not even write books.

We know, for example, that in the time of Elijah, the 800s B.C., there were at least 100 prophets of the Lord (1 Kings 18:4), but we have no record of them writing books. Thus, they are what are known as *oral prophets*.

Elijah himself was an oral prophet. There is no indication he ever wrote a book, but he is considered the most prominent Old Testament prophet, and during the ministry of Jesus he appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration, where Moses and Elijah represented the law and the prophets and how they testify to Jesus (Luke 9:30–31; cf. 24:27).

Other oral prophets include Elisha (1 Kings 19:16), Micaiah (2 Kings 22:13), Hanani (2 Chron. 16:7), and Jahaziel (2 Chron. 20:14). Some oral prophets were women.

These included Moses' sister, Miriam (Exod. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14).

The existence of oral prophets illustrates how God continued to give his word in oral form and not exclusively in Scripture. On the other hand, some prophets did write books, though they are not part of the Bible.

Samuel wrote a book on the rights and duties of a king (1 Sam. 10:25). He also wrote one, apparently of a historical nature, known as the *Chronicles of Samuel the Seer* (1 Chron. 29:29). Others who did this include Gad and Nathan (1 Chron. 29:29), Nathan (2 Chron. 9:29), and Shemaiah and Iddo (2 Chron. 12:15). These records presumably included information about the events of their times, as well as prophecies they received. Some wrote books that may have been more directly prophetic—that is, just the revelations they received. These include the prophets Ahijah the Shilonite and Iddo the Seer (2 Chron. 9:29).

Surprisingly, even some prophets who *did* write books of the Bible *also* wrote other works. Isaiah wrote a history of King Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:22), and Jeremiah wrote a second book of lamentations dealing with the death of Josiah (2 Chron. 35:25).

Besides books written by prophets, we know of other works, such as the *Book of the Wars of the Lord* (Num. 21:14) and the *Book of Jashar* (Josh. 10:12). Once the monarchy began, court records were kept, and Scripture mentions the *Chronicles of the Kings of Israel* (1 Kings 14:19), the *Chronicles of the Kings of Judah* (1 Kings 14:29), the *Chronicles of King David* (1 Chron. 27:24), and the *Acts of Solomon* (1 Kings 11:41).

These books are sometimes directly quoted in the Old Testament. Sometimes they are used as sources without being quoted. And sometimes the biblical writer refers the reader to them for further information. This means they

were important, but the fact that they aren't in the Bible shows God didn't ultimately want them in the canon.

While the court records weren't divinely inspired, the ancient Hebrews would have seen the books by prophets—especially ones containing divine revelations—as containing the word of God. This serves as a caution against identifying the canon of Scripture too closely with God's word. God gave his word to men in many ways, and he chose only some of it to be included in the Bible.

CHANGING LANGUAGES

Abraham, as a man from “Ur of the Chaldeans” (Gen. 11:28), would have spoken one of the Mesopotamian languages common in that region, such as Akkadian.

However, when he moved to the promised land, his household needed to learn the language of the Canaanites. Abraham's descendants thus began to speak “the language of Canaan” (Isa. 19:18), and today we refer to the dialect they eventually developed as Hebrew.

In Egypt, Israelites including Moses would have learned Egyptian. They may have continued to use an early dialect of Hebrew in their own circles, but they certainly used it once they returned to the promised land. By about 1000 B.C., they were definitely speaking Hebrew.

A writing system for Hebrew developed that was based on the Proto-Sinaitic script. This alphabet also was used by the Phoenicians, who had an extensive trading network. Through them, it spread to the Greeks and Latins. Surprising as it may seem, our English alphabet is based on the same one as Hebrew.

One reason our alphabet looks so different is that the direction of writing flipped. Hebrew is written right to left, while English is left to right. This means some letters are

reversed. The Hebrew equivalents of *r* and *q* are inverted, making them hard to recognize.

ר “R” ק “Q”

Modern Hebrew letters Resh and Qoph (“R” and “Q”)

Hebrew also didn’t originally have vowels, only consonants. The Greeks introduced new letters for vowel sounds, but in Hebrew a system of small marks known as *vowel points* were introduced. These are dots or other small marks written above, below, or inside the consonants.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:
וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תְהוֹם וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים

First lines of Genesis in Hebrew

Most Old Testament books were written in Hebrew, but not all. In 587 B.C., the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and deported many, beginning the Babylonian Exile. As with previous migrations, this caused a language change. Since the international language in the Middle East was Aramaic, the Hebrews began learning it.

Hebrew and Aramaic are related and have many words in common. In both languages, for example, the word for king is *melek*. This made Aramaic easier for Hebrews to learn. But there also are differences. The Hebrew word for son is *ben*, but the Aramaic equivalent is *bar*. That’s why in the New Testament St. Peter’s birth name is Simon bar-Jona rather than Simon ben-Jona.

Hebrew and Aramaic aren’t mutually intelligible. In 701 B.C., during the reign of King Hezekiah, the Assyrians threatened to conquer Jerusalem, and their envoy shouted

the threats in Hebrew to the soldiers on Jerusalem's walls. Hezekiah's ambassadors asked the Assyrians to speak in the international language of Aramaic, lest the Hebrew troops be demoralized, but they refused to do so (2 Kings 18:26–27).

By Jesus' day, Aramaic had become the normal language that Jews in Palestine spoke, and this transition had several effects. One is that Aramaic started to be used in Scripture. Significant portions of Ezra and Daniel were written in Aramaic (i.e., Ezra 4:8–6:8; 7:12–26; Dan. 2:4–7:28), and Tobit appears to have been written in Aramaic.

Hebrew continued to be used by some, and some later Old Testament books, such as Judith, Sirach, and Baruch, were written in Hebrew. However, Aramaic became more and more the normal spoken language.

Because ordinary people no longer knew Hebrew, they needed the scriptures translated for them. This resulted in Aramaic translations of the Old Testament known as the *targums*. These originated in the synagogues, where a lector would first read biblical passages in Hebrew and then translate them into Aramaic.

Another language change began in the 330s B.C., with Alexander the Great. His troops spoke different dialects of Greek, and these blended together to form a dialect known as *koiné* or “common” Greek. It's different from the classical Greek used by Homer and Plato. Later scholars were puzzled as to why the New Testament doesn't use classical Greek, and some speculated it used a special dialect that God created—a *Holy Ghost Greek*—but modern archaeological discoveries show it's written in *koiné*, the common form of Greek in the first century.

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν. ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἄορατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος, καὶ σκότος

First lines of Genesis in Greek

Alexander's conquests made Greek a new international language, particularly in the West. It was even widely used in Rome, where the local language was Latin. Greek was so widespread that the New Testament authors wrote in it rather than other languages.

During his career, Alexander founded several cities, including Alexandria, Egypt. Its inhabitants spoke Greek rather than Egyptian, and after about 300 B.C. a major Jewish colony was established there. Many Jews also were living elsewhere outside the Holy Land—a phenomenon known as the *Dispersion* of the Jewish people among the nations (see Jas. 1:1). Most learned Greek in addition to whatever other languages they knew.

Consequently, a few Old Testament books were written in Greek. These include Wisdom, which was likely written at Alexandria, and 2 Maccabees.

The other Old Testament books also needed to be translated for Jews who didn't speak Hebrew or Aramaic. This led to a Greek translation known as the *Septuagint*. Its name comes from the Latin word for seventy (*septuaginta*), and scholars often use the Latin numeral seventy—LXX—as an abbreviation for it.

This is because, according to an ancient document known as the *Letter of Aristeas*, the translation was begun by a team of seventy-two Jewish scholars. The letter states that Pharaoh Ptolemy II (r. 285–245 B.C.) ordered a Greek translation of the Jewish law books—the Torah—for the Library of Alexandria. This became the core of the Septuagint, and later the other Old Testament books also were translated or composed in Greek. Today scholars think the *Letter of Aristeas* isn't entirely accurate, but it's likely the Septuagint was begun by the Greek-speaking Jewish colony at Alexandria, possibly during the

reign of Ptolemy II and in connection with the Library of Alexandria.

JEWISH SECTS

By the end of the Old Testament era, a number of movements had developed in the Jewish community.

One was the Sadducees. This relatively small group was very influential and had support from wealthy, upper-class Jews. Sadducees didn't believe in an afterlife or angels. According to Luke, "the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit" (Acts 23:8). They stressed free will and denied fate or predestination. Finally, the Sadducees rejected the oral traditions honored by the Pharisees.

The second group was the Pharisees. They gained prominence around 120 B.C., and they were more numerous than the Sadducees. The Jewish historian Josephus reports that around 2 B.C. there were 6,000 Pharisees.⁴ They were popular with the ordinary people and believed in the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead, as well as rewards and punishments in the afterlife. The Pharisees believed in both free will and predestination and sought to harmonize them. They maintained an extensive body of oral traditions, which they held to have been passed down from ancient times.

A third group not mentioned in the New Testament was the Essenes. They were separatists who had a dispute with the high priests after around 170 B.C. They objected to someone whom they referred to as "the Wicked Priest," and they believed he and his followers polluted the temple. They refused to participate in temple worship and expected the temple to be destroyed and replaced. Josephus says there were about 4,000 Essenes.⁵ Most scholars believe

they had a community near the Dead Sea and wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Essenes believed in the afterlife and bodily resurrection as well as angels. They also believed in a strict form of predestination and practiced asceticism with some remaining celibate. They were hostile toward outsiders and believed all other Jews were disobeying God. They thought they were living in Last Days and that soon they would fight and win a war between the “sons of light” (i.e., the Essenes themselves) and the “sons of darkness.”

Another war-oriented group was the Zealots. Josephus describes them as the fourth major group of Jews in his day. They violently opposed the Romans, who conquered the Holy Land in 63 B.C. and installed Herod the Great as a client king. The Zealots passionately wanted to overthrow Roman rule, and they played a key role in starting the Great Jewish Revolt in A.D. 66, which led to the destruction of the temple.

There were smaller sects also. The Jewish philosopher Philo mentions an ascetic group known as the *Therapeutae*, who practiced healing. However, most Jews weren't members of one of these elite groups; they were ordinary, uneducated peasants who were known as the *people of the land* (Hebrew, *am ha-aretz*).

The only group that was strong enough to survive after the Great Jewish Revolt was the Pharisees, and their movement developed into modern rabbinic Judaism.

HOW THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON DEVELOPED

By the first century A.D., the books of the Old Testament had been written, but how did the canon form? Why were some like Ezekiel and Esther included while others like *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees* were not?

Some claim the decisions were made by a gathering of 120 Jewish sages known as the *Great Assembly*, which was founded after the Babylonian Exile by Ezra around 444 B.C.

In the A.D. 200s, rabbinical sages attributed all kinds of decisions to the Great Assembly, including the Old Testament canon. However, we have no contemporary records of the Great Assembly and no documents it issued. The earliest claims are around 600 years later, and modern scholars doubt it did the things claimed or that it even existed. It looks like the rabbis—the intellectual descendants of the Pharisees—attributed their own views to the legendary body to give them antiquity.

Another view holds that the priests made the decisions and kept an archive of the sacred books in the temple. Anything in this collection was canonical; anything that wasn't was not.

This view is mere speculation and is not backed up by the evidence. We know the Torah was kept at the temple (2 Kings 22:8–20), but we don't have a record of an official archive of the scriptures there. It would be surprising if there was, for the prophets were very critical of how the temple was run. Also, the Sadducees appear to have rejected many books of Scripture, and they were closely associated with the temple.

A third view holds that there were two canons in circulation—the *Palestinian canon* and the *Alexandrian canon*. The first contained the protocanonical Old Testament books written in Hebrew (with some Aramaic passages). It was used in Palestine and represented the pure Old Testament. Outside Palestine, where Greek was common, the broader, Alexandria-based Septuagint collection was used. Advocates of this theory sometimes claim that the Palestinian canon was finalized around A.D. 90 at a meeting known as the *Council of Jamnia*.

This view was common in the nineteenth century, but twentieth-century scholarship destroyed it. There was disagreement even in Palestine regarding which books were considered to be Scripture, and some didn't consider the canon closed.

All Jews—and even the Samaritans—accepted the Pentateuch. These five books were foundational for the Jewish faith, and they were considered by far the most important books. Even those who accepted other works as Scripture considered these preeminent.

The Samaritans accepted *only* the Pentateuch as Scripture, and we have no evidence they ever accepted other books as such. It thus appears they had a closed and very limited canon. The same may be true of the Sadducees. The Church Fathers state that the Sadducees accepted only the Pentateuch.⁶

As Luke notes (Acts 23:8), they didn't accept the resurrection of the dead, which is unambiguously attested in passages outside the Pentateuch, like Daniel 12:1–2 (cf. Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:1–14). It's hard to see how they would have included these books in their canon if they disbelieved in the resurrection. Also, when the Sadducees challenge Jesus about the resurrection (Matt. 22:23–33), he cites the Pentateuch (Exod. 3:6) instead of the more obvious passages outside it—likely because they didn't accept the other books.

The Sadducees thus appear not to have accepted all of the books of the Hebrew Old Testament and may have had a canon limited to the Pentateuch.

This wasn't the case for the Pharisees. They accepted additional books that corresponded roughly to the proto-canonical books found in Jewish Bibles today. However, the boundaries of this collection were still somewhat fuzzy.

Those who say the Council of Jamnia closed their canon around A.D. 90 admit it wasn't closed before this time—and that's true—but it wasn't fixed until later.

There was no “council” at Jamnia. Councils are temporary gatherings that meet for a time and then disband. They are a Christian rather than a Jewish institution. What actually happened was that during the Jewish War of the A.D. 60s, a sage named Johanan ben Zakkai obtained permission from Roman authorities to establish a rabbinical school in Jamnia (also known as Jabneh or Yavneh). After the war, the Jewish ruling council relocated there.

We don't have records saying the sages of Jamnia attempted to close the canon. In fact, rabbinic writings such as the Mishnah and the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds reveal there was a diversity of opinion among the sages about certain books. Some rabbis opposed the scriptural status of six books—Ruth, Esther, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Ezekiel. By contrast, some quoted Sirach as a book of Scripture, though it was eventually excluded.⁷ This uncertainty continued for several hundred years into the Christian era, and the Jewish canon wasn't closed until the third or fourth century.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed the Essenes had an even larger collection of scriptures. They appear to have included all of the protocanonicals except Esther. The likely reason is that the Jewish liturgical calendar was extremely important to them, and Esther conflicted with their understanding of the calendar. Hebrew and Aramaic copies of books like Sirach and Tobit also were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The sect had a large library of other materials, and many probably weren't regarded as Scripture. However, several factors—such as whether they were quoted as Scripture, had commentaries based on them, or were treated as prophetic

texts—have led scholars to argue that some of them were. These include *1 Enoch*, *Jubilees*, and a document known as the *Temple Scroll*.

The Septuagint tradition, which included not only the protocanonicals but also seven additional books: Tobit, Judith, 1–2 Maccabees, Baruch, Sirach, and Wisdom as well as expanded editions of Daniel and Esther, this tradition also had fuzzy boundaries. Some editions of the Septuagint included additional books such as *1–2 Esdras*, *3–4 Maccabees*, and the *Prayer of Manasseh*.

There were thus at least five major canonical traditions in the first century:

- The Samaritan tradition
- The Sadducee tradition
- The Pharisee tradition
- The Essene tradition
- The Septuagint tradition

None except the Samaritan tradition, and possibly the Sadducee tradition, represented a closed, fixed list of Scripture. Instead, they were open and had fuzzy boundaries, and this fuzziness would persist for centuries into the Christian age.

Finally, there were books in circulation that were presented as divine revelation, though we can't show that they were part of one of these established canonical traditions. They include works like the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*. Some modern authors dismiss them as if nobody in the ancient world regarded them as Scripture, but this doesn't fit the evidence. That these books survived indicates they were popular. If they hadn't been, not enough copies would have been made for them to survive. An individual copy had only a small

chance of surviving the ages, so there must have been many copies in circulation. But if a popular book presented itself as prophecy—like the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*—this is strong evidence at least some ancient Jews considered it Scripture.

400 SILENT YEARS?

Many in the Protestant community discount books not found in their version of the Old Testament on the grounds that there were “400 silent years” between Malachi and the ministry of Jesus.

This claim is bolstered by the assertion that there were no prophets in this period. The implication is that without the divine inspiration given to prophets books of Scripture couldn’t be written.

There are several problems with this assertion. One is that it isn’t clear that all the books in the Protestant Old Testament were written before 400 B.C. Even among conservative Protestant scholars, a significant body of opinion holds that some were written much closer to the time of Christ.

Another problem is that an author doesn’t have to be a prophet to write Scripture. While all of the biblical authors were divinely inspired, this didn’t mean that they functioned in society as prophets. Psalms and Proverbs attribute many passages to David and Solomon, but they were kings, not prophets. The truth is, we don’t know who wrote many Old Testament books, including all the historical ones (Joshua to 2 Chronicles), and it’s just supposition to claim that they were written by prophets. We also have no evidence that New Testament authors like Mark and Luke ever received prophetic revelations.

But even if we were to grant that one had to be a prophet to author Scripture, we don’t have evidence that

the gift of prophecy was absent in this period. Sometimes advocates of the “four hundred silent years” appeal to passages like 1 Maccabees 4:46 and 9:27 to support the claim that there were no prophets in this era, but these passages don’t show this.

The first describes how, around 164 B.C., Judah Maccabee and his men debated what to do about an altar the Gentiles had defiled. They tore it down and stored “the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them.” The second refers to a few years later, when “there was great distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them.”

These passages indicate that in the 160s B.C. there were no prophets functioning, but that doesn’t mean that God *never* gave prophecies between Malachi and John the Baptist or that Jews of the period didn’t *expect* new prophets. First Maccabees 4:46 shows they did when it says that they set aside the altar stones until “there should come a prophet to tell them what to do with them.” Similarly, 1 Maccabees 14:41 states that in 140 B.C. Simon Maccabee was made ruler of the people “until a trustworthy prophet should arise,” again indicating an expectation of further prophets, including the possibility of one arriving in the reign of Simon Maccabee.

The absence of prophets in the time of the Maccabees was a temporary event, and it wasn’t unprecedented. There were similar lulls in prophetic activity in other periods. First Samuel 3:1 reveals that when the prophet Samuel was a boy “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.” Yet later in his life, when Samuel anointed Saul as king, there was a band of prophets that met Saul on the road, and he himself was overcome by the Spirit and

began to prophesy. Thus, it became a proverb, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (see 1 Sam. 10:9–12).

Another prophetic lull is mentioned during the Babylonian Exile. Psalm 74, which records the destruction of the temple (vv. 4–7), says, “We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet” (v. 9). Similarly, Lamentations 2:9 describes events following the destruction of the temple by saying Zion’s “prophets obtain no vision from the Lord.” Yet, neither passage indicates that the age of Old Testament prophecy was closed, for prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel were active during the Exile. Neither do these prophetic lulls indicate Scripture couldn’t be written, for both passages are part of Scripture!

Even in a prophetic lull, God could give revelation, as in the case of the previous two passages. Similarly, in the time of the Maccabees, Judah Maccabee himself received a revelation (2 Macc. 15:11–16), though he didn’t function as a formal prophet.

The Jewish historian Josephus reports that the Maccabean high priest John Hyrcanus, who ruled between 134 and 104 B.C., had “the gift of prophecy. For so closely was he in touch with the deity that he was never ignorant of the future; thus, he foresaw and predicted that his two elder sons would not remain at the head of affairs.”⁸

In the New Testament, we learn that the holy priest Simeon had received a revelation from the Holy Spirit “that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:26), and we meet the “prophetess Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher,” who decades before the ministry of John the Baptist prophesied concerning Jesus “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:36, 38).

The readiness of people to accept John the Baptist and Jesus as a prophet (Matt. 21:11, 26; Mark 11:32; Luke 20:6; 24:19) also testifies to belief in ongoing prophecy.

According to Jesus' contemporary, the Jewish philosopher Philo (ca. 20 B.C.—ca. A.D. 50), “the sacred scriptures testify in the case of every good man, that he is a prophet; for a prophet says nothing of his own, but everything which he says is strange and prompted by someone else”—i.e., God—and that “the wise man alone . . . is a sounding instrument of God's voice, being struck and moved to sound in an invisible manner by him.”⁹ He also reported that he himself “was accustomed frequently to be seized with a certain divine inspiration”¹⁰ and to have “suddenly become full, ideas being, in an invisible manner, showered upon me, and implanted in me from on high.”¹¹

After the ministry of Jesus, other Jewish prophets continued to appear, including the peasant Jesus, son of Ananus, who began in A.D. 62 to prophesy the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.¹² Even false prophets such as Bar-Jesus (Acts 13:6) depended on belief in ongoing prophecy.

The evidence indicates that there was no belief at the time that prophecy had ceased. Instead, the attitude of the time was that “in every generation she [wisdom] passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets” (Wis. 7:27).

The Word of God Incarnate

THE WORD BECOMES FLESH

The next phase of God's plan began with a series of personal revelations.

The first occurred when the angel Gabriel appeared to the elderly priest Zechariah and told him that—despite his advanced age and his wife's barrenness—they would have a son who would have a prophetic ministry leading many to repent. Zechariah didn't believe the message and demanded proof ("How shall I know this?"). Gabriel replied that he would be mute until the child was born, which is what happened (Luke 1:5–23).

The second revelation occurred when Gabriel again appeared, this time to the Virgin Mary, and announced she would bear "the Son of the Most High." Mary believed the prophecy but asked how it would be fulfilled. Since she was betrothed to and thus legally married to Joseph at the time, her question suggests she wasn't planning on a normal marriage and intended to remain a virgin. Gabriel replied that the Holy Spirit would bring about the conception without a human father, thus revealing the child as the Son of God (Luke 1:26–35).

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