

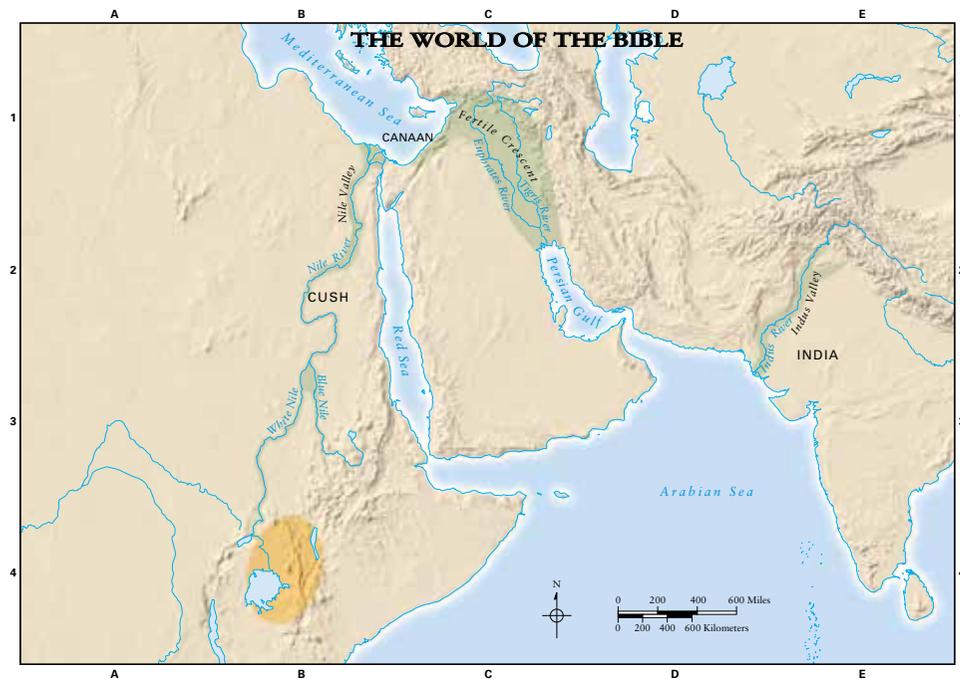


## **PART 1**

# **What Is the Bible, And How Did It Come About?**



MAP 1.1



MAP 1.2

The "Fertile Crescent" is the name given to the rich arable land in Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley, where ancient civilizations first developed. The area shaded yellow around Lake Victoria is where the oldest known human fossils have been discovered.



# 1

## The Bible A Gradually Emerging Collection

### IN THIS CHAPTER, YOU WILL LEARN ABOUT

- ▶ The process of canonization of the Bible
  - ▷ Hebrew Bible
  - ▷ New Testament
- ▶ Why communities need a canon
- ▶ The criteria writings needed to meet for admission to the New Testament

**W**hile most of us recognize a Bible when we see one, we often do not stop to consider just what it contains. What kinds of writings are in it? How did it get to us? Why are translations so different? We often hear questions of a different sort, questions about whether the Bible is true when it says the world was created in six days or that Jesus stopped a raging storm. What are those of us in a world dominated by a scientific outlook to think about such things in the Bible? How can an ancient book that seems to view the world so differently be valuable for

understanding life in this technological age? These all-important questions deserve clear and careful answers.

The Bible has been and can be an extremely valuable resource as we try to understand our lives today and try to find meaning in a fragmented world. In this book I try to understand the Bible in its own context, coming to see what understandings of God, the world, humanity, and God's people the Bible contains. Only after we have done that can we decide whether those understandings have something to offer twenty-first-century readers.

## ► The Bible: A Collection

The Bible is not a single book, but a collection of over sixty different writings composed by many different authors over hundreds of years, written in three **languages**: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Bible also includes many different kinds of writings: narratives, letters, psalms, poetry, and an “apocalypse,” to name a few. Some of its books have multiple authors—for example, the Gospel of John. Near the end of John, this statement appears: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24).

Notice the “we” in this verse. This sentence shows clearly that a group of people beyond the original “disciple whom Jesus loved” (whom this verse names as the source of the material in the book) had a hand in composing this Gospel. “We know” that what this disciple said is true. So even some books that we often think of as written by a single person had a more complex origin than just a solitary author composing at his or her desk.

### BOX 1.1

#### LOCATING MATERIAL IN THE BIBLE

Books of the Bible are divided into chapters and verses. These divisions are used to locate particular passages within the books. The regular way the divisions are written is chapter number, colon, verse number. For example, chapter 21, verse 24 is written 21:24.

## ► The Emergence of the Canon

The process of collecting the various writings into a single book took several centuries, and the decisions about which books would constitute the Bible involved a great deal of thought and discussion. In the end, the thirty-nine books of the **Protestant Old Testament** (the **Hebrew Bible** counts the same writings as twenty-four books by combining pairs of books like 1 and 2 Samuel into one and the Twelve Minor Prophets into one; see also the discussion of the Apocrypha below) and the twenty-seven books of the **New Testament** were the writings in which the faith communities heard the voice of God in a distinctive way, a way that led them to designate these books as authoritative guides for their lives and beliefs.

The term **canon** designates a collection of writings that carries authority in a given religious community. The English word *canon* comes from the Greek *kanon*, which means a measuring stick. The canon is the standard by which a religious community evaluates beliefs, practices, and ethical behavior. We may wonder why anyone would want such a standard. Why not let each person determine what is right? Even if you decide that you want a standard, how do you decide what it is? Who decides?

### Why Standards?

While it seems to run counter to our desire for freedom of thought and action, every group must have standards; without them there can be no *group*. They may be an aggregation of people in a single location, but without things that bind the people together, they are not a group.

Every group must have a purpose and agree upon means of working toward that purpose. Bridge clubs, poker groups, and political movements all have agreed-upon purposes and rules by which they conduct themselves. Sometimes those rules are explicit and sometimes they are implicit, but they are always there. Just try hiding a card up your sleeve if you think your poker group doesn't have rules! Likewise, all religious groups must have some guide for their beliefs and practices. Without those, you have no reason to come together as a religious group.

**Boundaries.** Not only do all religious groups need a guide for their beliefs and practices, they also need means of determining their boundaries. Every group must have ways to determine who is in and who is out. Again, without boundaries, you do not have a group, because being all-inclusive renders membership meaningless. The early church and **Second Temple Judaism** needed boundaries that set them off from the **polytheistic** world, and even from each other. They needed ways to determine what their identity was to be.

Determining what your identity is includes clarifying who you are not. So groups need some means of rejecting beliefs and practices that violate their core beliefs. This does not mean that people within the group must be narrow-minded, only that they need ways to be clear about who they are. If you belong to a group that has openness or inclusiveness as a central value, you cannot allow a person who successfully works at excluding as many people as possible to be part of your group. Everyone must draw boundaries. This task is particularly urgent when the group faces opposition or persecution, because people want to be clear about what they are willing to suffer for.

BOX 1.2

### SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM

*Second Temple Judaism* refers to the forms of Judaism that existed from approximately 515 B.C.E. to 70 C.E. This period begins when the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt after it had been destroyed by the Babylonians in about 587 B.C.E. and ends with its destruction in 70 C.E. by the Romans.

## ► The Canon of the Hebrew Bible

Like all groups, Second Temple-period Jews and early Christians needed authorities to which they could appeal when there were disputes about their identity, about what they should believe, and about how they should live. Both groups turned to books as their guides. So both the Jewish community and those who believed in Christ developed a canon, a set of authoritative writings. I will first sketch how the canon of the Hebrew Bible developed, and then turn to the New Testament.

### A Complicated Process

The process of collecting the books of the Hebrew Bible was complicated. First, many of the books show evidence of having been written by more than one person and of drawing on other written sources for some of their content. Indeed, some of the books seem to have incorporated material written hundreds of years before the texts we now have came together (we will discuss this in more detail in subsequent chapters). Many of the books of the Hebrew Bible are



**FIGURE 1.1 THE WESTERN WALL OF THE TEMPLE**

This wall is the most intact part of Herod’s Temple that remains. The sanctuary of the temple and the area for sacrifices stood above this wall. The Romans destroyed the other parts of the temple complex in 70 c.e. when they sacked Jerusalem to end a revolt. *Getty*

open about drawing on other sources for material. They tell you to read those other books if you want to know more about the subject they have been discussing. Here are a few examples of the many places where the text sends the reader to consult such works and gives their names:

Numbers 21:14:

the Book of the Wars of the LORD

Joshua 10:13:

“the Book of Jashar”

1 Kings 11:41:

“the Book of the Acts of Solomon”

1 Chronicles 9:1:

“the Book of the Kings”

1 Chronicles 29:29:

“the Book of Samuel”

Deuteronomy 17:18-19:

“the king is to keep a copy of this law”

These notations suggest that the writers of the biblical texts take what they find in other books and give them a religious or theological interpretation. The biblical writers interpret the events of the nation’s past so that those events reveal something about the people’s relationship

## BOX 1.3

## DESIGNATIONS OF YEARS

The common scholarly conventions for the designations of the eras have changed so that it is more inclusive. The designation B.C. (Before Christ) has been replaced by B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and A.D. (Anno Domini; in the year of our Lord) has been replaced by C.E. (Common Era), the time when both Judaism and Christianity exist.

with God. In addition to the texts that retell Israel's national story, the books attributed to prophets were often completed only after the prophet's death. One clear indication of this process of writing is that they often refer to the prophet in the third person rather than in the first person; that is, the prophetic books often say the word of the Lord came to *him*, rather than saying it came to *me*.

**"The book of the law."** Since many of these books were composed by multiple writers and sometimes rewritten over centuries, we should expect that gathering them into a single volume was also complex. The process did not get started as early as we might think. There was no large collection of authoritative books that Israelites could consult until about the sixth century B.C.E. The story of King Josiah (640–609) shows how late the process of gathering these books started. In 2 Kings 22:8-13 we hear that Josiah commissioned a refurbishing of the neglected temple of God in Jerusalem. During the renovations, workers found "the book of the law" in a back room of the temple. When

some officials read this newly discovered book, they became aware that they had not been living by its commands at all. Worried about this state of affairs, they called on a prophet, Huldah, to verify that the book really was the word of God. After she confirmed that it was, Josiah began a sweeping reform based on what this text commands. Though it might seem unbelievable to us, this story says that during Josiah's reform the people kept the Passover for the first time in three hundred years (2 Kgs. 23:21-23).

This story shows that the Israelites did not possess an extensive collection of writings by Moses or anyone else that gave instructions on how they should live and worship. They found this one book and were surprised by its instructions. So the process of developing a canon, a group of authoritative writings, did not begin until some time after this point. It is important to note that this story took place in about 620 B.C.E., only about thirty-five years before the kingdom of **Judah** fell. This means that the work of assembling the canon began in earnest during the **exile**.

## Developments after the Exile

When Judah (the second of the two Israelite nations) fell in 587 B.C.E., a large part of the population was forced to migrate to **Babylon** (located in today's Iraq). While Judah was in exile, the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians

## BOX 1.4

Read 2 Kings 22:8-10. What does this passage suggest about the authority of prophets in ancient Israel? What does it suggest about the status of women who possess this gift?

(located roughly in today's Iran). The Persians' policy concerning regions in the more distant parts of the empire differed from that of the Babylonians, so they allowed the people of Judah to return to Jerusalem around the year 539. The Persians granted the Judahites and other distant regions permission to govern themselves by their ancestral laws.

### **Ezra and the "book of the law of Moses."**

The first evidence for a collection of authoritative books within Judaism appears as the people of Judah returned from exile and began the process of semiautonomous governance. The book of Nehemiah tells about the return



**FIGURE 1.2 TORAH SCROLL**

Early eighteenth century. Art Resource

#### BOX 1.5

Read Nehemiah 8:1-8, 13-18. Notice the mention of the leaders and how they functioned on this occasion. How do you think the writer wants readers to understand the place of the Law in ordering society?

of some exiles and the establishment of the law of the land. It says that the priest Ezra gathered the people in Jerusalem and read to them the "book of the law of Moses" (Neh. 8:1-3). While Nehemiah describes the book as what God gave Moses, there is no evidence that it existed in written form, particularly in the form that Ezra read, until sometime during the exile. After all, before they found it in a back room of the temple, neither the king nor the temple's priests knew of its existence at the time of Josiah, the king who reigned just a few years before the first wave of the exile. Yet when the exiles return just about eighty years later, they possess a collection of writings by which they can govern their religious and civic lives.

**The three parts of the Hebrew Bible.** We do not know what was in the collection from which Ezra read, but it probably included much of what is now in the **Pentateuch**, the first five books of the Bible. These books are called the **Torah** in the Hebrew Bible. Other books were collected and began to be revered over the next two hundred fifty years. By the mid-second century B.C.E. the book called Ecclesiasticus or Sirach (part of the Apocrypha) could refer to a collection of writings divided into three groups: "the Law, the Prophets, and the other books," very close to the divisions of books of the Hebrew Bible still used today. While some

discussion continued about which books should be included, and some included books were still being reedited, the basic contours of the collection were in place at this point.

**The Dead Sea Scrolls.** Until the discovery of the **Dead Sea Scrolls** in 1947, our earliest extensive Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible came from about 1000 C.E. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls are copies of at least part of the Hebrew

text of every book in the Hebrew Bible except Esther. These copies were made just before and during the time of Jesus. For the most part, the scrolls demonstrate the care with which the copyists preserved the ancient text. But in some cases, we can see the ways that some books of the Hebrew Bible were still under construction. For example, some of copies of Jeremiah found among the scrolls are like the longer text in the Greek translation, others like the later accepted



**FIGURE 1.3 QUMRAN**

One of the caves in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, near Qumran. Among the Scrolls are copies of portions of every book in the Hebrew Bible except Esther.

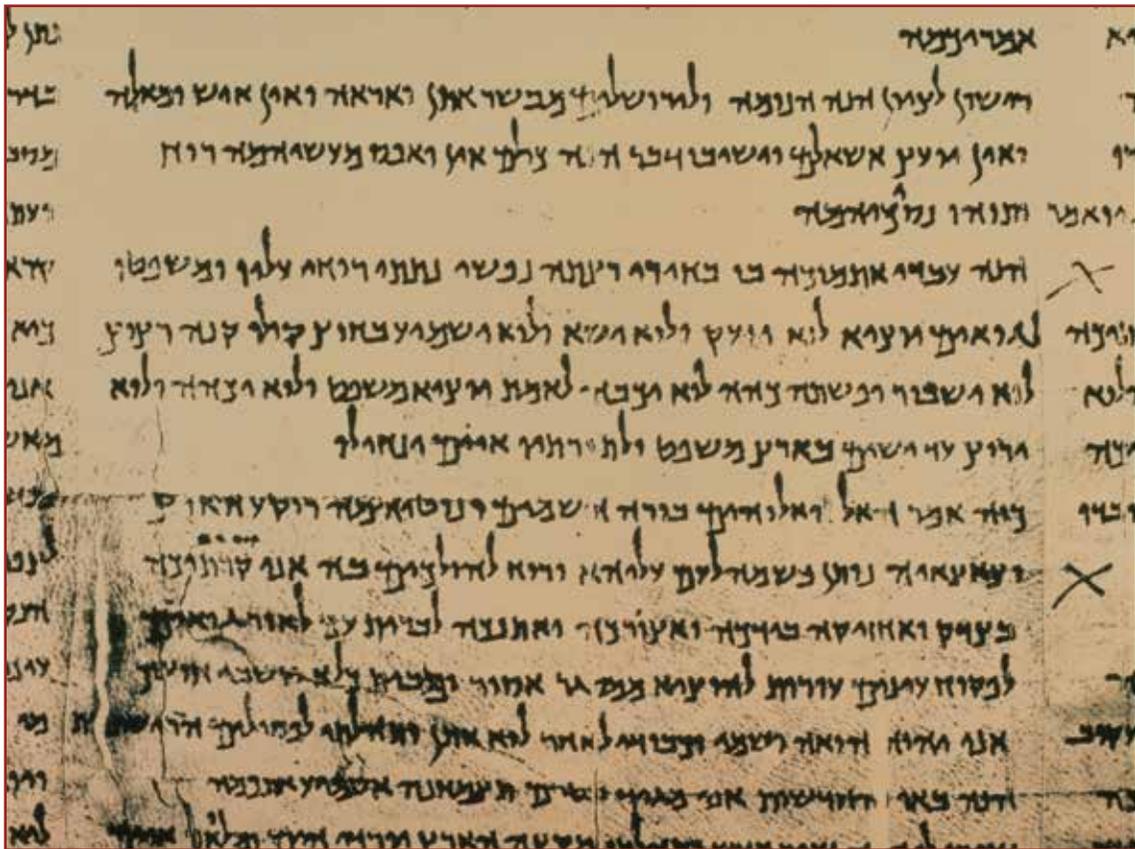


FIGURE 1.4 SECTION OF A SCROLL FROM QUMRAN

The Dead Sea Scrolls give us some of our best evidence for the form of the Hebrew Bible's text in the first century. This is a section from the Isaiah Scroll. *Art Resource*

biblical text, and another has different expansions so that it is significantly longer than that found in the Bible today.

### The Completion of the Canon of the Hebrew Bible

Our other most important evidence for understanding what Jews were reading as guides for their religious life is the **Septuagint**. The Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek that was completed near the end of the

second century B.C.E. That translation included all the books now found in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the books often called the Apocrypha. Many Jews viewed these books as authoritative, at least in some way.\* While the list was not completely decided upon, there

\*There were disagreements among different groups about which books were authoritative. For example, Sadducees accepted only the Torah as authoritative, while Pharisees accepted all thirty-nine books as authoritative.

was wide enough agreement about its content that first-century Jews could refer to the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, confident that other Jews knew what they meant. The first-century Jewish historian **Josephus** could refer to *the* books of Scripture. His accounting seems to amount to the thirty-nine books now in the Hebrew Bible. While there was a wide and broadening consensus about which books to include in the canon, there was no definitive delimiting of the canon until the end of the first century C.E. Before its destruction in 70 C.E., the temple had been a vitally important element in defining what it meant to be Jewish. Once it was destroyed, these texts (and their interpretation) became the central guide for determining what it meant to be a faithful Jew. Thus the canon of the Hebrew Bible was the result of ten centuries of work and thought.

## ► The Christian Canon

The Protestant Old Testament contains the same books as the Hebrew Bible, though they appear in a different order and are numbered differently. The Roman Catholic Bible includes as **deuterocanonical** the books called the **Apocrypha**. These seven books plus additions to Daniel and Esther were part of the Septuagint.<sup>2</sup> Later Judaism did not include these books in its canon, in part because most were not originally written in Hebrew. They remained within the canon in some parts of the Christian tradition because they were in the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Bible that was the primary Bible of the early church. Furthermore, the presence of these books in the Septuagint led to their inclusion in the **Vulgate**, the fifth-century translation of the Bible into Latin. The Greek

Orthodox Bible includes two additional books, 3 Maccabees and 2 Esdras, books also preserved in Greek and known widely in the early church.

**The earliest Christian writings.** The Septuagint was not only the early church's first Bible, but also nearly its only Bible through the first century. The earliest book of the New Testament (probably 1 Thessalonians) was not written until around 50 C.E. The latest of the New Testament books (probably 2 Peter) was composed around 125. The books of the New Testament also come from many different authors, and a number of them are written anonymously. Paul wrote his letters, the earliest writings in the New Testament, between the years 50 and 65. The New Testament Gospels began to be written soon after that and were probably all written by the year 100. By then, there were already collections of Paul's letters to churches circulating among the early communities of Christ believers.

**The question of authority.** From the earliest time after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the **apostles** were the central authorities within the church. The church needed to know more than simply what Jesus said or did and how he had died; they needed to know what these things meant. Knowing specific facts about the life of Jesus was less important than being able to interpret those facts in a way that was appropriate to what the church confessed about him. From the earliest times, the apostles were the people that the church saw as authorized to interpret the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Christ. Many interpretations of the life of Jesus were current in the first century: some saw him as a great reformer within Judaism, others as a political rebel, and still others as a misguided artisan. These interpretations

CHART 1.1

### THE CANONS OF THE TANAKH (JEWISH BIBLE) AND THE CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT OLD TESTAMENTS

| TANAKH                  | CATHOLIC OLD TESTAMENT  | PROTESTANT OLD TESTAMENT |
|-------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| <b>Torah</b>            | <b>Pentateuch</b>   | <b>Pentateuch</b>        |
| Genesis                 | Genesis   | Genesis                  |
| Exodus                  | Exodus  | Exodus                   |
| Leviticus               | Leviticus   | Leviticus                |
| Numbers                 | Numbers   | Numbers                  |
| Deuteronomy             | Deuteronomy   | Deuteronomy              |
| <b>Prophets</b>         | <b>Historical Books</b>   | <b>Historical Books</b>  |
| <i>Former</i>           | Joshua  | Joshua                   |
| Joshua                  | Ezra  | Ezra                     |
| Judges                  | Judges  | Judges                   |
| 1 Samuel                | Ruth  | Ruth                     |
| 2 Samuel                | Tobit   | Esther                   |
| 1 Kings                 | 1 Samuel  | 1 Samuel                 |
| 2 Kings                 | 2 Samuel  | 2 Samuel                 |
| <i>Latter</i>           | 1 Kings   | 1 Kings                  |
| Isaiah                  | 2 Kings   | 2 Kings                  |
| Jeremiah                | 1 Chronicles  | 1 Chronicles             |
| Ezekiel                 | 2 Chronicles  | 2 Chronicles             |
| The Twelve:             | <b>Poetry/Wisdom</b>  | <b>Poetry/Wisdom</b>     |
| Hosea                   | Job   | Job                      |
| Joel                    | Psalms  | Psalms                   |
| Amos                    | Proverbs  | Proverbs                 |
| Obadiah                 | Ecclesiastes  | Ecclesiastes             |
| Jonah                   | Song of Solomon   | Song of Solomon          |
| Micah                   | Wisdom of Solomon   |                          |
|                         | Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)   |                          |
| <b>Writings</b>         | <b>Prophets</b>   | <b>Prophets</b>          |
| Psalms                  | Isaiah  | Isaiah                   |
| Proverbs                | Jeremiah  | Jeremiah                 |
| Job                     | Lamentations  | Lamentations             |
| Song of Songs           | Baruch (including the Letter of Jeremiah)   | Ezekiel                  |
| Ruth                    | Ezekiel   | Daniel                   |
| Lamentations            | Daniel (including the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon) |                          |
| Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) | Hosea   | Hosea                    |
| Esther                  | Joel  | Joel                     |
| Daniel                  | Amos  | Amos                     |
| Ezra-Nehemiah           | Obadiah   | Obadiah                  |
| 1 Chronicles            | Haggai  | Haggai                   |
| 2 Chronicles            | Jonah   | Jonah                    |
|                         | Zechariah   | Zechariah                |
|                         | Micah   | Micah                    |
|                         |   | Nahum                    |
|                         |   | Habakkuk                 |
|                         |   | Zephaniah                |
|                         |   | Malachi                  |

CHART 1.2

**THE DEUTERO-CANONICAL BOOKS  
OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CANON  
(AND THE PROTESTANT  
APOCRYPHA)**

Tobit  
Judith  
Wisdom of Solomon  
Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)  
Baruch (including the Letter of Jeremiah)  
1 Maccabees  
2 Maccabees

In addition to these seven books, the Protestant Apocrypha also includes

1–2 Esdras  
Additions to Esther\*  
Letter of Jeremiah\*  
Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men\*  
Susanna\*  
Bel and the Dragon\*  
the Prayer of Manasseh

\*These writings are included within other canonical books in the Catholic canon, but are separate writings in the Protestant Apocrypha.

rested on the same facts the church had about the ministry and death of Jesus. The question was not what happened, but what those actions, particularly Jesus' death, meant.

**Apostolic authority.** Our earliest accounts agree that the church relied on the apostles for the proper interpretations of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They asserted that he was genuinely God's **Messiah** (literally "annointed one"; in Greek, *Christos*) or Messiah designate. Though it was nearly impossible to believe, given how his life ended, Jesus was the one in whom God had chosen to be present among God's people and to initiate the end

times. Understanding the resurrection as God's vindication of Jesus' teachings, life, and death makes this interpretation plausible. It was those closest to Jesus, the Twelve, who the church said most clearly understood the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection. To these twelve disciples the church added Paul, because he had a direct experience of the risen Christ, and James, the brother of Jesus, who became the leader of the Jerusalem church around the year 44 or 45.

**The need for authoritative writings.** In the earliest years of the church's existence, when someone wondered what a person who confessed Christ should do or believe, they would ask an apostle. What does Peter say this action of Jesus means? What does James say this saying of Jesus means? What does Paul say Christ believers should do in this situation? But by 65–70 many, probably most, of the apostles had died. Then the churches turned to those who knew the apostles best, but soon those associates of the apostles gave different answers when asked what an apostle would have told them to believe or do. (Of course, the apostles had themselves also given different kinds of answers to the same questions.) Since various leaders gave so many, and even contradictory, answers the church began to look to written sources for guidance. Then the question became, which writings have apostolic authority?

The church also felt the need to identify a set of authoritative writings because there were competing and mutually exclusive forms of Christianity. In the second century there were Gnostics, Marcionites, and Montanists, to mention just a few. Since these groups had contradictory teachings, the church needed an authoritative guide for its beliefs and practices.

## BOX 1.6

## INTERPRETATIONS OF JESUS

The range of interpretations that might have been given Jesus' ministry can be seen by a few examples from reports in the New Testament. Mark 3:19-27 reports that some who saw Jesus' miracles thought he was empowered to do them by the devil. Acts 5:33-39 tells of people who claimed to be called by God to oppose the power structure and who gathered followers and had political aspirations. They were, of course, defeated by the Romans. The Gospel of John has the people in charge in Jerusalem say the Romans will see Jesus as a political threat (11:45-51). So a wide range of interpretations of the life of Jesus appeared even during his lifetime.

They believed that some of these teachings denigrated human life and the God of Israel, so they sought a means to reject such teachings.

**The first Christian canon.** Not only were there teachings that the main body of the church rejected because they were dangerous, but in at least one case someone put together a canon that most found unacceptable. In the first half of the second century, **Marcion** went to Rome, where he made a bid to become a bishop. He taught that the God of the Hebrew Bible was not the Father of Jesus Christ. The God of Israel, he said, was too violent and vindictive to be the loving Father revealed by Jesus. He therefore rejected the whole Hebrew Bible and accepted only Luke as his Gospel (which he edited to suit his theology). He proposed that his edited

version of Luke and ten (edited) letters of Paul serve as the body of authoritative writings—the canon—for the church. The larger body of the church rejected Marcion's theology and canon. They insisted the God of Israel *was* the Father of Jesus Christ and defended the authority of the Hebrew Bible as well as that of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John.

**The criterion of apostolicity.** As the church began to assemble a group of authoritative texts, the most important characteristic a writing needed to be included among them was apostolicity; that is, it had to be written by, or related in some other way to, an apostle. Since the apostles had been the authorities within the church from its inception, the church looked to their writings as guides once the apostles themselves were no longer available. They saw the Pauline letters as clearly apostolic, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke were all written anonymously. Very soon after their composition, however, traditions grew up that attached each to an apostle: Matthew was said to be written by the apostle Matthew; Mark was written not by an apostle but by a disciple of Peter who wrote what Peter

## BOX 1.7

## APOSTOLICITY

Some connection to an apostle was one of the most important criteria for a writing to be considered authoritative as the Christian canon emerged. It was important that a book be written by one of the Twelve or Paul or James—or by someone closely associated with one of them.

preached about Jesus; similarly, Luke was written by an associate of Paul.

These traditions probably do not record actual historical connections to those apostles, but they do demonstrate the importance the church placed on relating each authoritative book to an apostle. The introductory words of the book of Jude exemplify the importance the church placed on a connection to an apostle. Jude identified himself as the brother of James. If he was the brother of James, he was also the brother of Jesus. But Jude made no claim to that immediate connection to Jesus, because that would not have established his authority the way a connection to the apostle James did. It is not simply what Jesus said or did that was authoritative, but the meaning the apostles gave to what Jesus did or said that mattered. So Jude had to attach himself to an apostle to get a hearing.

**Common usage and coherence.** In addition to needing an apostolic connection, a writing also had to be known and used widely across the Christian world. A text known primarily in Asia Minor (today's Turkey) or Egypt did not achieve the prominence needed to become authoritative for the whole church. Furthermore, for the wider church to begin accepting a book as genuinely apostolic, it had to agree with what later would be called the "rule of faith." That is, its content had to cohere with the range of beliefs that the early church accepted.

### The Closing of the Christian Canon: A Gradual Process

There was no one moment in the early church when a council suddenly decided what books would be authoritative and then closed the debate. Such decisions took several centuries.

Some accounts of the development of the canon make it sound as though the emperor **Constantine** adopted Christianity as the religion of the empire, immediately got together with his cronies in the proverbial smoke-filled back room, decided on the canon, and then imposed it on the church. Nothing could be further from the truth. While Constantine was interested in having Christians agree with one another about beliefs, he did not have a determinative role in the development of the canon. By the time he stepped on the stage, most of the decisions had already been made.

**Debated books.** Relatively few books were debated for very long. By the mid-second century, most churches (and there was no central governing body at this early date) accepted ten letters of Paul and the four Gospels as authoritative. By 200 nearly everyone accepted those fourteen books along with Acts, 1 Peter, and 1 John. There were still disagreements about other books; among those that got the most debate were Hebrews, Revelation, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. But some collections of books for Christians contained books that few people know of today, though many of them still exist. The late-second-century list from Rome known as the **Muratorian Canon** included the books mentioned above plus three more letters attributed to Paul (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), Jude, 2 John, Wisdom of Solomon, the *Apocalypse of James*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. The church eventually judged that the last two were not genuinely apostolic or authoritative.

**Athanasius and Jerome.** Discussions about the canon continued through the fourth century, after the time of Constantine. The fourth-century church historian Eusebius says that nearly

everyone accepts twenty-two books: the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, Hebrews (which he also attributes to Paul), 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation (though elsewhere he says Revelation is disputed). He then lists some writings that are disputed, all of which eventually became part of the canon. Finally he lists several books that are not accepted as authoritative but that may be good reading, though they do not bear authoritative status. **Athanasius**, bishop of Alexandria, is the first person to list as a group the books now found in the New Testament. In his Festal Letter of Easter in 367, he lists these twenty-seven as the books that contain true Christian teaching. But this declaration did not end the discussion. When **Jerome** (342–420) discusses which books the church accepts as authoritative, he lists the same twenty-seven as Athanasius, but comments that the “Latins” (the Western church) do not accept Hebrews and the “Greeks” (the Eastern church) do not accept Revelation. Jerome was to be one of the most influential people in this discussion because he included the twenty-seven current books of the New Testament in his Latin translation of the Bible. That translation, the Vulgate, became the Bible of the church for centuries to come, and so almost by default the books included in it became those the church recognized as authoritative.

### **The Reformation and the Council of Trent.**

Still, the discussion was not over. No official declaration of the church fixed the canon until the sixteenth century, when that declaration came as a reaction to Martin Luther’s questioning

the value and teachings of four New Testament books: Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. The Counter-Reformation **Council of Trent** responded by declaring it an article of faith that one accept the current twenty-seven books as canonical. Most people within the church, both Catholic and Protestant, have accepted this definition of the New Testament since that time. The Catholic Church retained the Apocrypha in their canon of the whole Bible at this time, while the Protestants did not include them. In this decision, the Catholic Church was following the lead of the Vulgate, which had included those books.

## ► **Conclusion**

The present-day church received the collection we call the Bible from its ancestors in the faith. The faith community discussed and debated which writings should be authoritative until they reached a broad consensus. There was not a simple hierarchical imposition from Constantine or anyone else. In the end, the believing communities (postexilic and pre-rabbinic Jews for the Hebrew Bible and the early church for the New Testament) gathered these writings, claiming them as the texts by which they would lead their lives and derive their understandings of God, the world, and one another. They bequeathed them to those who followed them (the Jewish community and the church) as books that give life and engender relationship with God, as books in which later believers could also hear the voice of God.

## ▶ LET'S REVIEW ◀

In this chapter we learned about:

- The Bible as a collection of books
  - Written in three languages
  - Written over many centuries
- The need for a canon
  - Boundaries
  - Identity
- The formation of the canon of the Hebrew Bible
  - Multiple sources and editions of individual books
  - Collection in exile and postexilic period
- The formation of the Christian canon
  - Need for expansion of the canon
  - Criteria for granting a work authority
  - The closing of the canon

## ▶ KEY TERMS ◀

|                    |                  |                       |
|--------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Apocrypha          | Exile            | New Testament         |
| Apostles           | Gnostics         | Old Testament         |
| Athanasius         | Hebrew Bible     | Pentateuch            |
| Babylon            | Huldah           | Polytheism            |
| Biblical languages | Jerome           | Second Temple Judaism |
| Canon              | Josephus         | Septuagint            |
| Constantine        | Judah            | Torah                 |
| Council of Trent   | Marcion          | Vulgate               |
| Dead Sea Scrolls   | Messiah          |                       |
| Deuterocanonical   | Muratorian Canon |                       |

## ▶ QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW ◀

- 1.1 What does it mean to call the Bible the “canon”?
- 1.2 Why do groups need a canon?
- 1.3 When did the Hebrew Bible begin to take a relatively firm shape? Why then?
- 1.4 What is the Apocrypha? Why is it not part of the Hebrew Bible?
- 1.5 How did Marcion influence the church to develop a canon?
- 1.6 Looking back, what criteria did the church (sometimes unconsciously) use to identify the books that should be authoritative, that is, should be part of the canon?
- 1.7 How did Jerome influence the stabilization of the canon?
- 1.8 How did Martin Luther influence the formation of the canon?

**▶ FOR FURTHER READING ◀**

F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988.

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Robert M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

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