

Why Should We Trust the Bible That We Have Today?

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🗣️ *Do we have the right books in the Bible?*

The Old Testament.

As far as the Old Testament is concerned, the only significant debate about the content of the Canon surrounds a collection of books known as the Apocrypha. These books were written somewhere between the time that Nehemiah served as cupbearer for the Persian King Artaxerxes (c.435 BC) and the time that Jesus was born. However, they were never considered Scripture by the Jewish authorities.

Josephus.

From Artaxerxes to our own time, a complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets.¹

Jesus did not consider the Apocrypha as a part of the Canon of Scripture either.

Luke 11:50-51

...The blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary...

2 Chronicles 24:21

But they conspired against [Zechariah], and by command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the Lord.

However, chronologically speaking, there is another prophet in the Old Testament who was murdered after Zechariah: Uriah, the son of Shemaiah.

Jeremiah 26:22-23

Then King Jehoiakim sent to Egypt certain men...and they took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who struck him down with the sword and dumped his dead body into the burial place of the common people.

Jesus mentioned Zechariah instead of Uriah because, in the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles is the last book. Jesus was saying, "All the blood of the prophets shed from the beginning of my Bible to the end of my Bible will come upon this generation." For Jesus, the Scriptures began in Genesis and ended in Chronicles. The Apocrypha was not included.

The New Testament.

For a similar type of discussion about the selection process for the books of the New Testament, read chapter 6 of the "**Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics**," (specifically the section entitled "Who Chose the Books and How Were They Chosen?" **p.120-128**).

¹ Josephus. *Against Apion 1.41* (as quoted in *Systematic Theology*. Wayne Grudem. p.56. Zondervan Publishing House 1994.

🕒 **How well were the books preserved over the years?**

An atheistic student at VCU:

“How can you trust a book that was written thousands of years ago and that has been copied so many times? It’s like that game *Telephone*. Maybe the original Bible might have been from God, but there’s no way to trust what we have today.”

Who Copied the Scriptures?	When?	Scripture Reference
Priests and Kings	c.1450-500 BC	Deuteronomy 17:18
The Soperim	c.500 BC-100 AD	N/A
The Talmudists	c.70-500 AD	N/A
The Massoretes	c.500-900 AD	N/A

The Soperim.

The Soperim were the “scribes” or the “teachers of the law” in Jesus’ day. The *Babylonian Talmud* states: “The older men were called *soperim* because they counted all the letters in the Torah” [“*soper*” may also mean “one who counts”]. (*Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 30a*).²

The Talmudists.

For a discussion about the strict rules which governed the copying process of the Talmudists, see: Doug Powell. *The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics*. 2006, p.188.

The Massoretes.

...The Hebrew alphabet did not contain any vowels. To ensure the accurate passing down of tradition (“*massora*” means tradition), the Massoretes developed a system of markings that surrounded the consonants and acted as vowels.

Like the Talmudists, the Massoretes also developed a system for ensuring the accuracy of their copies. They would count the number of words and letters in each book and also calculate the middle word and middle letter. They even knew the number of times each letter of the alphabet appeared in each book. If a copy did not agree exactly with the original, it was destroyed.³

(For instance, they knew that there were exactly 78,064 consonants in Genesis.)

² Adapted from The *ESV Study Bible: The Reliability of Bible Manuscripts*. 2008, p.2585.

³ Doug Powell. *The Holman QuickSource Guide To Christian Apologetics*. 2006, p.189.

The Dead Sea Scrolls.

In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd went looking for a lost goat in the caves of Qumran near the Dead Sea. Instead, he found a number of clay jars with ancient manuscripts in them.

When it was all said and done, by 1954, about 270 caves in the area had been searched. Over 40,000 fragments were discovered from about 500 different books and writings, including every single book of the Old Testament, with the exception of the book of Esther.

Prior to this discovery, the oldest extant manuscript that we had of the Old Testament was the Massoretic Text (c.980 AD). On average, the Dead Sea Scrolls were about 1000 years older. When the scrolls were compared to the Massoretic Text, the two were found to have an astonishing level of agreement.

The Isaiah Scroll from Cave #1:

There are 166 Hebrew words in Isaiah 53. When we compare the Dead Sea manuscript to the Massoretic Text, only 17 letters are found to be different. Of the 17 letters, ten are spelling variations and four are stylistic changes. The three letters that are of any real variance do not change the meaning of the text at all.

🕒 *How does the Bible compare to other ancient documents?*⁴

Author (work)	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span (in years)	# of Copies Extant
Julius Caesar (Gallic Wars)	c.100-44 BC	c.900 AD	1000	10
Plato (Tetralogies)	c.427-347 BC	c.900 AD	1200+	7
Tacitus (Annals of Rome)	c.100 AD	c.1100 AD	1000	20
Thucydides (History)	c.460-400 BC	c.900 AD	1300	8
Suetonius (<i>De Vita Caesarum</i>)	c.75-160 AD	c.950 AD	800	8
Herodotus (History)	c.480-425 BC	c.900 AD	1300	8
Sophocles	c.496-406 BC	c.1000 AD	1400	193
Aristotle	c.384-322 BC	c.1100 AD	1400	49
Homer (Illiad)	c.900 BC	c.400 BC	500	643
Old Testament	c.1450-400 BC	c.150 BC	1300	12,500+
New Testament	c.40-100 AD	c.100-150 AD	50	24,000+

Sir Frederic Kenyon:

“The interval, then, between the data of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”⁵

⁵ Sir Frederic Kenyon. *The Bible and Archaeology*. 1940, p.288. (as quoted in F.F. Bruce. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 1963. p.20).