

# 2

## SUMMARY

The Hebrew Scriptures (= Old Testament) are divided into the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, which reflects their origin. The spread of Judaism brought about the translation of these Scriptures into Greek. Some important books which were included in this translation were never accepted in the Hebrew Scriptures. These came to be called the *Apocrypha* (or, sometimes, the deuterocanonical books). The list of books accepted as sacred scripture is known as the *canon*.

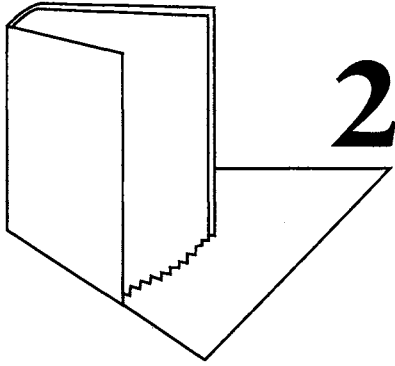
The books of the New Testament were written in Greek within a century after Jesus' life. Four Gospels and some letters of Paul were accepted as Scripture first. Other books were added, and by the mid-fourth century the twenty-seven books of the present New Testament were declared to be the canon of the New Testament. Other "apocryphal" books from the period of the early church are not canonical but merit study.

## BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

Matthew 7:12; 23:35  
Luke 16:29, 31; 24:44  
John 1:45  
Acts 28:23  
Romans 3:21  
2 Peter 3:15b, 16

## WORD LIST

Apocrypha  
Babylonians  
Canon  
Deuterocanonical  
Former Prophets  
Latter Prophets  
liturgical  
Septuagint  
Torah  
Writings



## How Did the Bible Come to Be?

### The Hebrew Scriptures

We have looked at our familiar Bible with its sixty-six books, thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament. Of course, the “Old” Testament was not called by that name until there was a “New” Testament. And it was Jesus’ Bible. It was written in Hebrew and contained just about the same books as we have today.

In **Luke 24:44** the risen Jesus says, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me *in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms* must be fulfilled.” This statement reflects how the Scriptures were organized in Jesus’ day and how they are still arranged in the Hebrew Bible today.

At this point look at Appendix A on page 51. We are going to discuss the three different ways the “books” of the Old Testament are arranged in this chart. Under “The Protestant Old Testament” you will see the books listed as you are accustomed to them, and as we listed them in Chapter One. In this chapter we are looking at the books as they were arranged in their Hebrew originals, so we are calling them “the Hebrew Bible.” Remember, however, that the earliest Christians accepted these books as sacred Scripture, so when we call them “the Old Testament,” they are indeed Christian Scriptures.

The heart of the Hebrew Scriptures is the Law. The Hebrew word for this part of the Scriptures is *Torah*, which means “instruction” or “regulation.” It includes the first five books of our Old Testament. (See the list of books of the Law in Chapter One.) In synagogues today every word of Torah is read during the year, and that reading is revered somewhat as the reading of the Gospel is in liturgical Christian churches (churches that follow a set order of worship).

Moses is the key person in these books, and he is credited with an important role in the collection of their content. For many centuries, however, the material was passed from generation to generation in oral form.

In the Hebrew Bible the “Prophets” number eight “books” (or scrolls). These books are divided into two parts, the “Former” and the “Latter” Prophets. The Former Prophets include our books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. (The “first” and “second” with Samuel and Kings came about when the contents were too long for single scrolls.) These are designated “prophet” books because prophets play important roles in this era of Hebrew history (notably Elijah, who confronted the wicked queen Jezebel). “Former” prophets are distinguished from “Latter” prophets because of their historical period (to be discussed in Chapter Three).

The Latter Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and “The Twelve.” We call “The Twelve” *minor prophets*, not because they are of minor importance, but because they are short enough that the Jews could put them all on one scroll. Note that Daniel is not reckoned among the Latter Prophets because that book was not yet written in the period of the major prophets.

The Law (Torah) probably reached its final form some time in the fifth century B.C. The books of the Prophets were agreed upon in the Hebrew community by Jesus’ era. Read **Matthew 7:12** and **John 1:45**. When Jesus speaks about “the law and the prophets,” we may assume he means the Jewish Scriptures of his day. Sometimes “Moses” is used to stand for the Law (as he was the key figure in those books); read **Luke 16:29, 31**. Paul also used the same way of referring to Scripture; read **Acts 28:23** and **Romans 3:21**.

The third group in the Hebrew Scriptures is the Writings. The book of Psalms is the most important of these (recall Luke 24:44). It became the hymnbook of the temple. The Writings occur at various places in our Old Testament. For example, five poetical books (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon) are placed together. The last book in the Hebrew Scriptures is Chronicles, a later review and editing of the history contained in Samuel and Kings. Read **Matthew 23:35**, where Jesus gives illustrations from the beginning and the end of Hebrew Scripture (Genesis 4:8 and 2 Chronicles 24:20-22). Several of the Writings were read on particular festival days.

## The Greek Old Testament and the Canon

In the sixth century B.C. a critical event occurred in the history of Israel. The Babylonians (from the Tigris-Euphrates area) conquered Judea and took many Jews into exile. In Babylon the Jews maintained their identity, including the use of the Hebrew language. One group of exiles, however, went to Egypt and eventually became a large colony in Alexandria. Greek was the principal language there, and it became the everyday language of the Jews. It is not surprising, therefore, that during the third and second centuries B.C. the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. This translation is known as the “Septuagint,” from the Greek word for “seventy,” because of a tradition that seventy scholars worked on it. By Paul’s day the Septuagint had spread widely in eastern Mediterranean lands, and in his letters Paul generally quotes from this Greek version.

Refer again to the lists in Appendix A. In the Septuagint several books were included that were never accepted into the Jewish Bible in Palestine. They were, of course, written in Greek. These books have been known traditionally as the “Apocrypha,” from a word meaning “hidden” or “concealed”—it later came to mean “put away.” All of them are important, and most of them are interesting. For example, First Maccabees contains the story about how Hanukkah, the Festival of Light, came about. Since that happened in the mid-second century B.C., the book is relatively late (about the same time as the writing of Daniel).

Some other books have survived that were loosely related to the Old Testament but were never accepted into either the Palestinian or the Alexandrian Scriptures. One of these, the book of Enoch, is quoted in Jude 14, 15. In Acts 17:28 Paul quotes a Greek poet and perhaps also a Greek philosopher (see if your study Bible has a note about this).

Near the end of the first century of our era, a body of Jewish leaders agreed on which books would be considered sacred Hebrew Scripture. Some books sparked considerable debate. You may be surprised to learn that the status of the book of Esther was controversial—perhaps because it does not contain the name of God. It does, however, tell the story behind the Festival of Purim. The accepted list of books is known as the *canon*, from a word meaning “measuring rod.” A modern term for the Apocrypha is “Deuterocanonical,” meaning a “second canon,” usually with the implication that it is “secondary.”

## The New Testament

The books of our New Testament were written in Greek, all within a century after Jesus' life. These are listed in Appendix B. By the middle of the second century the church was beginning to make some decisions about which books were accepted as Scripture. Our four Gospels and a number of letters of Paul were the first books agreed upon. Read **2 Peter 3:15b, 16**, where you will find a very early reference to Paul's letters. Beside mentioning specific books (such as the Gospels), early Christian writers quoted from books that were in general use.

There were a number of books available beside the ones finally received as canonical, and their value was debated. For example, there were Gospels of "Peter" and "According to the Hebrews." Works called the "Epistle of Barnabas" and the "Shepherd of Hermas" were highly regarded by some churches. In the year 367 a festival letter of a famous bishop, Athanasias, listed the twenty-seven books now accepted in our canon. Shortly after that there were several official confirmations of this list. This has been referred to as "the closing of the canon." One of the ancient tests for acceptance was that a book have some connection with one of the apostles. This criterion was not strictly applied. Luke's Gospel was accepted because Paul was considered to be an apostle, and Luke was his companion.

The sixty-six-book list was not universally accepted as binding, however, for some other books that were seriously considered for inclusion remained in popular use. These and other books constitute New Testament "apocrypha." One book that was discovered only about fifty years ago has received much attention, *The Gospel of Thomas*. It almost surely contains some genuine sayings of Jesus that are not in our four Gospels. Through the years—and today—not all Christian churches accept exactly the same list of books.

## For Further Study and Reflection

### Memory Bank

1. Review the names of the books of the Bible as assigned in Chapter One. It will aid your Bible study significantly to know this list perfectly.

## Research

1. Ask a rabbi about the use of Torah in the Jewish synagogue. What is “Simchat Torah”?
2. Check the word “prophet” in a dictionary. “Foretelling” is probably not the first definition. The Hebrew prophets were first of all “*forthtellers*,” persons who spoke out for God, often by divine inspiration. When they spoke for God to the people and this was directed to the future, it sometimes became *foretelling*.
3. What is the story behind the Festival of Purim?
4. Locate additional information about the Septuagint.
5. In a Bible dictionary read the article on “canon.” (Bible dictionaries will be discussed in Chapter Six.)

## Reflection

1. Imagine yourself a fourth-generation Jewish youth in Alexandria. Why would the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures be important to you?
2. Why would Paul prefer to use the Greek Old Testament?
3. Why is it important for Christians to include the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) in their Bible?
4. Should we accept other books into our biblical canon today? If so, what criteria would you use to evaluate the additions?