

WHY AND WHEN THE NEW TESTAMENT BECAME SCRIPTURE

1. INTRODUCTION

Gospels by Thomas, Philip, James and Peter, Acts of John and Peter, an Epistle by Barnabas, and Revelations by Peter and Paul.

'Why and when the New Testament was recognized as Scripture.'

'The Canon of Scripture'

(a) why these 27?

(b) when were they recognized?

Until the late first century, the word 'Scripture' meant only the books of the Old Testament; it was many years before 'Scripture' was extended to include what we know as the New Testament.

The word 'canon' meant, in New Testament times, a 'measuring rod', for judging whether something was straight, so the phrase 'the Canon of Scripture' means the defined group of 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament.

2. WHY?

(a) Marcion's truncated New Testament - 144 - edited Luke + 10 Pauline Letters

(b) Montanus' New Prophecies - 156 - 172 - new messages from God

(c) Diocletian's persecution - 304 - what is worth risking your life for?

The New Testament As It Gained Acceptance by the Early Church

200	250	300	400
New Testament used in the church at Rome (the "Muratorian Canon")	New Testament used by Origen	New Testament used by Eusebius	New Testament fixed for the West by the Council of Carthage
<p>Four Gospels</p> <p>Acts</p> <p>Paul's letters:</p> <p>Romans</p> <p>1 & 2 Corinthians</p> <p>Galatians</p> <p>Ephesians</p> <p>Philippians</p> <p>Colossians</p> <p>1 & 2 Thessalonians</p> <p>1 & 2 Timothy</p> <p>Titus</p> <p>Philemon</p> <p>James</p> <p>1 & 2 John</p> <p>Jude</p> <p>Revelation of John</p> <p>Revelation of Peter</p> <p>Wisdom of Solomon</p> <p>To be used in private, but not public, worship</p> <p>The Shepherd of Hermas</p>	<p>Four Gospels</p> <p>Acts</p> <p>Paul's letters:</p> <p>Romans</p> <p>1 & 2 Corinthians</p> <p>Galatians</p> <p>Ephesians</p> <p>Philippians</p> <p>Colossians</p> <p>1 & 2 Thessalonians</p> <p>1 & 2 Timothy</p> <p>Titus</p> <p>Philemon</p> <p>1 Peter</p> <p>1 John</p> <p>Revelation of John</p> <p>Disputed</p> <p>Hebrews</p> <p>James</p> <p>2 Peter</p> <p>2 & 3 John</p> <p>Jude</p> <p>The Shepherd of Hermas</p> <p>Letter of Barnabas</p> <p>Teaching of Twelve Apostles</p> <p>Gospel of the Hebrews</p>	<p>Four Gospels</p> <p>Acts</p> <p>Paul's letters:</p> <p>Romans</p> <p>1 & 2 Corinthians</p> <p>Galatians</p> <p>Ephesians</p> <p>Philippians</p> <p>Colossians</p> <p>1 & 2 Thessalonians</p> <p>1 & 2 Timothy</p> <p>Titus</p> <p>Philemon</p> <p>1 Peter</p> <p>1 John</p> <p>Revelation of John (authorship in doubt)</p> <p>Disputed but well known</p> <p>James</p> <p>2 Peter</p> <p>2 & 3 John</p> <p>Jude</p>	<p>Four Gospels</p> <p>Acts</p> <p>Paul's letters:</p> <p>Romans</p> <p>1 & 2 Corinthians</p> <p>Galatians</p> <p>Ephesians</p> <p>Philippians</p> <p>Colossians</p> <p>1 & 2 Thessalonians</p> <p>1 & 2 Timothy</p> <p>Titus</p> <p>Philemon</p> <p>Hebrews</p> <p>James</p> <p>1 & 2 Peter</p> <p>1, 2, & 3 John</p> <p>Jude</p> <p>Revelation of John</p> <p>To be excluded</p> <p>The Shepherd of Hermas</p> <p>Letter of Barnabas</p> <p>Gospel of the Hebrews</p> <p>Revelation of Peter</p> <p>Acts of Peter</p> <p>Didache</p>

3. FOUR CRITERIA

(a) A link to an Apostle

Matthew and John were no problem, as they were first-hand accounts. It was accepted that Mark had accompanied Peter on his travels; Peter's Greek wasn't fluent, so for some Greek-speaking audiences Peter preached in Aramaic and Mark interpreted for him. On Peter's death, martyred by the Emperor Nero in 64, Mark wrote down what he had heard Peter say about Christ. Luke were accepted because he also wrote Acts, much of which is about Paul, and Paul was accepted as an Apostle - the Apostle to the Gentiles. So Paul's Letters were accepted from very early on, before some of the Gospels were even written.

Books Debated for Inclusion in the New Testament Canon

QUESTIONED BOOK	REASONS GIVEN FOR ACCEPTANCE	REASONS GIVEN FOR EXCLUSION	RESULT
HEBREWS	Thought Pauline in East	Thought non-Pauline forgery in West	Accepted
JAMES	Thought genuine in East	Authorship questioned in West	Accepted
2 PETER	Petrine authorship	Authorship questioned Similarity of chapter 2 to Jude	Accepted
2-3 JOHN	Johannine authorship	Lack of citations in early writings	Accepted
JUDE	Early citations Apostolic authorship	Authorship questioned	Accepted
REVELATION	Widely recognized as Johannine	Questioned by Eusebius largely because of his opposition to chiliasm	Accepted
THE SHEPHERD OF HERMAS	Edifying contents Visions from God	Nonapostolic origin Late date	Excluded
DIDACHE	Record of genuine apostolic traditions	Uncertain origin Late date	Excluded
REVELATION OF PETER	Suspected Petrine authorship Similarity to Johannine Apocalypse	Authenticity doubted	Excluded

(b) Orthodoxy

If a writing didn't conform to the core teaching of the apostles, it was unacceptable. The yardstick of orthodoxy was the Rule of Faith - to be look at under heading 4 - on page 4.

(c) Antiquity When Montanists claimed in the mid to late second century that they had fresh revelations, the Church insisted that the only revelations worthy of inclusion in the Canon were those from the apostolic age - no later revelations could be called Scripture.

(d) Usage

How a book served the churches in worship and instruction played an important role in determining whether it became part of the Canon. The earliest record we have about Sunday services in local churches is from c150; a major part of the service was the public reading of 'the memoirs of the apostles' (that is the Gospels) and the letters of Paul.

Chapter 7. Concerning Baptism.

Concerning baptism, baptise this way: having first said all these things, baptise into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in running water. But if you have no running water, baptise in other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

Chapter 9. The Eucharist.

Now concerning the eucharist, give thanks this way.

First, concerning the cup: We thank thee, our Father, for the holy vine of David Thy servant, which You made known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory.

And concerning the broken bread:

We thank Thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge which You made known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever. Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever.

But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, unless they have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, ‘Give not that which is holy to the dogs.’

Chapter 11. Concerning Teachers and Prophets.

Whosoever comes and teaches you all these things that have been said before, receive him. But if the teacher himself turns and teaches another doctrine to the destruction of this, hear him not. ... But if he remains three days, he is a false prophet. And when he goes away, let him take nothing but bread. If he asks for money, he is a false prophet.

Chapter 12. Reception of Christians.

But receive everyone who comes in the name of the Lord, and prove and know him afterward; for you shall have understanding right and left. If he who comes is a wayfarer, assist him as far as you are able; but he shall not remain with you more than two or three days, if need be. But if he wants to stay with you, and is an artisan, let him work and eat. But if he has no trade, according to your understanding, see to it that, as a Christian, he shall not live with you idle. But if he wills not to do, he is a Christ-monger. Watch that you keep away from such.

Chapter 14. Christian Assembly on the Lord’s Day.

But every Lord’s Day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who is at odds with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned.

Chapter 15. Elders and Deacons

Appoint, therefore, for yourselves, elders and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful and proved; for they also render to you the service of prophets and teachers. Therefore do not despise them, for they are your honoured ones, together with the prophets and teachers.

4. RULE OF FAITH

Rule of faith in Lyons (Irenaeus c190), Carthage (Tertullian c200) and Alexandria (Origen c220)

Irenaeus

For the Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world. . . has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith:

in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all things that are in them;

and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation;

and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the incarnate ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His future manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father, to 'sum up all things' (Ephes. 1.10) and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord and God and Saviour and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, 'every knee should bow, of things in heaven. . . etc. (Phil. 2.10-11). 'and every tongue confess' and that He should execute just judgement towards all; that He may send 'spiritual likenesses' (Eph. 6.12), and the angels who transgressed and came into a state of rebellion together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into the everlasting fire; but may as an act of grace, confer immortality on the righteous and holy, and those who have kept his commandments, and have persevered in his love, some from the beginning, and others from their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory.

Tertullian

Now, as to this rule of faith. . . it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that

there is one only God, and that he is the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through his own Word, First of all sent forth;

that this Word is called his Son, and under the name of God, was seen in divers forms by the patriarchs, ever heard in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of God the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh, although he was God. . . He made flesh in her womb and, being born of her, lived as Jesus Christ; thenceforth he preached a new law and a new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles, was crucified, and rose again the third day;

He was caught up to the heavens, and sat down at the right hand of the Father;

He sent instead of Himself the power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe,

He will come again with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh.

This rule was taught by Christ, and raises among ourselves no questions except those which heresies introduce.

Origen (abridged)

. . . The holy apostles, when preaching the faith of Christ, took certain doctrines, those namely which they believed to be the necessary ones, and delivered them in the plainest terms to all believers. . . The kind of doctrines which are believed in plain terms through the apostolic teaching are as follows:

First, that God is one, who created and set in order all things, and who, when nothing existed, caused the universe to be. He is God from the first creation and foundation of the world, the God of all righteous men (OT heroes listed). This God in these last days, according to the precious announcements made through his prophets, sent the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then again: Christ Jesus, he who came to earth, was begotten of the Father before every created thing. . . in these last times he emptied himself and was made man, was made flesh, although he was God. . . He took to himself a body like our body, differing in this alone, that it was born of a virgin and the Holy Spirit. And this Jesus Christ was born and suffered in truth and not in mere appearance, and truly died our common death.

Moreover he truly rose from the dead, and after the resurrection companied with his disciples and was then taken up to heaven.

Then again the apostles delivered this doctrine, that the Holy Spirit is united in honour and dignity with the Father and the Son. . .

Next after this the apostles taught that the soul. . . will be rewarded according to its deserts after its departure from the world; for it will either obtain an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness. . . or it must be given over to eternal fire and torments. . . Further there will be a time for the resurrection of the dead. . .

(Origen then adds a number of further doctrines as apostolic: freewill, the struggle with the devil, the help of ministering angels in bringing about salvation; and observes a number of doubtful points which are open to investigation)

Note: a number of these excerpts leave out quotations from scripture for the sake of space.

5. WHEN was the New Testament recognized as Scripture?

- (a) The Gospels
- (b) Paul's letters - II Peter 3:16 refers to Paul's Letters as 'Scripture'
- (c) A 'New' Testament, c150
- (d) Origen of Alexandria, c250 - see Chart on page 1
- (e) Eusebius of Caesarea, c300 - see Chart on page 1
- (f) Not on the chart, Athanasius' Easter Letter of 367
- (g) The Council of Carthage (397) - the last chart on page 1

So, the New Testament was, humanly speaking, determined by general usage and usefulness, and recognized as such, not laid down by any authoritarian pronouncement. There was no formal act of 'Canonisation' of the New Testament - Christians simply recognized those writings which expressed the teaching of the apostles. Looking back now, we can see that the books of the New Testament are, in contrast to the Apocrypha, self-authenticating - there's something about them that's unique and rewarding:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16)

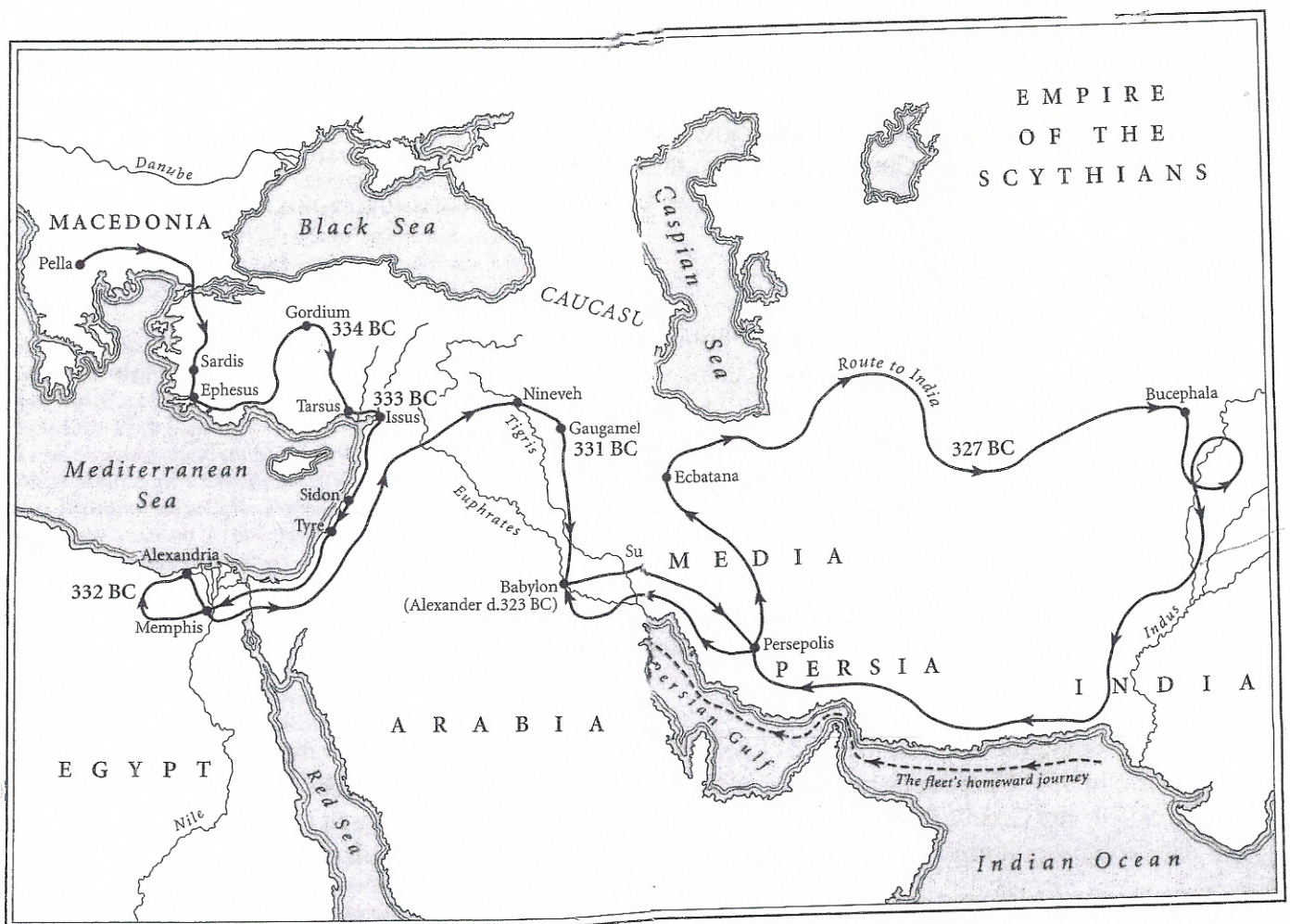
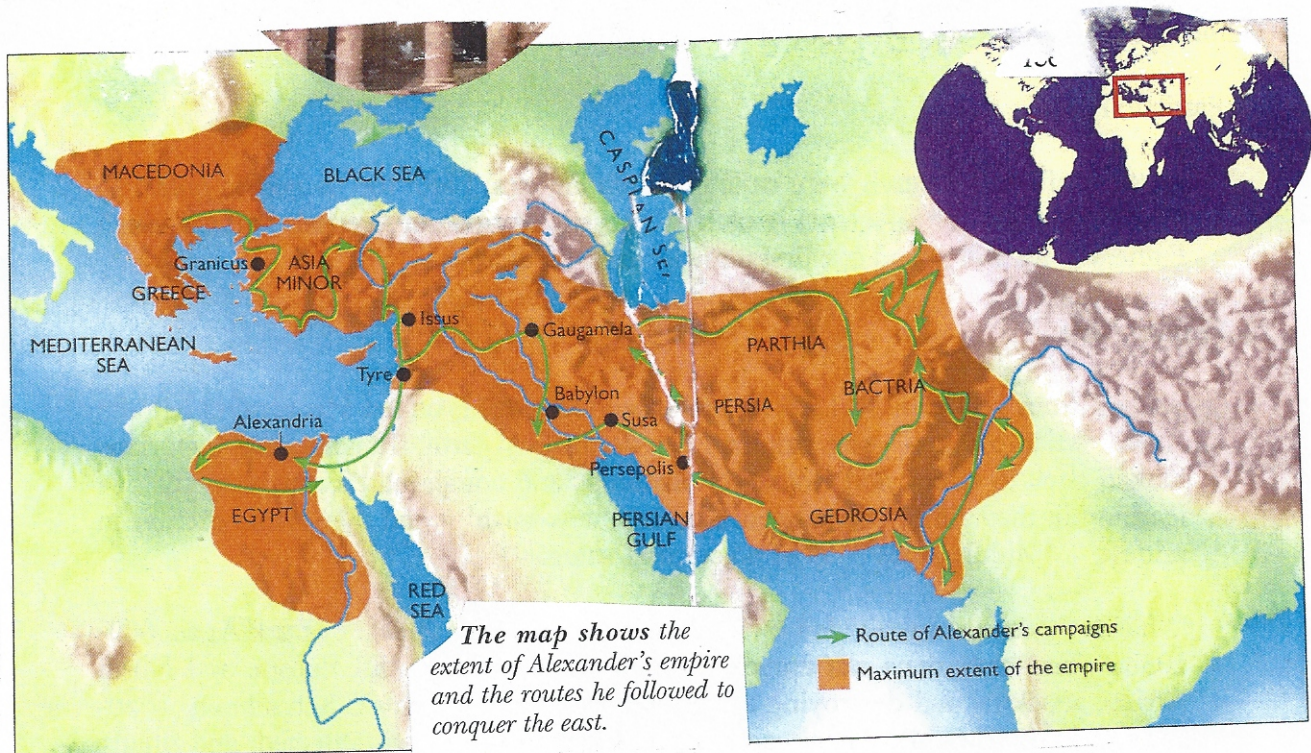
6. Why was the New Testament written in Greek?

Jesus and most of his first disciples were almost certainly tri-lingual. They spoke Aramaic and a few Aramaic words are scattered throughout the New Testament. They understood Hebrew, the language of the Jewish Scriptures. But to communicate widely, they also had to speak Greek, the language used throughout the Roman Empire. When Christ was crucified, Pilate's notice, fastened to the Cross, 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews', was in Aramaic (the local language), Greek (the trade language) and Latin (the first language of educated Romans).

Why was Greek so widespread?

300 years before Christ, the warrior Alexander the Great (BC 356-323) conquered the territory eastward from his native Greece to North India, including North Africa. Follow the arrows on the maps on the next page. His conquest was different from others, as he imposed his ideas as well as his army's physical presence. Greeks loved the arts (painting, architecture, poetry, drama) and the sciences (mathematics, astronomy, medicine). Conquered peoples were attracted to this and so learned to speak Greek; also, Alexander encouraged trade, so while Latin was the official language in the West of the Roman Empire, that is from Italy to the Atlantic, Greek had become the trade language throughout the Roman Empire by the time of Christ. Even the Old Testament, written originally in Hebrew, had been translated into colloquial Greek before Christ, called the Septuagint - to be looked at on page 7. So Christianity was born into a vast area with a common language; naturally, the apostles and Paul wrote in the language that almost everyone understood; early Christian missionaries did not need an interpreter, or to go to language school. It's hard to imagine Christianity spreading so rapidly if the whole Mediterranean area had not had this common language - seen by many as an illustration of Paul's words, that 'Christ came into the world at the right time': (Romans 5:6, Galatians 4:4). Other reasons for saying it was 'the right time' are (1) the Roman 'pax', which made travel easy, and (2) the network of Jewish synagogues, open to evangelists.

Alexander the Great's conquests eastward from his native Greece to North India – follow the arrows on both maps. The conquered territories learned to speak Greek for two reasons: (1) they admired Greek culture and wanted to emulate it and (2) Alexander encouraged trade, so Greek became the trade language throughout the Roman Empire.



7. Apocrypha

(a) A brief mention of the Old Testament Apocrypha is necessary, to distinguish it from the New Testament Apocrypha, which is quite different.

SEPTUAGINT

Jewish community in Egypt had Hebrew Bible translated into Greek, probably as early as C2 BC. It was known as Septuagint from Latin *septuaginta*, seventy, often abbreviated to Latin numbers LXX, because a legend grew up that it was work of seventy elders of Israel. Seven more Hebrew books were translated into Septuagint than there are in Hebrew Bible; these are now known as OT *Apocrypha*, which is Greek for 'hidden things' (asterisk on chart).

HEBREW BIBLE		PROTESTANT OLD TESTAMENT	ROMAN CATHOLIC OLD TESTAMENT (DOUAY VERSION)
Genesis		Genesis	Genesis
Exodus		Exodus	Exodus
Leviticus	LAW	Leviticus	Leviticus
Numbers		Numbers	Numbers
Deuteronomy		Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy
		Joshua	Josue
Joshua		Judges	Judges
Judges		Ruth	Ruth
Samuel		Samuel	Kings
Kings		Kings	Paralipomenon
Isaiah		Chronicles	Esdras
Jeremiah		Ezra	Nehemias
Ezekiel		Nehemiah	*Tobias
Hosea		Esther	*Judith
Joel	PROPHETS	Job	Esther
Amos		Psalms	Job
Obadiah		Proverbs	Psalms
Jonah		Ecclesiastes	Proverbs
Micah		Song of Solomon	Ecclesiastes
Nahum		Isaiah	Canticle of Canticles
Habakkuk		Jeremiah	*Wisdom of Soloman
Zephaniah		Lamentations	*Ecclesiasticus
Haggai		Ezekiel	Isaias
Zechariah		Daniel	Jeremias
Malachi		Hosea	Lamentations
		Joel	*Baruch
		Amos	Ezechiel
Psalms		Obadiah	Daniel
Proverbs		Jonah	Osee
Job		Micah	Joel
Ruth		Nahum	Amos
Song of Songs		Habakkuk	Abdias
Lamentations	WRITINGS	Zephaniah	Jonas
Ecclesiastes		Haggai	Micheas
Esther		Zechariah	Nahum
Daniel		Malachi	Habacuc
Ezra			Sophonias
Nehemiah			Aggeus
Chronicles			Zacharias

* = Books not found in Hebrew Bible or Protestant OT.

Malachi
*I and II Maccabees

Old Testament Apocrypha (continued)

The Greek-speaking Church used the Septuagint (Greek) translation as its 'Old Testament'. Then the whole Bible, both the Septuagint and the evolving New Testament, were translated from the Greek into Latin, but not very good Latin - it was slangy in parts. So c400 the Emperor of Rome - the Emperors were now Christian - commissioned a monk called Jerome to make a new Latin translation of the whole Bible. For the Old Testament, Jerome went back to the Hebrew original and not, as everyone else had done, simply translated from the Septuagint. Jerome discovered that there were only 39 books in the Hebrew Scriptures, so he insisted that they alone were canonical, but he also translated the extra books and called them the Apocrypha, Greek for 'hidden'. Jerome's translation became known as the Vulgate, Latin for 'commonly used', because Jerome used ordinary spoken Latin of his day, not classical Latin. It was a vast improvement on earlier translations, and the Church accepted the Vulgate in its entirety, 39 + 7 extra. The Roman Catholic Church still does - and usually prints the Apocrypha either between the two Testaments although sometimes the Old Testament Apocrypha is interleaved.

At the Reformation, the Reformers went back to the original documents - which was the prime reason for the Reformation, reading the New Testament in the original Greek without centuries of overlay. Going back also to the Hebrew Scriptures, they accepted only the original 39 books as authentic Old Testament Scripture.

(b) New Testament Apocrypha

Apocryphal Gospels

- The Gospel of Thomas
- The Gospel of Peter
- The Proto-Gospel of James
- The Infancy Gospel of Thomas
- The Gospel of the Hebrews

Apocryphal Acts

- The Acts of Peter
- The Acts of Paul
- The Acts of Thecla
- The Acts of John

Apocryphal Epistles

- Paul's Third Letter to the Corinthians
- The Correspondence between Paul and Seneca
- Paul's Letter to the Laodiceans
- The Epistle of the Apostles
- The Letter of Barnabus

Apocryphal Apocalypses

- The Revelation of Peter
- The Revelation of Paul

While the Old Testament Apocrypha was clearly defined, and is still used by the Roman Catholic Church, the documents forged in the names of Apostles, and known loosely as the 'New Testament Apocrypha', are not recognized by any mainstream Church, that is the Roman Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox and the Protestants, as part of the Bible..