1. Christianity develops its own canon of scriptures

Modern Christians call the Christian scriptures “the New Testament” (NT) in which “testament” = “covenant.” By this, they distinguish the Christian scriptures from the Hebrew Bible or “Old Testament.” To Christians, the Hebrew scriptures are about God’s covenant with Israel via Abraham and Moses, and the Christian scriptures are about God’s covenant with all people via the followers of Christ. Christians read the Old Testament (OT) as a foreshadowing of the NT, picking up on passages such as Jer. 31:33-34 as evidence of God’s intentions: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I shall make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah…. I shall put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” We believe that Jesus instituted the new covenant at the Last Supper: “Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:27-28, NRSV).

In its final form, the NT includes 27 canonical books: (1) the 4 Gospels, about the public career and teachings of Christ, composed 40-65 years after Jesus’s death; (2) Acts, a narrative about the birth and growth of Christian communities, composed by the author of the Gospel of Luke; (3) 13 letters to Christian communities and to followers, commonly attributed to Paul, that were written perhaps 20 years before the first Gospels; (4) a miscellany including the epistle to the Hebrews, the catholic (i.e., general) epistles, and Revelation. Except for Paul’s genuine letters, written ca. 50-62 CE, most of the New Testament was written in 70-100 CE, following the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The latest books are 1-2 Timothy and Titus (110-130 CE), and Jude and 2 Peter (130-150 CE).

It took about four centuries for the Christian canon to develop. Early Christianity was organized around communities, not around a centralized Church in Rome. These communities favored texts that were associated with the apostles and their followers.

- By the mid-second century, as 2 Peter 3:14-16 testifies, the epistles of Paul were considered canonical. These were 1 Thessalonians, 1-2 Corinthians, Romans, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and possibly 2 Thessalonians and Colossians. To these, Ephesians, 1-2 Timothy, and Titus were gradually added.

- In the 160’s, Justin Martyr (executed by the Romans in the 160’s) refers to the four Gospels as equal in status to the Hebrew scriptures. He also observes that the Christian scriptures were being read as part of the liturgy. But other gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas (re-discovered in 1945) also circulated in the first century and after.

- The other books of the New Testament were not fully accepted into the canon until about the 4th century. The first good evidence of the present-day canon is a letter by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, written in 367, listing the present-day 27 canonical books. Even so, there were differences among Christian groups for several hundred years. Interestingly, the story of Christ and the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11) does not

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1 CE = “Common Era,” meaning the way we count years in the Western world. It is a neutral equivalent of A.D. (Anno Domini, in the year of the Lord).

2 For example, a 5th c. Greek manuscript known as the Codex Alexandrinus includes 1-2 Clement (letters attributed to an early bishop of Rome); and the eastern churches of Alexandria and Antioch as well as the Syrian church rejected the Book of Revelation.
occur in the most ancient Bible manuscripts, and we don’t know how it came to be considered canonical.

- The final impetus towards settling the canon was the Vulgate Bible, which adopted the canon of texts listed in the letter by Athanasius. (Further see section 3 below.)

- The Christian version of the Old Testament was based on the Septuagint, which included books and passages not found in the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible: Tobias, Judith, Esther 10:4-16:24, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Daniel 3:24-9 and 13:1-14:42, and 1-2 Maccabees. The medieval Vulgate (roughly the years 500-1500) included the Prayer of Manasseh and 3-4 Esdras, but these were removed from the Vulgate by the Council of Trent (1545-63). At the Protestant Reformation, when the King James Version was made, Protestants in England adopted the Hebrew Bible as their Old Testament, relegating the just-mentioned Septuagint books, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 3-4 Esdras to the category of apocrypha (books once accepted as canonical but subsequently rejected.)

2. What has been left out of the Christian canon

The noncanonical writings are texts which competed with the 27 canonical books of the NT. Some are as old or older than the canonical books. Some are by authors of canonical books. For example, Paul refers to another of his epistles in 1 Cor. 5:9-11. As late as the 4th century, some Christian churches rejected books that now are considered canonical, such as the catholic epistles and Revelation, while accepting others that are no longer canonical. Some examples of noncanonical Christian writings that competed with canonical texts:

- **Gospels:** Gospel of Thomas (114 sayings of Jesus); Gospel of Peter (crucifixion, burial, and resurrection); Secret Gospel of Mark (variant version of canonical Mark).


- **Epistles:** Epistle of Barnabas (Paul’s mentor); 1 Clement (third bishop of Rome); Epistles of Ignatius (to various communities and people).

- **Apocalypses:** Shepherd of Hermas.

3. How Christianity preserved and transmitted the Bible

The language of the NT is Greek, the same language as the Septuagint used by Jews of the diaspora. The NT uses the Septuagint as its text of the Hebrew Bible when it cites it. Latin-speaking Christians began producing Latin translations of the Septuagint and the Greek Christian scriptures very early. Some of these survive, the most important being the *Vetus Latina*. Only individual books, not a complete Bible, survive in the VL version, fragments of which were being copied as late as the 13th c. Parts of it have also been reconstructed from early Christian texts that allude to it.

At various times in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, Eusebius Hieronymus (ca. 347-419), known as Jerome, translated the Gospels and the much of the Old Testament into Latin. Although at first his translation met

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3 Scholars think that either this letter is lost or that a fragment of it survives as 2 Cor. 6:14-17.1.

4 Indeed, our modern word “Bible” comes from the Greek *ta biblia*, which referred to the Hebrew or Christian scriptures. Ultimately, *ta biblia* is from Greek *biblos*, meaning originally a strip of papyrus and later an entire book.
resistance in some churches because it was new and unfamiliar, Jerome’s “Vulgate” Bible (from Latin vulgus, meaning common) used Latin well enough to become a stylistic model for 1000 years and more. The rest of the Bible was completed by a disciple of Jerome’s, perhaps Rufinus the Syrian, who completed the work and assembled the various translations made by Jerome into the Vulgate. The oldest complete Vulgate Bible manuscript is the Codex Amiatinus, from about the year 700, written in Northumbria, England.

Nevertheless, the Vulgate existed in more than one form. Individual manuscripts differ from one another textually, despite the obvious care that scribes took when copying the sacred page, and in the order of the Biblical books. Italy, Spain, Gaul (the Roman province before it was called France), and Ireland all had their own recensions (technical term for variant text). In the time of Charlemagne (9th c.), the English scholar Alcuin undertook to correct the versions he knew. The text that he produced became the basis for the 13th century “Paris Bible,” which in turn was the first Bible printed by Gutenberg (Mainz, 1455); it was then authorized by the Council of Trent (1546), and then by Popes Sixtus V (1590) and Clementine VIII (1592) as the so-called Sixto-Clementine Vulgate. A new edition, which is the Church’s current official Bible, was authorized by Pope John Paul II in 1979. (Further see The National Catholic Register for 9/5/2017 at http://www.ncregister.com/blog/jimmy-akin/is-the-vulgate-the-catholic-churchs-official-bible)

**Sources:**

1. **The Christian canon:**

2. **Noncanonical Christian writings:**

3. **Christian preservation and transmission of the Bible:**