

# how we got the bible

The Bible is not a single book, but a collection of 66 books written over more than a millennium. There are histories, poetry, letters and more all within the two divisions we now call the Old and New Testaments. This six-week course will look at the process of going from oral traditions to scrolls and parchment to our modern Bible.

## THE CANON

The Bible sets the bounds for orthodox beliefs for Christians around the world. While some churches describe themselves as “Bible believing,” one would be hard pressed to find Christian churches that reject the Bible outright. In truth, Christians differ on how they interpret the Bible, while the Bible itself is taken as a given. However, it was not until 397 A.D., more than 350 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, that the church officially set a canon of scripture, or an official list of what is in and what is out. The 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament had been fairly well set for some time, but there were some alternatives rejected along the way. A few definitions will help give a starting place for our journey:

## GLOSSARY

**Apocrypha**—These are books from the intertestamental period (written between the Old and New Testaments), which while not considered scripture, are suggested for reading to aid understanding of the context of the times. These are found in the New Revised Standard Bible and in some other translations.

**Canon**—This is from the Greek *kanon*, meaning a rule or measuring stick. Canon can refer in church terms to any decisions of a church council. With regards scripture, the canon is the official list of the books of the Bible. The canon was not formalized until the Council of Carthage in 397 A.D.

**Dead Sea Scrolls**—Scrolls and fragments discovered between 1947 and 1960 in seven sites near the Qumran community along the Dead Sea in Israel. There are remains of more than 750 Hebrew,

Aramaic, and Greek documents, dating from the 3rd century B.C. to 50 A.D. These documents include texts found in the current Bible together with documents not found in scripture.

**Gnosticism**—Gnostics taught that they had special “gnosis” or knowledge passed down from a secret tradition teaching that the spirit was all good and the flesh and material things were bad. Gnostics taught that Jesus was a spirit-being who only appeared to be human. Writings countering these claims are in John’s epistles. Gnosticism was fully rejected by the end of the 2nd century A.D.

**Jamnia**—An assembly of Jewish elders took place in this Palestinian coastal town (sometimes referred to by the Hebrew name, Jabneh) around 90 A.D. This is reported by some scholars (particularly from 1900-1960, but still found today) as the time and place where the Jews canonized the Hebrew scriptures. Jews had likely closed their canon of scripture two centuries earlier.

**JEDP**—Scholars working with the first five books of the Bible in the mid-19th century noticed the variety of styles of writing and categorized the texts as Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomist (D) and Priestly (P). In 1885, Julius Wellhausen put forward a four-source hypothesis for the creation of the Torah and suggested a reasoned dating for the four sources, beginning the modern era of biblical studies.

**Q**—From the German word *Quelle*, meaning “source,” this is a hypothetical text which accounts for material in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which was not also found in Mark.

**Septuagint**—The most influential early translation of the Hebrew Scripture. 72 translators are said to have worked simultaneously around 250 B.C. and created identical translations of the Hebrew. Septuagint comes from the word for 70. This was the version of the Bible most frequently quoted in our New Testament.

**Tanakh**—This is the Jewish term for what Christians call the Old Testament. It is an acronym from the Hebrew words Torah (“teaching” or “law”), Nevi’im (“prophets”) and Kethuvim (“writings”). The Tanakh contains the same 39 books as the Christian Old Testament, though the order is different. Many Jews today do use the term Bible when referring to the Tanakh.



# AN OUTLINE OF THE CLASS

Week	General Topic
1	Introduction to the canon and how we got it <i>Who set the canon, when, and why</i>
2	Old and New Testament sources <i>JEDP, Q, and more</i>
3	The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library <i>The Essenes and their texts</i> <i>The Gospel of Thomas and other recent hits</i>
4	Some more alternatives <i>The Didache, Infancy Thomas, The Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Diatesseron</i>
5	The canonical process revisited <i>Jamnia, the Muratorian fragment, Eusebius, Athanasius, and the Council at Carthage</i>
6	Closing thoughts on canonization <i>Considering Thomas—Five Gospels or Four?</i> <i>The Jesus Seminar and a canon within a canon.</i> <i>Should the canon expand or contract?</i> <i>What good is a canon?</i>

**King of Peace**  
Episcopal Church — Kingsland, Georgia

P.O. Box 2526 ♦ Kingsland, Georgia 31548  
[www.kingofpeace.org](http://www.kingofpeace.org)

# how we got the BIBLE



A SIX-WEEK STUDY