I understand that the people who collected the sacred writings into what we now call the Bible were led by the Holy Spirit. But what criteria did they use to decide which books belonged? I've also heard that some writings, like the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Thomas, were rejected. Why were they excluded?

ANSWER:

It's important to recognize that the Bible is not merely a human compilation, but the result of divine inspiration. The 66 books of the Bible—39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament—were included not by accident or political maneuvering, but through the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit.

> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.
>
> (2 Timothy 3:16, ESV)

Even though God can act independently, He often chooses to

work through people, using them as instruments to fulfill His will (see Romans 12:1-2, Exodus 31:1-3). The process of identifying and preserving the canon of Scripture is one such divine act carried out through faithful servants.

1. The Old Testament Canon – 39 Books

The Old Testament was recognized and preserved by faithful Jewish scholars and scribes, especially after the Babylonian exile. The books were accepted based on their prophetic origin, historical accuracy, doctrinal purity, and long-standing use in temple worship.

Key Facts:

The Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy), attributed to Moses, was considered foundational and authoritative from the start.

> Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord.
>
> (Exodus 24:4, ESV)

Books like Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles were preserved because they recorded Israel’s divine history.

Prophetic books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel were recognized because their prophecies were fulfilled and consistent with earlier Scripture.

Wisdom literature, such as Psalms and Proverbs, were included because they aligned with the fear of the Lord and the truth of God’s character.

Jesus Himself affirmed the authority of the Old Testament, often quoting from it. He referred to “the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms” as the threefold division of the Hebrew Scriptures:

> These are my words that I spoke to you… that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.
>
> (Luke 24:44, ESV)

2. The New Testament Canon – 27 Books

The New Testament books were written in the first century by apostles or close companions of apostles (such as Luke and Mark). These writings were recognized by early Christians not because of church councils, but because of their apostolic authority, doctrinal consistency, spiritual impact, and wide use among the churches.

> You were built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.
>
> (Ephesians 2:20, ESV)

Apostolic Letters Circulated Early:

Paul’s epistles were already being copied and read publicly during his lifetime.

> And when this letter has been read among you, have it also

> read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.
>
> (Colossians 4:16, ESV)

Even the Gospels were treated as Scripture early on. Paul’s quote in 1 Timothy 5:18 cites both the Old Testament and the Gospel of Luke:

> For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.
>
> (1 Timothy 5:18, ESV; cf. Luke 10:7)

This confirms that the Gospels were already recognized as Scripture in the first generation of the Church.

3. Criteria for Recognizing Inspired Books

Early Church leaders used several key criteria when discerning

whether a book belonged in the canon:

1. Apostolic Origin – Was it written by an apostle or under apostolic authority?

2. Universal Acceptance – Was it widely recognized by the early Church across various regions?

3. Doctrinal Consistency – Did it agree with the known teachings of Christ and the apostles?

4. Spiritual Authority – Did it bear the witness of the Holy Spirit in its message and impact?

5. Harmony with Scripture – Did it quote or align with Old Testament truths?

Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into all truth:

> When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the

> truth…
>
> (John 16:13, ESV)

This guidance was evident not only in writing the New Testament, but also in the Church’s recognition of those writings.

4. What About the “Lost” or Rejected Books?

Some writings, like the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Peter, were excluded because they did not meet the biblical criteria. They were often written long after the apostles had died, were not widely accepted, and contained false teachings, often influenced by Gnosticism—a heretical movement that denied Christ’s full humanity or divinity.

Paul warned of such distortions:

> But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

> (Galatians 1:8, ESV)

These writings were never part of the true Christian tradition and were rejected because they did not bear the mark of divine inspiration.

5. The Role of Church Councils

The Council of Carthage in A.D. 397 formally listed the 66 books we now have in the Bible. But these councils did not create the canon—they recognized and affirmed what God had already made clear to His Church through the Holy Spirit.

> Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.
>
> (Psalm 119:89, ESV)

Conclusion:

The formation of the Bible was not a random human project, but a sovereign work of God. Through the Holy Spirit, God ensured that only the inspired, authoritative, and life-giving books would be preserved for His people. Today, the 66 books of the Bible stand as a complete, trustworthy, and divinely preserved testimony of God’s revelation to humanity.

> The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.
>
> (Isaiah 40:8, ESV)

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