

BIBLE STUDY

Did the Apostles know that what they were writing would become books of the Bible, and who decided what writings would be included in the Bible?

This is a question that is more common than one would think; and thanks to some research and advice from my close friend and pastor, William Attaway, we offer the following explanation in hopes it will help you better understand how God's Holy Word came into being and the role played by the Apostles.

It's true that the New Testament wasn't around in Jesus' day. In fact, it wasn't officially "canonized" until 367 AD. However, the Old Testament was firmly established during this period. Jesus would have learned to read from, and been taught from, the entire Old Testament, from Genesis to Chronicles (a different order applies for the Hebrew Bible, but all the same books are there).

Jesus refers at times to the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, which was the way that the Jews would refer to the various parts of the Old Testament (i.e., by its divisions). This demonstrates that the entire Old Testament was known to, and accepted by, Jesus and the Apostles as Scripture. The rabbi's finalized the Old Testament canon in 90 AD, but it was fixed in the culture prior to that, likely decades before the time of Jesus. So that's the Old Testament part of it — they believed in much more than just the first 5 books.

Now on to the New Testament. Although the Apostles most likely did not consider their writings to be on the same level as those of the Old Testament, God in His wisdom has nevertheless included them. When books were considered by various church leaders and councils for inclusion or exclusion from the New Testament canon, there were 5 criteria that were applied:

1. Authorship by an Apostle or a close associate
2. General recognition, i.e., it was accepted by the majority of churches
3. It possessed an inherent spiritual quality or authority (i.e., it changed lives)
4. It was composed in antiquity (during the New Testament time period)
5. It was orthodox, i.e., it adhered to the apostolic faith; thus, heretical books were excluded

Additionally, some books were rejected, not because they were heretical, but because they did not meet one of the above criteria. Examples of these include The Shepherd of Hermas, 1 Clement, Didache, etc.

Before the canon was "finalized" in 367 AD, when a book was included by churches, it was because that book had intrinsic spiritual value. I believe that God's Spirit superintended this process from start to finish. So, while men "chose" some books and not others, the "choosing" was under God's authority, including the books that He wanted included in His Word. We can trust the Bible as we have it, because God's Spirit guided these church leaders and councils in their deliberations and decisions.

In Christ,

Wes