

Don Stewart :: Why Are the Books of the Bible Placed in a Particular Order or Sequence?

Why Are the Books of the Bible Placed in a Particular Order or Sequence?

Why the Bible Is So Special – Question 7

Although Christians believe that the sixty-six books of the Bible are all part of sacred Scripture, the books are not arranged in any God-given order. The reasons for the way they are variously arranged are as follows:

The Old Testament (Protestant Order)

According to the Protestant order, the books of the Old Testament are divided along a topical arrangement. They are divided into five sections. This is for the sake of convenience. The usual Protestant order is as follows: the Law, History, Poetry, Major Prophets and Minor Prophets.

This division goes back to the time the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek. This translation, known as the Septuagint (which means seventy and is abbreviated LXX), began in the third century before Christ. Jerome, the scholar who translated the Old Testament into Latin in the fourth century A.D., also adapted this division. The present English division follows Jerome.

The Hebrew Division of Scripture

The traditional number of the books contained in the Hebrew Scripture is twenty-four. First century writer Flavius Josephus said the Jews recognized twenty-two sacred books. Most likely he placed Ruth with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah. Both the Protestant division and the Hebrew division contain the exact same books, no more, no less. The only difference is in the way in which these books are divided.

An apocryphal book, called Second Esdras, which was written at the end of the first century A.D., records what is known as the “Ezra legend.” In it, we find the number of books listed as twenty-four.

There was also another ancient Hebrew division where the books were numbered at twenty-seven. Again, the contents were exactly the same as those divisions that had twenty-two and twenty-four books. They were merely divided differently.

Modern Hebrew Bibles have thirty-six books. The books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles are considered one book, not two. The Protestant Bible divides Samuel, Kings and Chronicles into two books following the Septuagint.

The reason that the Septuagint divided these three books into six books was for practical reasons; they could not all fit on to one scroll. The Hebrew text does not contain vowels, and thus it is much shorter than the Greek text. Therefore, the entire book could be put onto one scroll.

However, the Greek language contains vowels and thus two scrolls were needed to record the entire book. Hence, we end up with First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings and First and Second Chronicles. Again, we have the exact same text; the only difference is the way it is divided.

There is something else that should be noted. The terms, “Major Prophets” and “Minor Prophets” are derived from the size of the writings—it has nothing to do with their importance. The Major Prophets are longer writings than the Minor Prophets.

Some Groups Accept More Old Testament Books than Protestants and Jews

The Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopic Church add a number of books to the Old Testament that are not accepted by the Protestants or by the Jews. As far as the books added by the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, these works are known as the “Old Testament Apocrypha” by Protestants and Jews, and “Deuterocanonical books,” or books added to the canon, by the Roman Catholic Church.

In our course on the “Canon of Scripture,” we detail the reasons as to why the Roman Catholic Church accepts these works as Scripture and why Protestantism and Judaism reject them. We will discover that there are no good reasons for accepting these extra books as part of Holy Scripture.

The Eastern Orthodox Church adds three additional books that the Roman Catholic Church does not consider to be sacred Scripture; the Russian Orthodox Church adds four extra books, while the Ethiopic Church adds five books.

The Hebrew Bible Today Has Three Major Divisions

The modern Hebrew Bible has a different structure than the English Bible. The grouping of books is according to their literary character. The Hebrew Bible divides the Scripture into three divisions—the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The Hebrew terms are *Torah*, *Nebhiim* and *Kethubiim*. The acronym TeNaKh is used to describe the entire collection (*Torah*, *Nebhiim* and *Kethubiim*).

One note of interest is that certain books of history, Joshua through Kings, are called books of prophecy. The reason this is so is because history and prophecy are so intermingled in these written works. There is the historical event recorded and then the divine explanation, or meaning, given for the event.

There May Be Early Testimony to the Threefold Division of the Old Testament

There is some question as to whether there was the threefold division of the Old Testament, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings, with the exact same books in each section, at the time of Christ. The first clear testimony to this threefold division, with the same contents in each section of the Old Testament, is about a century *after* Christ.

Some have argued that earliest testimony to the threefold division of the Old Testament, with the same books in each section, actually goes back two hundred years before the time of Christ. It is found in the prologue to the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus; written about 180 B.C. However, it is not certain that this work testifies to this same threefold division with the same books in each of these three sections.

First century historian, Flavius Josephus, has a threefold division of the Old Testament, but it does not contain the same books in each section as does the modern division of Scripture.

Jesus referred to a threefold division of the Old Testament. We read about this in Luke's gospel:

He [Jesus] said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." ([Luke 24:44](#) TNIV)

He called the last part "the Psalms." It is possible that only the Book of Psalms, by itself, constituted a third division of the Old Testament. All of the other books were either in the Law or the Prophets.

Philo of Alexandria, who lived in the first century A.D., mentioned the three different sections of the Old Testament (*The Contemplative Life*, 25). Like Jesus, he calls the third section "the Psalms." Again, what we may have in this third division is only the Book of Psalms and not all the books that eventually made up the third division of the Hebrew canon. The evidence is not that clear and scholars are divided on how to understand it.

The Usual Division Was into Two Sections: Law and Prophets

The Old Testament was usually divided into two sections—the Law and the Prophets. This division consisted of the Books of Moses, the Law and all the books that came after Moses. Jesus referred to this division. In the Sermon on the Mount, we read the following:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. ([Matthew 7:12](#) TNIV)

The New Testament uses both the twofold division, as well as the threefold division in referring to the Old Testament books. However, as stated, it is uncertain that the modern threefold division was used during New Testament times with the same books in each of the three sections.

The Old Testament Books Are Divided Differently by Jews and Christians

It is clear that the order of the Old Testament books has not always been the same. In addition, both the Jews and the Christians have divided the books differently. We can sum up the various divisions of the Old Testament as follows:

Ancient Hebrew Division According to Josephus (22 Books)

The ancient Hebrew division has twenty-two books. The Book of Ruth was probably placed with Judges, while Lamentations was placed with Jeremiah. This division is testified to by Josephus as well as by the early church father Origen. It is possible that the division into twenty-two books was to symbolize the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Ancient Hebrew Division According to Second Esdras, the Ezra Legend (24 Books)

Another ancient Hebrew division, found in a work called Second Esdras, lists the number of books at twenty-four. Again, we have the same content, just a different way of dividing them.

Ancient Hebrew Division According to Jerome (27 Books)

The fourth century Bible translator Jerome mentions another ancient Hebrew division where the books are numbered at twenty-seven.

Modern Hebrew Division (36 Books)

Modern Hebrew division is thirty-six books. The Twelve Minor Prophets are not considered as one book, but as separate books in the modern division.

Protestant Division (39 Books)

The Protestant division has thirty-nine books. They contain the exact same content as the ancient and modern Hebrew divisions; the differences are in the way the books are counted.

Though the divisions are different, these books contain the exact same content. Therefore, the Jews and Protestants agree on the extent of the Old Testament canon.

More Books Are Added by the Roman Catholics, the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox and the Ethiopic Church

The Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox, or Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as the Ethiopic Church, add more books to the Old Testament than do the Jews and

Protestants. These can be listed as follows:

Roman Catholic Division (46 Books)

The Roman Catholic division has forty-six books in the Old Testament. This is because the Old Testament Apocrypha, consisting of seven books, is added to the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Scripture. With the addition of these books, the total comes to forty-six separate books.

Eastern; Greek Orthodox Division (49 Books)

The Eastern Orthodox Church, like the Roman Catholic Church, adds the seven books from the Apocrypha to the Old Testament. They also seemingly add three other books that the Roman Catholic Church does not. The reason we say “seemingly” is because they are somewhat vague on the exact status of these extra books.

Russian Orthodox Division (50 Books)

The Russian Orthodox Church adds the same books to the Old Testament as the Roman Catholic Church. In addition, four other books that Roman Catholics do not accept as canonical are also seemingly added to their Old Testament. Like the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church is also vague on the exact number of books which make up the Old Testament.

The Ethiopic Church Division (51 Books)

The Ethiopic Church accepts the same forty-nine books as does the Eastern, or Greek Orthodox Church, as well as adding two others; the Book of Jubilees and the Book of Enoch. They are the only major Christian community that accepts these two books as part of Old Testament Scripture.

The Thirty-Nine Books of the Old Testament Are Not in Dispute

To sum up, there is no dispute among the Christians with respect to the thirty-nine books which are presently contained in the Old Testament. All agree that these books belong in Holy Scripture. The question is: are there additional books that should also be considered divinely inspired and be added to the Old Testament?

The Division of New Testament Scripture

We will now consider the New Testament division of Scripture. Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy accept the same thirty-nine books as divinely inspired Scripture; there are no differences between them.

The Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox division of the New Testament is as follows:

Observations on the Present Division of Scripture

There are a number of things that should be noted about the present division of Scripture that is found in printed Bibles. They include the following:

1. THERE IS NO DIVINE ORDER TO THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

To begin with, there is no divine or sacred order in which the books of the Old Testament are to be placed. It is only in modern times that the books have been placed in a consistent order. The reason has to do with the invention of printing. Once the Old Testament began to be printed, the order of the books became somewhat standardized.

The order of the books for the Old Testament in the English Bible is derived from the Latin Vulgate. It was the standard translation for western Christianity for a thousand years. In the Old Testament, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint, is usually seen as the basis of the order of the books which are found in the Vulgate. Yet, the manuscripts of the Septuagint have much variation in them.

The Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Old Testament usually have the same order for the five books of Moses and for the four books of the prophets, or history, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, which come after the Books of Moses. Yet, this is not always the case. For example, the Syriac Peshitta, an ancient translation of the Old Testament, has the Book of Job between the Books of Moses and the Book of Joshua. This occurred because it was believed that Moses wrote the Book of Job.

We also find that there was no settled order in the remaining books of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew order is different from the Greek order. The Hebrew order consists of the Law, Prophets and Writings, while the Greek order has the Law, History, Poetry and Prophets. English versions have followed the Greek order of the books, through the Latin, rather than the Hebrew order.

Consequently, today we find the printed Hebrew texts of the Old Testament having a different order than the books which are found in the English versions. The contents are the same but the order of the books is different. Therefore, there is no proper or divine order in which we are to read or study the Old Testament books.

2. THERE IS NO SACRED ORDER OR SEQUENCE FOR THE BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The same problem arises with the New Testament books. The twenty-seven books are not placed in the order in which they were written. The order is more logical than chronological. However, this order is not always consistently found in the ancient manuscripts. Indeed, in the existing Latin manuscripts that contain parts of the New Testament we find almost three hundred different sequences for the books!

The first known listing of our present twenty-seven New Testament books is contained in an Easter letter written and sent out by the church Father Athanasius in A.D. 367. In his list, the general or universal letters follow the Book of Acts and the Book of Hebrews follows Second Thessalonians. The

first list of the New Testament books in the order most people are familiar with is found in the writings of Amphilocius of Iconium in A.D. 380.

When the books were written on individual scrolls, their sequence did not matter. The various scrolls were kept in a chest or box called a *capsa*. However, once the codex, or book form, was invented in the second century A.D., the order, or sequence, became more of an issue.

3. THE ORDER OF THE GOSPELS IS BASED UPON THE ASSUMED ORDER IN WHICH THEY WERE WRITTEN

The common or traditional order of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is based upon the way the four gospels are found in the great majority of manuscripts of the New Testament. Matthew is usually the first, followed by Mark, then Luke and John the last.

For most of the history of the church, this was the order in which people believed they were written. However, many modern scholars now assume that Mark was written first. But this is by no means certain. To the contrary, every ancient source testifies that Matthew was the first gospel written. Whatever the case may be, there is no “divine” order to the four gospels.

Indeed, there are at least eight other sequences in which we find the four gospels in the various manuscripts of the New Testament. For example, in some manuscripts written in the fifth century, the order is Matthew, John, Mark and Luke. Since Matthew and John were the only two apostles among the four gospel writers, it is easy to understand why some would place them before the other written gospels. Interestingly, Luke’s gospel is *never* placed first in any of the manuscripts and Matthew’s gospel is *never* placed last.

4. THE BOOK OF ACTS IS USUALLY PLACED AFTER THE FOUR GOSPELS

Since the Book of Acts is the transitional book from the gospels to the New Testament letters, it was usually placed after the four gospels. However, this is not always the case. *Codex Sinaiticus*, the oldest complete Greek manuscript of the New Testament, as well as a sixth century manuscript, *Codex Fuldensis*, places the Book of Acts after the letters of Paul. Interestingly, this sequence is found in the first printed Greek New Testament; volume five of the Complutensian Polyglot printed in 1514. This again underscores the fact that there is no divine sequence, or order, of the New Testament books.

5. THE LETTERS OF PAUL ARE NOT ALWAYS PLACED BEFORE THE UNIVERSAL LETTERS

There is still more. In the present printed editions of the New Testament in the Western Church, the letters of Paul are placed before the general or universal letters. In the Eastern Church, this is reversed—the general or universal letters come before Paul’s writings in the printed editions. Indeed, almost all the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament have the universal letters directly *after* the Book of Acts and before the letters of Paul.

This is likely due to the fact that the universal letters were addressed to all believers, while Paul’s letters were written to specific churches as well as private individuals. In addition, three of the authors of the Catholic letters, James, Peter and John, were considered “pillars” of the church. On the other hand,

according to his own testimony, Paul was the least of the apostles. This could be part of the reason why his letters came after the universal letters.

6. THE PRESENT ORDER OF PAUL'S WRITINGS IS SEEMINGLY BASED UPON THEIR SIZE

The present order of the thirteen letters of the Apostle Paul is not based upon when they were written, but rather it is seemingly based according to their length. The Book of Romans is the longest letter that Paul wrote to the churches, while Second Thessalonians is the shortest. The only exception to this is Ephesians, which is slightly longer than Galatians. First Timothy is the longest letter that Paul wrote to an individual, while Philemon is the shortest.

However, this usual order of Paul's writings is not consistently found in biblical manuscripts. There are about twenty different arrangements of Paul's letters that have been found in biblical manuscripts.

7. THE UNIVERSAL LETTERS ARE NOT ALWAYS IN THE SAME SEQUENCE

Like the other grouping of the New Testament, the order in which we find the general, or universal, letters is not always the same in New Testament manuscripts. They were commonly found in the sequence of James, Peter, John and Jude. This sequence is the same in which we find these names listed in the Book of Galatians. Paul wrote:

And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.
([Galatians 2:9 NKJV](#))

We should note that "Cephas" is the Aramaic name for Peter.

Thus, the listing of these three universal letters in this particular sequence may have been influenced by the order in which Paul listed these men.

In the Western church, the supremacy of Peter eventually came to be an important doctrine. Thus, we find Peter's writings listed *first* among the universal letters.

8. THE BOOK OF HEBREWS IS FOUND IN NUMEROUS PLACES

While the Book of Hebrews is classified as one of the universal letters, it is found in a number of different places in the manuscripts of the New Testament; often with the letters of Paul. In most of the Greek manuscripts we find Hebrews following Philemon. In the oldest surviving manuscript copy that contains the Book of Hebrews, P46, it is found after the Book of Romans. In a number of ancient manuscripts, Hebrews stands between the Second Thessalonians and First Timothy.

Part of the reason can be attributed to the confusion over who authored Hebrews. Many attributed it to Paul and thus placed it somewhere among Paul's letters. It has been speculated that at an early time, Hebrews was kept in a box, or *capsa*, with Paul's letters. Therefore, it was assumed that Paul was the

actual author. Whatever the case may be, Hebrews has an unsettled history in its placement among the New Testament books.

9. THE BOOK OF REVELATION WAS USUALLY PLACED LAST AMONG THE BOOKS LISTED

The Book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse, was usually placed as the final book in the New Testament manuscripts. However, this was not always the case. In a few manuscripts, it is placed after the four gospels. This occurred because it contains the words of Christ which were written to the seven churches. Consequently, it seemed appropriate to put a book with the actual words of Christ after the four gospels.

Therefore, as we consider the position of the books of the New Testament, we find that the five main groupings: Gospels, Acts, Letters of Paul, Universal or Catholic Letters and Revelation, are not always in the same order. In addition, the various books that are found in each of these groupings are likewise not always in the same sequence. Evidently, it was not a great concern to the believers as to the order or sequence in which they placed or read the various books of the New Testament.

10. GENESIS AND REVELATION ARE IN THE RIGHT POSITION IN THE PRINTED TEXTS

From the above evidence, we can conclude that the books of the Bible, as found in printed English editions, are not in any sacred order, but rather are usually found in a logical order. However, two of them, Genesis and Revelation, should stand in their present position. The Book of Genesis must be the first book of Scripture because it records the beginning of all created things. In the same manner, the Book of Revelation should stand last because it chronicles the end of all things that presently exist as well as the promise of a new heaven and a new earth.

11. THE TITLES OF THE BOOKS ARE BASED UPON THEIR MAIN CHARACTER, CONTENTS, LITERARY FORM OR PEOPLE ADDRESSED

Not only is there no such thing as a sacred order or sequence for the books of Scripture, there is also no such thing as a sacred or divine name or title for these books. Originally, the books did not have a title written at the beginning of the work. However, there was probably some notation made on the outside of the scroll to indicate either who wrote it or what the writing was about.

For the most part, the English titles of the various Old Testament books are derived from the Latin Vulgate. These titles were translated from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.

However, the titles of the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture, or the Books of Moses, differ from the English titles. The Hebrew titles are based upon the first few words in the text. For example, in Hebrew, Genesis is called "In the beginning," Exodus is titled, "These are the names," Leviticus, "And he called," Numbers is "In the wilderness" and Deuteronomy, "These are the words." The English titles of these first books come to us through the Latin Vulgate by way of the Septuagint.

Other Old Testament books are based upon the names of the main characters, such as Ruth or Esther, or the contents of the book, such as Judges, Kings and Chronicles, or the author of the book, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel or Jeremiah. The Psalms and Proverbs are named after their literary form; they contain songs and wise sayings.

In the New Testament, we find that the four gospels were named after the individuals whom it is believed authored the works; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Properly, we should speak of the gospel “according to Matthew,” “according to Mark,” etc., rather than the gospel “of Matthew.” The gospel is the good news about Jesus according to the various authors.

Interestingly, the Book of Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles, did not initially have this for a title until the end of the second century. In some manuscripts, the Book of Acts is wrongly titled “the Acts of All the Apostles.” The Book of Acts does not record the acts of all the apostles but rather only a select few.

Paul’s letters are named after either the churches to whom he was writing (such as Thessalonica) or the individuals to whom he addressed (such as Timothy).

In contrast to Paul’s letters, the universal letters are named after the person who it is believed authored the letters; Peter, James, Jude and John, rather than the recipients of the letters as is the case with the letters of Paul.

The Book of Revelation is somewhat unique. The manuscripts that contain the Book of Revelation have a number of different titles. They include the Revelation of John, the Revelation of John the Evangelist and the Revelation of John the Divine. However, the first verse tells us that this writing is the revelation of Jesus Christ, not the revelation of John. John merely wrote down what the Lord showed him.

From the above facts, we should view the titles of the various books of Scripture as a means of helping us understand the contents of the writing, but not as some sacred or divine heading.

Almost All of the Books of the Bible Were Written by Jews

It appears that men from the Hebrew, or Jewish, race wrote all the books of the Scripture. Scripture says that the Jews were entrusted with the very words of God. We read the following:

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. ([Romans 3:1-2 TNIV](#))

The one exception is the writings of Luke. He wrote the gospel that bears his name, as well as the Book of Acts. It seems that Luke was a Gentile. Paul spoke of him in this manner:

Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and *also* Demas. ([Colossians 4:14 NASB](#))

Before he sent greetings from Luke, Paul made this statement:

These *are my* only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision; they have proved to be a comfort to me. ([Colossians 4:11 NASB](#))

After Paul mentioned the various Jews who provided comfort to him, he then went on to mention a number of Gentiles. Luke is in this group of people. Therefore, it seems Luke is associated with the Gentiles, or non-Jews, who sent their greetings.

Conclusion: the Sequence Does Not Matter

In conclusion, these facts concerning the present order of the biblical books help us understand the total number of books that are considered as Scripture, as well as the order in which we presently find them. The real issue is not so much the order or sequence of the books, the real question is: do we have the correct books in the Old Testament and in the New Testament? The answer to this question is a resounding, “Yes.”

Summary – Question 7

Why Are the Books of the Bible Placed in a Particular Order?

The books of the Bible are divided for sake of convenience and their logical historical development—there is no sacred order. Because the order of the books is human-made, it is not necessary to read the Bible in this sequence.

In the Protestant Bible, there are sixty-six books—thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament. In the Hebrew Bible, which has the same content as the Protestant Old Testament, there are twenty-four books. The difference is in the way they are divided.

The Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox and Ethiopic Church, add a number of books to the Old Testament that are not accepted by Protestants or by the Jews. These books are known as the Apocrypha by Protestants, and the deuterocanonical books by the Roman Catholic Church.

There are twenty-seven books in the New Testament. They can be divided into four gospels, one book of history, twenty-one letters and one book of prophecy.

There is no divine order for the biblical books. In the Latin manuscripts that are known to exist, we find about three hundred different arrangements of the books of Scripture. Paul’s letters are arranged in at least twenty different sequences.

The four gospels are placed in their present order based on the usual order in which they are found in the existing manuscripts. The letters of Paul are placed in order according to their length, rather than

the time they were written.

The Eastern and Western Churches have a different order with respect to Paul's writings and the general letters. The Western Church places Paul's writings before the general letters, while the Eastern churches reverse this.

While there is no sacred order of the books of Scripture, Genesis and Revelation must stand first and last since they detail the beginning and the end of all things. The books were named after their subject matter, literary style, person or group addressed, or the name of the author. All the books seem to have been written by Jews with the exception of the writings of Luke (Luke/Acts).

These are the basic facts concerning the order and number of the books that presently make up the Bible.