
FAQ

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Original Order, Books of the Bible

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Is it true that the order of the books of the Bible used today, for both the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures (Old and New Testament), is not the original order?

It is not difficult for Bible readers to figure out that the book order of the Tanach or Old Testament, as seen within either the Jewish Synagogue or Christian Church, is a bit different. For today's Messianic Believers, who tend to have both Jewish Bible versions and Christian Bible versions in their home library, this is easily detected. The very term Tanach/Tanakh (תנ"ך) is an acronym for *Torah* (Law), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). These divisions were identified by Yeshua Himself, and were in existence in His day (Luke 24:44; cf. Sirach 39:1). The traditional Christian book order of the Old Testament, follows the order of the Greek Septuagint version, sub-dividing the texts into: Pentateuch, Historical Books, Poetic and Wisdom Books, Major Prophets, and Minor Prophets. The chart below has listed the texts of the Tanach or Old Testament, side-by-side according to the order one will find in a Jewish edition of the Tanach, and in a Protestant Christian version of the Old Testament:¹

BOOKS OF THE TANACH OR OLD TESTAMENT	
JEWISH ORDER	PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN ORDER
<i>Torah</i> Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	<i>Pentateuch</i> Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy
<i>Nevi'im</i> Joshua Judges 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings Isaiah	<i>Historical Books</i> Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings

¹ In either Roman Catholic Bibles or ecumenical Bibles, with input from Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant scholars, the books of the Apocrypha or Deutero-Canon are typically listed between those of the Old Testament and New Testament, or after the New Testament. In Roman Catholic Bibles, the Apocryphal books tend to be sorted into the Historical and Poetic/Wisdom Books.

Jeremiah	1 Chronicles
Ezekiel	2 Chronicles
Hosea	Ezra
Joel	Nehemiah
Amos	Esther
Obadiah	
Jonah	
Micah	<i>Poetry and Wisdom Books</i>
Nahum	Job
Habakkuk	Psalms
Zephaniah	Proverbs
Haggai	Ecclesiastes
Zechariah	Song of Songs
Malachi	
<i>Ketuvim</i>	<i>Major Prophets</i>
Psalms	Isaiah
Proverbs	Jeremiah
Job	Lamentations
Song of Songs	Ezekiel
Ruth	Daniel
Lamentations	
Ecclesiastes	<i>Minor Prophets</i>
Esther	Hosea
Daniel	Joel
Ezra	Amos
Nehemiah	Obadiah
1 Chronicles	Jonah
2 Chronicles	Micah
	Nahum
	Habakkuk
	Zephaniah
	Haggai
	Zechariah
	Malachi

There can be some theological points taken from these two different divisions for the Tanach or Old Testament, both of which were present in ancient times. The reckoning of Joshua-2 Kings among the Prophets, for example, would indicate that these texts have significant prophetic lessons to be learned by Ancient Israel, and they are not solely history. Readers should take note of their prophetic themes of warning, given what would happen if Israel rebelled against God. At the same time, it cannot be overlooked how in the Christian book order, the Book of Daniel is definitely listed among the Prophets, whereas in the Jewish book order, it is instead listed among the Writings. This too might have some sort of theological bearing on whether Daniel is just a record of interesting philosophy, with some possible debate surrounding the accuracy of its message, or is genuine revelation given by God to one of His servants.

Bible students need to be aware of each book order of the Tanach or Old Testament, given their usage in a wide array of academic materials. Editions of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, the standard critical edition Hebrew Bible used in Biblical Studies today, employ the traditional Jewish order of the Tanach (and its main user is actually Christian scholastics and seminary students). Ultimately, regardless of if you primarily use a Bible that uses the Jewish or Christian book order, your responsibility is to make sure that you regard each text of the Tanach or Old Testament as inspired of the Holy One, and as 2 Timothy 3:16 communicates, “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.”

The order of the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament, is actually a rather unique study. Almost all printed Bibles today follow a New Testament order of: Gospels and Acts, Pauline Epistles, Hebrews, General Epistles, and Revelation. Among ancient Greek textual witnesses, though, it is widely documented how the General Epistles, also commonly called the Catholic Epistles,² of James, 1&2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude, are listed after the Book of Acts, and before the Pauline Epistles. The chart below points out the two main book orders of the Apostolic Scriptures:

² Here, “catholic” is intended to mean universal, although our preference as a ministry is to use “general,” to dispel any possible confusion.

BOOKS OF THE APOSTOLIC SCRIPTURES OR NEW TESTAMENT	
STANDARD ORDER	ALTERNATIVE ANCIENT ORDER
<i>Gospels and Acts</i> Matthew Mark Luke John Acts	<i>Gospels and Acts</i> Matthew Mark Luke John Acts
<i>Pauline Epistles</i> Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus Philemon	<i>General Epistles</i> James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude
Hebrews	<i>Pauline Epistles</i> Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus Philemon
<i>General Epistles</i> James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John	Hebrews
Revelation	Revelation

In his article “The Order of the Books of the New Testament,” Greg Goswell describes how “The order of Acts—Catholic Epistles—Pauline Epistles reflects the presentation within Acts itself, in which Peter largely dominates chapters 1-12 and chapters 13-28 center on Paul. The Orthodox churches arrange the books of the NT in this order....The logic of the placement of Paul’s letters immediately after Acts is that Paul’s story dominates the second half that book. The (alternative) logic of having non-Pauline letters follow Acts is that this order draws attention to the fact that Acts features apostles others than Paul (especially Peter, who is the leading figure in the first half of the book).”³

Because there is no single established ancient tradition for the book order of the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament, no one should fault the different parts of the emerging Christian Church in antiquity for having different lists. Sub-consciously in the minds of many, contemporary Christians in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, though, the listing of the Pauline Epistles before the General Epistles, has likely caused some people to treat the letters of James, 1&2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude as being of lesser importance than the Pauline materials. This is unfortunate, especially since Paul himself stated in Galatians 2:9, that “James and Cephas and John...were acknowledged pillars” (NRSV) of the Body of Messiah. Goswell validly points out, “The existence of two different canonical orders warns the reader against prescribing one or [the] other order as determinative for interpretation. To give exclusive rights to any one order of books would be to

³ Greg Goswell, “The Order of the Books of the New Testament” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Vol. 53 No. 2 (2010):235.

fail to see the character of a paratext as (uninspired) commentary on the text.”⁴ Responsible Bible readers, regardless of which order of the Apostolic Scriptures they demonstrate a preference for, have to be able to hold all of its books in the highest canonical regard.

Beyond the two ancient orders of the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament that one may find, it should be noted how various specialty New Testament editions, produced by either theologians or linguists (i.e., *The New Testament* by Richmond Lattimore), tend to rearrange the order of texts even further. This is usually done to accommodate some kind of important conclusion drawn on the composition of a book. While various specialty New Testaments tend to keep the standard book order found in most Bibles, the most common alteration made has been to list the Gospel of Mark *first* before the Gospel of Matthew, as it is widely agreed that Mark was written before the other Synoptics of Matthew and Luke.

The editor’s workbook *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic* (forthcoming 2012 paperback edition) follows a similar method of modification, in listing the composition data on each text of the New Testament. It basically employs the alternative ancient order as listed above, but with a number of additional changes. The Gospel of Mark is listed first, and the Book of Acts is listed after the Gospel of Luke as the second volume written to Theophilus. The Epistle of Jude is listed after 2 Peter, as the two texts generally appear together in scholastic commentaries. Likewise, the Epistle to Philemon is listed immediately after the Epistle to the Colossians, as the two letters were written at the same time and they too generally appear together in scholastic commentaries.

⁴ Ibid.