

# THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

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## Introduction

To understand the history of the canon, we must understand a particular developmental process in history.<sup>1</sup> This historical process has four stages: (1) use, (2) collection, (3) authority, and (4) canon. The earliest stages of use and collection, however, can be combined, since they practically cannot be distinguished given our meager historical knowledge. The result is three major periods in the development of the New Testament canon:

- (1) period of use and collection, about A.D. 90-180
- (2) period of the emerging canon, about A.D. 180-225
- (3) period of the closed canon, about A.D. 225-400.

## History of the Canon

### *1. Period of Use and Collections (A.D. 90-180)*

Almost overlooked in the rush to tell the canonical story are two important initial observations. First, Jesus himself wrote no book. Second, all stories about Jesus initially were plain word of mouth testimony. Word of mouth testimony generated a bulk of material about Jesus, but the material was all oral tradition. Either you knew Jesus personally and could tell the story, or you memorized the story about Jesus told by someone else. Put simply, these were wonderful *ad hoc* stories about Jesus, but not necessarily thought of as “Scripture” immediately.

The same could be said for the correspondence of Paul. These letters were used and read in the churches of Paul’s labors, but not necessarily thought of as “Scripture” immediately. As an inkblot test, say the word “Scripture” to Paul and he probably would have responded, “Deuteronomy,” or “Isaiah.” The word “Scripture” to the earliest Christians meant what you mean today when you say the “Old Testament.”

To be sure, in due process, the more the stories of Jesus were told and the more Paul’s letters were read, the more highly they were regarded in the churches as spiritually useful for worship and edification. Increased use brought increased

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<sup>1</sup>The following outline and material in the main is a summary of the article by James A. Brooks, “The Text and Canon of the New Testament,” Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 8: “General Articles, Matthew-Mark,” Clifton J. Allen, gen. ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969): 15-18.

respect. Somewhere along the way, someone started writing down the stories of Jesus and someone started collecting the letters of Paul. So, at some stage, these oral traditions circulating about Jesus became the backbone of written Gospels, and the letters of Paul were collected, and from that point on, the journey to canonicity was on in earnest. Our earliest records testifying to attitudes about these written Gospel materials begin with the “Apostolic Fathers,” that is, the generation *after* the apostles (the name does not fit the logical situation).

#### A. *Apostolic Fathers*

1. Jewish (A.D. 70-120): represented in **Didache**, **Hermas**, **Papias**.
2. Hellenistic (A.D. 120-170): represented in **Clement**, **Ignatius**, **Polycarp**, etc. (2 *Clement* 2:4 cites a Gospel as “Scripture.”)
3. Summary: The OT was their scripture. Many NT books are referred to, but not necessarily or regularly as “Scripture,” with an exception or two; oral tradition still given highest value; all else is secondary.

#### B. *Apologists*

**Justin Martyr** (150-160): Primary authority still the OT. The first to call the gospels and Revelation “Scripture.” So Synoptics as we know them were authoritative, but other gospels also were in circulation. Paul’s letters had frequent use.

#### C. *Heretics*

1. **Basilides** (117-138): although he was castigated as a heretic, he possibly was the first to attest divine authority to NT books.
2. **Marcion** (145-55): again, another individual branded as a heretic, but he had tremendous influence. His main contribution may have been to be the first person to bring to any one’s attention the idea that the Christian writings to be used and accepted as authoritative ought to be restricted to a specified list; he created a revised edition of Luke and included ten of Paul’s letters in his list.

#### D. *Summary of the Period of Use and Collection (A.D. 90–180)*

1. *Collections*—The major New Testament documents (four Gospels, letters of Paul, the general epistles) already are showing up as independent *collections* (cf. 2 Peter 3:15-16). No one document is circulating by itself, and we have not even one mention of a known autograph (original). Apparently, the originals were lost to history already sometime in the first century. All we have even early in the second century are copies of copies made by hand.
2. *Designations*—Most New Testament documents known today are beginning to be quoted by writers. Some particular documents occasionally are referred to as *Scripture*. Such designations, however, are not common or consistent from writer to writer.

3. *Ambiguity*—Even though collections happen early and we have sporadic designations as Scripture, a picture of anything like an distinct NT Canon is ambiguous.

## 2. *Period of the Emerging Canon (A.D. 180-225)*

### A. *Muratorian Canon*

A list of books used as Scriptures in Roman Church about 180-200. Included are the four Gospels, Paul's letters (including Hebrews), 1–2 John, Jude, and Revelation. Note, however, that the Roman church also considered as Scripture the *Wisdom of Solomon* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*.

### B. *Three Great Writers*

The following three writers represent most of the known Christian world of their day. They attest to the existence and use of all the NT except James, 2 Peter, and 3 John.

1. **Irenaeus** (of Lyons in Gaul, d. 190): Irenaeus traveled extensively, so his testimony represents half the known world. Basically, he regarded the NT as scripture and as more important than the OT. This evaluation is significant, a watershed shift towards regarding NT documents more highly than OT. He was a champion spokesman for the fourfold gospel concept. He quotes all as Scripture except Philemon, James, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude. Hebrews is known, but not regarded as authoritative. The *Shepherd of Hermas*, in contrast, *is* regarded Scripture. Irenaeus illustrates that at the end of the second century, the main outline of what later would be called the NT is *clear, but not fixed*.
2. **Clement of Alexandria** (d. 215): The four Gospels are distinguished from apocryphal gospels. He shows knowledge of all but James, 2 Peter, and 3 John. However, Clement also holds as Scripture *1 Clement*, *Didache*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, and *Preaching of Peter*. Thus, Clement illustrates how numerous other documents continue being regarded as authoritative even at the beginning of the third century.
3. **Tertullian** (d. 225): Tertullian is called the first Latin Father. He is the first to use the term “New Testament” in the sense of a specific collection. He shows knowledge of all except James, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, and Jude. He does not regard Hebrews as Scripture, but does regard Barnabas as the author, so the book is to be valued. Thus, Tertullian illustrates the growing concept of a canon list.

### C. *Summary of the Period of the Emerging Canon (A.D. 180–225)*

1. *Canon concept*—The list of books on the combined accepted and disputed lists is close to our NT:

- a. Accepted: Four gospels, letters of Paul, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John are firmly established. Revelation seems secure but later comes under heavy fire in the East.
  - b. Disputed: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude.
2. *Canon ambiguity*—While a concept of a distinct canon is emerging, other books that eventually did not survive the cut also still are used and accepted in various locations across Christendom.
  3. *Canon open*—Thus, a concept of a NT canon definitely is emerging, but the list is open and not settled or fixed.

### 3. *Period of the Closed Canon (A.D. 225-400)*

#### A. *Five Crucial Writers*

The canonical process finds its consummation in the work of the following five important scholars across the third and fourth centuries.

1. **Origen** (d. 254): Origen was a world-class scholar who traveled widely. He was the first to apply principles of research that anticipated the scientific age. He was acutely aware of the problem of establishing the limits of the canon. He established three categories for referring to types of Christian writings and their degree of authority and use across Christendom:
  1. Acknowledged: On this list he included the four Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul, Hebrews (“by most”), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. Origen himself also wanted to include *Didache*, *Barnabas*, and *Hermas*.
  2. Disputed: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2&3 John, Jude, *Hermas*
  3. Rejected: apocryphal gospels, apocalypses, etc.
  4. Summary: Origen illustrates a definite canon list developing, but discussions about some books continue. By the end of the third century, most NT documents have a secure place, but of those that finally made the cut, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude are still disputed in the West.
2. **Dionysius of Alexandria** (d. 264): Dionysius illustrates the problem of the book of Revelation. While accepted in the West, Revelation is fighting a losing battle in the East. Dionysius created questions about the book of Revelation’s assumed authorship by John the Apostle. He applied linguistic analysis to the Gospel of John and Revelation and concluded the same author could not possibly have written both. Even though Dionysius regarded Revelation as authoritative, his study on authorship provoked long debate about the canonical status of Revelation in the East. In fact, in the East, whereas the book of Revelation eventually was included in the NT, to this day the Eastern Church will not use the book for liturgy or doctrine.

3. **Eusebius of Caesarea (325):** The church historian Eusebius is Alexandrian in outlook and basically follows Origen. In the middle of his history, Eusebius surveyed and summarized canon views in the church. He used Origen's three categories:
  1. Acknowledged: On this list he included the four Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul, Hebrews (Pauline), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation (but Eusebius dissents).
  2. Disputed: Eusebius subdivides Origen's category into two:
    - a. Accepted: James, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude accepted by most but disputed by some.
    - b. Spurious: *Didache*, *Barnabas*, *Hermas*, *Acts of Paul*, *Gospel of the Hebrews*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, rejected by most but accepted by some. Revelation should be on this list, Eusebius himself thinks.
  3. Rejected: Universally rejected now are the apocryphal gospels and other genres such as apocalypses, etc.
  4. Summary: Eusebius illustrates the growing fixity of the various classifications of Christian writings, with many books now being excluded.
4. **Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 348):** A church father in the East, Cyril accepts all but Revelation. Cyril illustrates that canon questions are settling out now in the East too on a pattern quite similar to the West, but Revelation still is struggling in the East.
5. **Athanasius of Alexandria (367):** Athanasius represents the watershed in the history of the canon. In his 39<sup>th</sup> Festal Letter (Easter) of 367 he has the first canon list corresponding exactly to our 27 books and no others. Athanasius also was first to use the word "canon" in the technical sense of a *restricted list* of authoritative books. "These are the wells of salvation," said Athanasius, "so that he who thirsts may be satisfied with the sayings in these. Let no one add to these. Let nothing be taken away."

### *B. Final Developments*

1. **Church Councils:** The church councils do not unilaterally establish the canon, because the canon has been in development for centuries and the basic NT outline clear for a long time. The councils, however, represent the accumulated wisdom of the church universal, so represent a crucial final stage of the process.
  1. **Council of Hippo (393):** concurs with the Athanasius list of 27 books and no others.
  2. **Council of Carthage (397):** concurs with the Athanasius list of 27 books and no others. Augustine was the guiding light: "Aside from the canonical Scripture nothing is to be read in the church under the name of divine Scripture." This council officially closed the NT canon.

2. **Individuals:** Two great fourth-century scholars affirm the developments with Athanasius and the councils. They put all their weight behind the results. No serious question was raised again about the canon until the Reformation.

1. **Jerome** (d. 420): concurs with the Athanasius list of 27 books and no others.

2. **Augustine** (d. 430): concurs with the Athanasius list of 27 books and no others.

### *C. Summary of the Period of the Closed Canon (A.D. 225-400)*

1. *Canon clear*—In the third century, most books are secure on the list.

The list, however, is not closed, and some books that became canonical still are disputed. Also, other books that did not survive the final cut are included in various locations of the church.

2. *Canon closed*—In the fourth century, developments rapidly accelerate to a conclusion. The result was a closed canon list, first identifiable in Athanasius and never varying afterwards, that corresponds exactly to our New Testament of today.

### *D. Footnotes*

1. *Revelation's status:* Revelation always was a special case in canon history. Doubts about Revelation continued for centuries in the East. The Syrian churches did not even include the book into a Syriac translation of the NT until the sixth century, half a millennium after the book's composition! This Eastern hesitation is quite odd, since Revelation originated in the East. If known to be by an apostle, how could the book have been rejected?

2. *Reformation's questions:* The canon question today is not a Roman Catholic one. In the sixteenth century, Protestant Reformers themselves revived questions about the canon. Luther, for example, did not mind raising serious questions about James and Revelation. Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible except for the book of Revelation.

## **Factors in the Development of the Canon**

### *1. Factors that initially retarded the development of the canon.*

- 1.1. The OT was widely circulated and regarded as Scripture.
- 1.2. Many early Christians had personal knowledge of Jesus.
- 1.3. Eyewitness testimony was available.
- 1.4. Oral tradition was prized over the written record.
- 1.5. Apostolic reflection on the significance of Jesus required time.
- 1.6. The very nature of some apostolic writings, such as the letters, as occasional writings to specific congregations did not suggest universal distribution.

- 1.7. Eschatological expectation at first may have reduced any felt need to preserve traditions for posterity.
- 1.8. The Holy Spirit as a living revelatory experience in early Christian worship did not seem to create a need for written words.

*2. Factors that ultimately led to the development of a canon.*

- 2.1. Inadequacy of the OT: The OT was difficult for Gentiles and had no explicit references to Jesus. Further, Jesus himself claimed a greater authority than that of the OT.
- 2.2. Demise of eyewitnesses and the corresponding decline of oral tradition: Without eyewitness, the accuracy of oral tradition could not be attested.
- 2.3. Rise of heresy in the second century threatened Christianity:
  - a. Gnosticism. Champions of orthodoxy appealed to true apostolic traditions and genuine apostolic writings.
  - b. Marcionism. Marcion rejected all of the OT. He accepted only parts of Luke and ten letters of Paul.
  - c. Montanism. Montanus claimed that the age of revelation continued to his own day, but his new “revelations” were all millenarian.
- 2.4. Proliferation of many biblical-type Christian books (heretical and orthodox) led to growing needs to control the use of the material.
- 2.5. Use of the codex form of books beginning in the first half of the second century was less expensive, made passages easier to find, and allowed more material than a scroll. Entire collections of books could be kept more easily.
- 2.6. Persecution: In the midst of persecution Christians needed to know which books were worth giving their lives for.
- 2.7. Constantine’s conversion: One result was the ordering of the official publication of the NT. Eusebius tells us that Constantine ordered 50 copies.
- 2.8. Implications in the NT itself for a concept of canon: Exhortations were given to read the apostolic writings publicly; instructions for circulation were given (Col. 4:16); some writings were referred to as Scripture (1 Tim. 5:1; 2 Pet. 3); the NT writings on occasion claimed divine authority for their message.
- 2.9. An increasingly high value was placed on the teachings of Jesus.

### **Principles of Canonicity**

1. *Apostolicity*: This principle is the effort attempting to establish a direct connection with an apostle. If an apostle was author, the issue of authority was settled. But this idea was not necessarily literally applied. In fact, all the Gospels are anonymous, yet each was associated with an apostle in early church tradition. For example, the Gospel of Mark was not written by the Apostle Peter, but in the church tradition the Gospel is connected to the Apostle Peter’s preaching in Rome as transmitted by his disciple, Mark. The principle of apostolicity explains the forced traditions in the East about Hebrews. The early attempt to ascribe Hebrews to Paul was not on the basis of considered study of the Greek vocabulary, grammar, and syntax

nor the book's decidedly distinctive priestly content unusually grounded upon principles of a literate form of Hellenistic philosophy and embedded in sustained and sophisticated rhetorical argument—in other words, completely unlike Paul in any way, whether vocabulary, grammar, logic, argument, or thought. Ascribing Hebrews to Paul, instead, was the Eastern Church's forced effort on the ultra-slim evidence of the bare mention of Timothy in Heb. 13:23 to hedge the bets on the book being canonized when its content already was felt to be authoritative regardless the author. Hebrews, in fact, is anonymous, and the author a complete mystery. Origen was correct: on the authorship of Hebrews, God alone knows (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.25.14).<sup>2</sup>

- a. The principle of apostolicity is seen in the earliest non-biblical writers recognizing a difference between themselves and the apostles.
  - b. This principle explains the dispute over certain books, such as Hebrews or Revelation, or why others were included, such as the four Gospels, despite their being anonymous.
  - c. The principle can be seen at work in Serapion of Antioch's rejection of the *Gospel of Peter* and the condemnation of the author of the *Acts of Paul*.
  - d. The principle is explicitly stated in the Muratorian canon.
2. *Antiquity*: The older the document has been attested, usually the better. A concept of antiquity is tied to apostolicity and naturally helped to reduce serious consideration of a number of more recent Christian documents in circulation. For example, the recent appearance of the *Acts of Paul* was a decided factor against its consideration for church fathers.
3. *Orthodoxy*: The orthodox contents of a document were more important than known authorship. The four Gospels are anonymous but connected to the apostles and their orthodox traditions on the teachings of Jesus.
- a. This principle is illustrated in the statement of the Muratorian canon that one "should not mix gall and honey."
  - b. This principle also is seen in Serapion's treatment of the *Gospel of Peter*.
  - c. Tertullian rejects the *Shepherd of Hermas* because of some of its content.
  - d. This principle shows the growing concept of an appeal to the "rule of faith"—that deposit of doctrine from the teachings of the apostles as preserved faithfully by the apostles' historical and spiritual heirs in the church. The principle speaks to concord with apostolic teaching.
4. *Catholicity*: Catholic means universal. The more widely known, read, and used across all Christendom in worship and teaching, the more likely a given book will be respected and included as authoritative. This principle explains why some books

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<sup>2</sup>For a concise discussion on the authorship of Hebrews, see David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004, 787–88).



known and valued locally but not universally, such as the *Didache* or the *Shepherd of Hermas*, did not ultimately make the cut.

5. *Spiritual value*: This principle is the inherent perception of the spiritual value of a document's content that cannot be measured in a test tube, but is part of the energy driving historical acceptance. In the final analysis, Hebrews makes the cut on this criterion more than any other, even if the early tradition accepted Paul as the author. All the ancients recognized that the language was not Paul's, and numerous theories were devised in the attempt to cover that embarrassing reality. In the end, the bottom line was that if the content had been theologically dubious, no one would have been clamoring for Paul to be the author of this anonymous work in the first place, even with the mention of Timothy in Heb. 13:24.

### **Canonization**

So, in conclusion, at what point did a book become canonical? Well, that is the point—certainly not at a “point.” The historical process is more fluid and dynamic than that concept allows. However, here are some suggestive principles about the process:

1. A book is becoming canonical when considered to have authority equal to that of the OT.
2. A book is becoming canonical when read as Scripture in public worship.
3. A book is becoming canonical when included as a part of a collection.
4. A book is becoming canonical when gaining widespread acceptance and use in the above ways.