

CANNON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Christian Biblical canon is the set of books Christians regard as divinely inspired and thus constituting the Christian Bible. Although the Early Church primarily used the Greek translation of the *Jewish Scriptures*, the Septuagint or LXX, or the Targums among Aramaic speakers, the Apostles did not otherwise leave a defined set of new scriptures.

Instead the "New Testament Canon" developed gradually over time. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia the idea of a complete Canon existing from Apostolic times, has "no foundation in history". The **Canon of the New Testament**, like that of the Old, was the result of debate, disputes and research, not reaching its final term until the dogmatic definition of the Council of Trent.

The writings attributed to the apostles circulated amongst the earliest Christian communities. The Pauline epistles were circulating, perhaps in collected forms, by the end of the first century AD. Justin Martyr, in the early second century, mentions "memoirs of the apostles" as being read on Sunday alongside the "writings of the prophets". A four gospel canon (the *Tetramorph*) was asserted by Irenaeus, c. 180, who refers to it directly.

By the early 200s, Origen may have been using the same 27 books as in the *Catholic NT canon*, though there were still disputes over the canonicity of Hebrews, James, II Peter, II and III John, and Revelation, known as the *Antilegomena*. Likewise the Muratorian fragment is evidence that perhaps as early as 200 there existed a set of Christian writings somewhat similar to the *27-book NT canon*, which included four gospels and argued against objections to them. Thus, while there was a good measure of debate in the Early Church over the New Testament canon, the major writings are claimed to have been accepted by almost all Christians by the middle of the third century.

In the 4th century, in his Easter letter of 367, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, gave a list of exactly the same books as what would become the *27-book NT canon*, and he used the word "canonized" (*kanonizomena*) in regards to them. The North African Synod of Hippo, in 393, approved the *27-book NT canon* together with the OT Septuagint books, a decision that was confirmed by Councils of Carthage in 397 and 419. These councils were under the authority of St. Augustine, who regarded the canon as already closed. Pope Damasus I's Council of Rome in 382, if the *Decretum Gelasianum* is correctly associated with it, issued a biblical canon identical to that mentioned above, or if not the list is at least a sixth century compilation. Likewise, Damasus's commissioning of the Latin Vulgate edition of the Bible, circa 383, was instrumental in the fixation of the canon in the West. In circa 405, Pope Innocent I sent a list of the sacred books to a Gallic bishop, Exsuperius of Toulouse. Christian scholars assert that when these bishops and councils spoke on the matter, however, they were not defining something new, but instead "were ratifying what had already become the mind of the Church."

Thus some claim, that from the fourth century, there existed unanimity in the

West concerning the *New Testament canon* (as it is today), and that by the fifth century the Eastern Church, with a few exceptions, had come to accept the Book of Revelation and thus had come into harmony on the matter of the canon. Nonetheless, full dogmatic articulations of the canon were not made until the Council of Trent of 1546 for Roman Catholicism, the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563 for the Church of England, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 for Calvinism, and the Synod of Jerusalem of 1672 for the Greek Orthodox.

McDonald and Sanders's *The Canon Debate*, 2002, Appendix B, lists the following most important primary sources for the "New Testament Canon".

Early Christianity (c.30-325)

Early Christianity relied on the Sacred Oral Tradition of what Jesus had said and done, as reported by his Apostles and Disciples. These oral traditions were later written down as gospels.

In the one-hundred-year period extending roughly from A.D. 50 to 150 a number of documents began to circulate among the churches. According to Jerome the first such document was the Gospel according to the Hebrews. Also included were epistles, gospels, acts, apocalypses, homilies, and collections of teachings. While some of these documents were apostolic in origin, others drew upon the tradition the apostles and ministers of the word had utilized in their individual missions. Still others represented a summation of the teaching entrusted to a particular church center. Several of these writings sought to extend, interpret, and apply apostolic teaching to meet the needs of Christians in a given locality.

Clement of Rome

By the end of the 1st century, some letters of Paul were collected and circulated, and were known to Clement of Rome. Bruce Metzger in his *Canon of the New Testament*, 1987, draws the following conclusion about Clement:

Irenaeus

A four gospel canon (the *Tetramorph*) was asserted by Irenaeus, c. 160, who referred to it directly.

An insistence upon there being a canon of four gospels, and no others, was a central theme of Irenaeus of Lyons, c. 185. In his central work, *Adversus Haereses* Irenaeus denounced various early Christian groups that used only one gospel, such as Marcionism which used only Marcion's version of Luke, or the Ebionites which seem to have used an Aramaic version of Matthew, as well as groups that used more than four gospels, such as the Valentinians (*A.H.* 1.11). Irenaeus declared that the four he espoused were the four "Pillars of the Church": "it is not possible that there can be either more or fewer than four" he stated, presenting as logic the analogy of the four corners of the earth

and the four winds (3.11.8). His image, taken from *Ezekiel* 1, or *Revelation* 4:6-10, of God's throne borne by four creatures with four faces—"the four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and the four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle"—equivalent to the "four-formed" gospel, is the origin of the conventional symbols of the Evangelists: lion (Mark), bull (Luke), eagle (John), man (Matthew). Irenaeus was ultimately successful in declaring that the four gospels collectively, and exclusively these four, contained the truth. By reading each gospel in light of the others, Irenaeus made of *John* a lens through which to read *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke*.

In *Against Heresies* 3.11.8, Irenaeus wrote:

Based on the arguments Irenaeus made in support of only four authentic gospels, some interpreters deduce that the *fourfold Gospel* must have still been a novelty in Irenaeus's time. *Against Heresies* 3.11.7 acknowledges that many heterodox Christians use only one gospel while 3.11.9 acknowledges that some use more than four. The success of Tatian's *Diatessaron* in about the same time period is "...a powerful indication that the fourfold Gospel contemporaneously sponsored by Irenaeus was not broadly, let alone universally, recognized."

McDonald & Sanders, Appendix D-1, lists the following canon for Irenaeus, based on Eusebius' *Church History* 5.8.2-8, but notes that: "...it is probably nothing more than Eusebius's listing of the references made by Irenaeus.":

Irenaeus apparently quotes from 21 of the New Testament books and names the author he thought wrote the text. He is known to have been connected to Polycarp and since Polycarp may have been connected to John the Apostle of Jesus, there is potentially great authority to his tradition.

He mentions the four gospels, Acts, the Pauline epistles with the exception of Hebrews and Philemon, as well as the first epistle of Peter, and the first and second epistles of John, and the book of Revelation. He may refer to Hebrews (*Book 2, Chapter 30*) and James (*Book 4, Chapter 16*) and maybe even 2 Peter (*Book 5, Chapter 28*) but does not cite Philemon, 3 John or Jude.

He does think that the letter to the Romans, known now as 1 Clement, was of great worth but does not seem to believe that Clement of Rome was the one author (*Book 3, Chapter 3, Verse 3*) and seems to have the same lower status as Polycarp's Epistle (*Book 3, Chapter 3, Verse 3*). He does refer to a passage in the Shepherd of Hermas as scripture (*Mandate 1 or First Commandment*), but this has some consistency problems on his part. Hermas believed that Jesus became the Son of God at the Baptism (*Parable 5 of Shepherd; Chapter 59, verses 4-6*), a concept called adoptionism, but all of Irenaeus's work including his citing of the Gospel of John (*Jn. 1:1*) proves that he believed that Jesus was always God.

Justin Martyr

In the mid-second century, Justin Martyr (whose writings span the period from c. 145 to

163) mentions the "memoirs of the apostles", which Christians called "gospels" and which were regarded as on par with the Old Testament. However, of the gospels later accepted into the canon, Justin only appears to be aware of the synoptics - Matthew, Mark, and Luke - but not of John. In Justin's works, distinct references are found to Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, and possible ones to Philippians, Titus, and 1 Timothy.

Justin Martyr appears to have accepted the authority of works which were not later included in the canon including the "Acts of Pontius Pilate" (not to be confused with the Acts of Pilate, which was written later - probably in the fourth century):

In addition, he refers to an account from an unnamed source of the baptism of Jesus which differs from that provided by the synoptic gospels:

Marcion of Sinope

Marcion of Sinope, a bishop of Asia Minor who went to Rome and was later excommunicated for his views, was the first of record to propose a definitive, exclusive, unique canon of Christian scriptures, compiled sometime between 130-140 CE. (Though Ignatius did address Christian scripture, before Marcion, against the perceived heresies of the Judaizers and Docetists, he did not publish a canon.) In his book *Origin of the New Testament* Adolf von Harnack argued that Marcion viewed the church at this time as largely an Old Testament church (one that "follows the Testament of the Creator-God") without a firmly established New Testament canon, and that the church gradually formulated its New Testament canon in response to the challenge posed by Marcion.

Marcion rejected the theology of the Old Testament entirely and regarded the God depicted there as an inferior Being. He claimed that the theology of the Old Testament was incompatible with the teaching of Jesus regarding God and morality. Marcion believed that Jesus had come to liberate mankind from the authority of the God of the Old Testament and to reveal the superior God of goodness and mercy whom he called the Father. Paul and Luke were the only Christian authors to find favour with Marcion, though his versions of these differed from those later accepted by mainstream Christianity.

Marcion created a canon, a definite group of books which he regarded as fully authoritative, displacing all others. These comprised ten of the Pauline epistles (without the Pastorals and Hebrews) and Luke's Gospel. It is uncertain whether he edited these books, purging them of what did not accord with his views, or that his versions represented a separate textual tradition.

Marcion's gospel, called simply the Gospel of the Lord, differed from the Gospel of Luke by lacking any passages that connected Jesus with the Old Testament. He believed that the god of the Jews, Yahweh, who gave them the Jewish Scriptures, was an entirely different god than the Supreme God who sent Jesus and inspired the New Testament.

Marcion termed his collection of Pauline epistles the *Apostolikon*. These also differed from the versions accepted by later Christian Orthodoxy.

In addition to his *Gospel* and *Apostolikon*, he wrote a text called the *Antithesis* which contrasted the New Testament view of God and morality with the Old Testament view of God and morality, see also Expounding of the Law#Antithesis of the Law.

Marcion's canon and theology were rejected as heretical by the early church; however, he forced other Christians to consider which texts were canonical and why. He spread his beliefs widely; they became known as Marcionism. In the introduction to his book "Early Christian Writings", Henry Wace stated:

The Catholic Encyclopedia of 1913 characterized Marcion as "perhaps the most dangerous foe Christianity has ever known."

Everett Ferguson in chapter 18 of *The Canon Debate* quotes Tertullian's *De praescriptione haereticorum* 30:

Note 61 of page 308 adds:

Other scholars propose that it was Melito of Sardis who originally coined the phrase *Old Testament*, which is associated with Supersessionism.

Robert M. Price, a New Testament scholar at Drew University, considers the Pauline canon problem: how, when, and who collected Paul's epistles to the various churches as a single collection of epistles. The evidence that the early church fathers, such as Clement, knew of the Pauline epistles is unclear. Price investigates several historical scenarios and comes to the conclusion and identifies Marcion as the first person known in recorded history to collect Paul's writings to various churches together as a canon, the Pauline epistles. Robert Price summarizes,

If this is correct, then Marcion's role in the formation and development of Christianity is pivotal.

Tatian

Tatian was converted to Christianity by Justin Martyr on a visit to Rome around 150 A.D. and, after much instruction, returned to Syria in 172 to reform the church there. At some point (it is suggested c. 160 A.D.) he composed a single harmonized "Gospel" by weaving the contents of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John together along with events present in none of these texts. The narrative mainly follows the chronology of John. This is called the Diatessaron ("Harmony) Through Four") and it became the official Gospel text of the Syraic church, centered in Edessa.

Valentinus

Clement of Alexandria records that his followers said that Valentinus was a follower of Theudas and that Theudas in turn was a follower of St. Paul of Tarsus one of the most important steps in the development of early Church, was the decision about which writings were Divinely inspired, and therefore should be included in

Scripture. The leadership of the Church made this decision with utmost care, looking for the “fingerprints” of the Apostles in each book that was considered. However, the process took more than a century and did not receive final confirmation until nearly 400 A.D. The standard for inclusion into the canon of Scripture was described by the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Also, the Apostle Peter stated in 2 Peter 1:16, “For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.” (Holy Bible) When believers first began to meet, they would only study the Old Testament, from which Jesus had taught. The first written materials to be gathered, were the letters written by the Apostle Paul to the churches. Over time, as the eye witnesses slowly died, and as the oral traditions began to fade, the Church saw its need to record the teachings, and the life of Jesus. This process was further complicated by the “fragility and scarcity of the early written copies of apostolic writings which led to some documents being well known in some areas but lost in others.” Also, another problem was the numerous false teachings being passed through the church. These writings had comparable names and appeared to discuss the same topics, as the genuine texts written by the apostles. Due to the increasingly intense persecution, people were no longer willing to risk their lives for a teaching, unless they were certain it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. (<http://www.standard.net.au/~covenant/studies/CanonNT.html>, Unger’s Bible Dictionary, How Our Bible Came to Us and Christianity Through the Centuries)

The Gospel of Mark was likely written first and followed by Matthew, Luke, Acts and John. The dates for these books begin at around 60 AD and end with John being written near 100 AD. Though these dates are not certain, Mark is placed first because of its simplicity; the Gospels of Matthew and Luke seem to use passages from Mark and that is why Mark is listed as being penned first. By approximately 175 A.D, there was general agreement concerning the apostolicity of most of the known books in what is today called the New Testament. Nevertheless, there were several criteria that the books had to pass. First of all, was the book written by one of the apostles, or by someone who was closely linked to an apostle? For example, the Gospel of Mark was accepted, because of the vital link that Mark possessed to the Apostle Peter. Second, did the book confirm the accounts of the eye witnesses of the life of Jesus? Third, was the book able to encourage and strengthen the believers in their faith, when it was read publicly? Fourth, did it confirm the truths contained in the creeds adopted by the founding fathers of the church? Lastly, did it have any heretical doctrines contrary to the teachings of Jesus? (Christianity Through the Centuries, How Our Bible came to Us, and <http://www.standard.net.au/~covenant/studies/CanonNT.html>) In reality, the writings that did not appear to be led of the Holy Spirit, were no longer used in the churches. Basically, believers in Jesus continued to “test the Spirit” to see which books were from the Lord. “In the final analysis, it was the historical verification of apostolic authorship or influence, and the universal consciousness of the church, guided by the Holy Spirit, that resulted in the final decision concerning what books should be considered canonical and worthy of inclusion in what we know as the New Testament.” (Christianity Through the Centuries and <http://www.standard.net.au/~covenant/studies/CanonNT.html>) The

Muratorian Canon in approximately 180 A.D, had judged twenty-two books as being worthy of being accepted into the New Testament. From that time forward until modern times, the question of whether or not to include those books in the New Testament, was not challenged again. Nonetheless, the books of James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation were somewhat problematic. There was some uncertainty about the authorship of these books for a number of decades. Eventually, these books were considered to be authoritative by the Council of Laodicea in 363 A.D. and by the Council of Carthage in 397 A.D. However, it was the constant usage of these books which made them stand out as being valid, as opposed to the undocumented, false teachings of the Gnostic and other heretical groups. (Christianity Through the Centuries and Encyclopedia Americana.)

The New Testament is a collection of books of the Christian Bible, comprising the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and the Revelation of St. John the Divine. (Webster) Canon is defined as the books of the Bible recognized by any Christian church as genuine and inspired. (Webster)

The Apocrypha The Apocrypha is a set of 14 books that had been allowed by the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem to be used among Greek speaking Jews over the course of Greek Hellenization that took place between the Old and New Testaments. Although never part of the Hebrew scriptures, these apocryphal writings had increased in authority merely by the passing of time. Shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, a group of Jewish Rabbis met in Jamnia to codify the ancient scripture for a population that had now been widely dispersed. They were also reacting to the Jewish cult of Christianity that continued to grow in popularity. In order to completely sever ties to these Greek speaking Christians, they purified the Hebrew canon by discrediting anything that was originally written in Greek. This, of course, included the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) and, of course, the letters of Paul that were circulating on par with "the other scriptures" (1 Peter). Thus the Bible retained by the early Christians contained the Apocrypha, and the Jewish Bible clarified what were the original Hebrew scriptures.

To Christians, the New Testament was recognized as the inspired word of God beginning in Acts chapter 15 when the council of Jerusalem excused Gentile believers from the burden of Hebrew law. Instead, the teachings of Christ became their "New Covenant" or Testament. Peter dictated to Mark the teachings and activities of Christ and other first hand accounts came into circulation. Mark is placed first because of its simplicity; the Gospels of Matthew and Luke seem to use passages from Mark. John's account has his own unique style which sets it apart from the three "synoptic gospels". Luke compiled from reliable sources and also reported on the "Acts of the Apostles" much of which he experienced first hand as he traveled with Paul. Paul's inspired letters were circulated and copies were collected by first century church leaders as were other epistles from reliable authors such as James, the brother of Jesus, and intimate eyewitnesses accounts from John and Peter.

The integrity of the gospel writers is apparent as they share personal faults and weaknesses that could be used against them. There were many times that the apostles

couldn't comprehend the miracles and mysteries of Jesus but they included them in their writings. Their honest sincerity even records faithless times when they doubted God. Paul too, records his intimate struggles in Romans 7.

The earliest church elders were extremely cautious in their acceptance of these early Christian scriptures. Paul knew of counterfeits and signed his distinctive signature after he had dictated his letters. The authority of an eyewitness apostle who also confirmed the accurate theology taught in Paul's writings, provided the standard to test subsequent documents that appeared. In this manner, the New Testament, as we have it today, was considered a closed canon shortly after the last apostle died. The martyrdom of many apostles also lends support to the credibility of a message they were willing to die for.

Although the Apocryphal books of the Greek Old Testament remained in use, they were never given the authority of the original Hebrew scriptures that were often referred to by Jesus and the Apostles. Contextual criticism of the Apocrypha's multiple errors in history, geography, and doctrine, led the reformers to finally remove that section from subsequent translations.

Like the Jewish Rabbis' who had met in Jamnia over a thousand years earlier in reaction to a weakened Judaism, the actions of Christian reformers catapulted the Roman Catholic church into a counter-reformation that sought to strengthen their weakening position. Thus the Council of Trent formally codified the Apocrypha from which they had acquired teachings that went counter to those of the first century church. Doctrines of purgatory, paying money for forgiveness of sin, and Maryoetry all received a stronger stance in opposition to the Reformation. This is why the Apocrypha has never been a part of the Hebrew or Protestant Bibles.

When questioning the authenticity of written works such as the New Testament, there are several points in which one must be aware. As Christians, we know that the New Testament Canon is the inspired Word of God and is profitable for teaching, reproof and training in righteousness; therefore we simply believe it is true. (2 Tim. 3:16-17) However, further research must be carried out in order to prove its authenticity and validity to unbelievers.

Defined as various religious writings of uncertain origin and doubtful authenticity, the Apocrypha contains numerous fallacies and errors. Though the Roman Catholic Church accepted the Apocrypha into their Bible, Christians have found many evidences against the false works. For instance, the book of Tobit contains verses embracing superstitions such as touching the heart and liver of a fish to keep demons away. Another book of the Apocrypha called 2 Maccabees proves that the Apocrypha is definitely not Biblical. The book tells of a nobleman who "plucked out his bowels[...] and cast them upon the thron" to escape wickedness on earth and later died. Ecclesiasticus also contradicts the inspired Word of God by saying that one can buy salvation. The Apocrypha states that "alms makes' an atonement for sins". The Bible says that the only way to get to gain eternal life is to believe and confess your sins and you will be saved. (Acts 16:31) The Apocrypha contains many other doctrinal contradictions, and errors in geography and

history which are why they were not accepted into the Canon.

Some claim that there are controversial books in the Bible that discredit the Epistles of Paul. Martin Luther was one of those who despised the book of James because of its apparent contradiction to Luther's idea of salvation by faith alone as taught by Paul. The crucial point that Martin Luther failed to realize was that James was addressing the Jews while Paul wrote to Christians and fellow believers of the Word. James wrote to the Jews as a counselor and in order that they might grow in the Christian faith. He included many portions of useful advice to aid them during their sufferings. When one decides to critique scriptures, one must ask who the intended audience was at that time and read the scripture in context. It is never profitable to take scriptures and twist them out of context to fit a presupposed truth.

2 Peter 3 warns against false prophets and heretics who distort God's Word to their own destruction. The book reminds its audience to be wary during the last days when men will rise up and try to turn us from the truth of God's Word. From the Gnostic heretics that Paul dealt with, to today's cults of Christianity who manipulate scripture like the Jehovah Witnesses, or add their own scripture like the Book of Mormon, evangelicals stand still stand secure God's word.

The flawless, life giving text of the New Testament clearly reveals God's inspiration upon the authors who wrote this holy work as He guided them and filled their minds with His perfect words.