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The Canon of the New Testament

The New Testament canon can be assessed in terms of its early and later development. Most place the emphasis in discussions of the canon on the later centuries of development. However, much canonical activity was taking place in the first three centuries of development as well.

The Earliest Forms of the New Testament Canon: The First Three Centuries

The early church relied heavily upon the words of Christ and the teachings of the apostles as their foundation of doctrine and worship. The traditions that were being taught needed to be handled with utmost care to ensure their accuracy for early Christians as well as for subsequent generations of believers. The book of Acts records much of the history of the early church in the first century AD and how the gospel message was spread throughout the empire of Rome.

At the beginning of church history, the early Christians were able to learn from those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ and His resurrection, and from the apostles. Oral traditions (such as early creeds or confessions) were formed and used as early as a few months to two or three years after the resurrection and ascension of Christ. These traditions were very reliable, being based on heavy repetition and recitation in a culture where memorization was a central part of cultural tradition. It was upon these traditions that Paul relied in his defense of Christ's resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, when he declares that he is passing on to the church at Corinth the tradition of the teachings of Christ that he received. So it was upon this oral and eyewitness tradition of transmission of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, as well as upon Jesus' and the apostles' teachings, that the written documents of the New Testament were based.

Some scholars, however, level the accusation that this kind of oral tradition became corrupted during transmission, even going as far as to say that the teachings being transmitted were manipulated by the disciples. However, it must be taken into account that in such cultures, typical oral transmissions are fixed; the accounts of Jesus' life would

have been no different. Any deviation from the fixed form of oral transmission of the teachings, life, and work of Christ would have been immediately detected and corrected by the community.

It is also worth considering that, during the early transmission of these teachings, eyewitnesses were still alive to attest to and verify them or refute and correct them. The fact is that these oral traditions were based on firsthand eyewitness accounts. These eyewitnesses were still present during the time when the apostles began to write their epistles and have them circulated among the early Christian communities (more than 250 of them were still alive when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 15:6, for instance). False accounts of Jesus' life would not have been able to be circulated because of these eyewitnesses.

Furthermore, such accusations of corruption within the oral (and even written) transmission of Jesus' life do not seem to take into account that the disciples were willing to be martyred for their faith in what they proclaimed. Nor do they consider the extrabiblical records that support the claims of Jesus' life and ministry (for example, those of Josephus, Phlegon, Tacitus, Mara Bar-Serapion, Pliny the Younger, the Talmud, Celsus, and Lucian).[1]

The Process of Collection and Recognition

Each of the 27 books of the New Testament was initially a separate literary unit that was written independently of the others. Each of the Gospels was written independently, as were Acts, each of Paul's letters, the general epistles, and the Revelation of John.

Prior to AD 180, there is no evidence that shows that any one community used more than one single Gospel. It was only at this time that evidence has revealed accounts of the existence of single-volume collections of the four Gospels that were regarded as equally authoritative accounts of the gospel story, being widely recognized by authoritative figures in the church. Such collections are mentioned in statements from the Church Father Irenaeus as well as in what is known as the Muratorian Canon, a list from about AD 190 of canonical books. By around this time it was apparently possible to produce books of papyrus that would accommodate the entire text of all four Gospels. One such is P^{45}, which was written at the beginning of the third century AD and originally comprised 55 sheets (or double leaves), equating to 220 pages, and contained all four Gospels with the addition of the book of Acts.

The epistles of Paul were probably the earliest writings that were collected. Not only would the early churches have preserved these letters carefully for their own meetings, but they would have also exchanged copies of these letters with other churches as well, as was the custom. This custom would explain the existence of Paul's letters to churches that did not last very long (such as the church in Galatia). For example, Paul gives explicit instructions in his letter to the Colossians to have his letter be read in their church and in the church at Laodicea (see Colossians 4:16). Moreover, there is record of a letter known as 1 Clement, the earliest Christian document outside of the New Testament, which was sent from the church in Rome to the church in Corinth. This letter dates to about AD 95 and contains references to Paul's letter to the Romans and from 1 Corinthians and

Hebrews. As Kurt Aland recognizes, this indicates the possibility of an existing collection of Paul's letters in circulation among the early churches, although some of the references in this letter from Clement have yet to be identified conclusively.[2]

It is clear that Paul saw himself as authoritative in his apostolic position as is conveyed through his greetings (see Galatians 1:1, among others) and his teachings and writings (as seen in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians 4:17, Colossians 1:25, 2 Thessalonians, and many other passages of Scripture). There is no doubt that Paul viewed the commands he gave to be on the same level of authority as Christ's (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

The early Church Fathers also attest to the authoritative nature of Paul's letters, as helpfully identified by Peter Wegner. In his above-mentioned letter to the Corinthians, Clement (c. AD 95) refers to Paul's letter to them and even identifies him as an apostle (1 Clement 47.1). Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in the beginning of the first century AD, mentions Paul's concern for the Ephesians in his other epistles. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (c. AD 69–155), in a letter to the Philippian church, refers to Paul's letters to them and even equates those letters to Old Testament Scripture, thus attesting to the authority of Paul's words as Scripture. In the mid second century AD, Marcion is noted for recognizing the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's letters in his canon. One can infer from this that by this time the epistles of Paul had been collected and circulated among all the early churches.

Of the Gospels, many contemporary scholars believe that Mark was the first Gospel written (c. AD 60), recording the events that occurred years before, and that the other Gospels came out shortly thereafter. However, evidence from the early Church Fathers suggest that the Gospels were written in the order in which we have them, with Matthew first and John last. Colin Hemer provides good evidence that Acts was written before AD 62, which would place Luke before this (see Acts 1:1 and Luke 1:1). This would place Matthew and Mark (possibly referred to in Luke 1:1) in the late 50s. In any event, the synoptic Gospels were composed before AD 62.

The book of Acts, Luke's sequel to his Gospel, which records the history of the early church from about AD 33 to AD 60, is considered a pivotal work by some. The earliest references to its canonicity go back to the end of the second century AD in such documents such as the Muratorian Fragment (c. AD 190) and in its mention by Irenaeus, who states that it was written by Luke. The date range for the circulation of Acts is confirmed by Hemer's *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* and his conclusion, which, as said, affirms Acts' writing prior to AD 62.

The general epistles were challenged more than the other books because of the seemingly inconclusive evidence for their authorship. It seems there was no consensus about these epistles until around the end of the second century AD.

The canonicity of the book of Revelation was in dispute for many years before it was finally accepted. The earliest documentation of the book's canonical status dates back to the end of the second century AD, being mentioned by Melito, bishop of Sardis (AD 170), who wrote a commentary on it. Justin Martyr and Irenaeus also refer to this book, declaring the apostle John as the author.

Immediate Acceptance vs. Ultimate Recognition

There is an important difference between when a given New Testament book was accepted as canonical and when the Christian church in general eventually recognized it. The following chart reveals that virtually all the New Testament books were recognized and cited by some Father or canon within the first century or so after the New Testament was completed. For instance, by AD 182 to 188, during the time of Irenaeus, every book except the tiny one-chapter book of 3 John was accepted. Of course, since travel and communication was slow, not all the books were recognized everywhere until the Council of Hippo (AD 393).

The New Testament Canon During the First Four Centuries

BOOK	Mt	Mk	Lk	Jn	Acts	Rom	1Cor	2Cor	Gal	Eph	Phil	Col	1Thes	2Thes	1Tim	2Tim	Ti	Phe	Heb	Js	1Pet	2Pet	1Jn	2Jn	3Jn	Jd	Rv
Pseudo-Barnabas (c. 70-130)	x	x	x							x						x	x		x		x	x					
Clement of Rome (c. 95-97)	x	x	x			x	x			x					x		x		x	x	x	x					
Ignatius (c. 110)	x			x	x	x	x		x	x		x								x	x						
Polycarp (c. 110-50)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x						x		x	x			
Hermas (c. 115-40)	x	x			x		x	x			x		x		x	x			x	x	x		x				x
Didache (c. 120-50)	x		x			x	x						x		x												x
Papias (c. 130-40)				x																							x
Marcion (c. 140)			x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x				x									
Irenaeus (c. 130-202)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Justin Martyr (c. 150-55)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x							x						x
Muratorian (c. 170)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x					x	x	x	x	x
Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x		x		x			x	x
Tertullian (c. 150-220)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Origen (c. 185-254)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x			x	x
Old Latin (c. 200)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x					x	x	x	x	x
Cyprian (d. 258)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Apostolic (c. 300)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-86)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Eusebius (c. 325-40)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	?	x	?	x	?	?	?	x
Athanasius (367)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Jerome (c. 340-420)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Hippo (393)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Carthage (397)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Augustine (c. 400)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Chart from Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, 1986); © 2006 Norman L. Geisler. Used by permission of Moody Press. Main source for data: Philip Schaff, indexes to *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

X = Citation or allusion; ? = Names are disputed

During this process of the recognition of the New Testament canon several factors were brought into consideration, such as a book's authorship, its apostolic authority or approval, its prophetic voice, and its acceptance in the early church.

The Canon in the Fourth Century and Beyond

Over the first few centuries of the early church the canon of the New Testament came to be recognized by the early Church Fathers. From the time of Clement of Rome in the first century to Athanasius in the late fourth century a consensus formed among the church as to which books were to be accepted as canonical. Athanasius (c. 296–373), the bishop of Alexandria, became the first to have a canon that included all 27 books of the New Testament.

It was during the fourth and early fifth centuries AD that several synods and councils were held to deal with the issue of the New Testament canonical books. It was during these councils that a broader consensus was formed among the church as to which books were to be recognized as divinely inspired and, therefore, canonical. However, it is important to make the distinction that these councils did not *determine* which books were canonical and which ones were not; they merely *discovered* what the church already recognized the New Testament canon to be. The Council of Hippo, held in AD 393 at Hippo, North Africa, confirmed the same 27 books that were generally accepted as canonical by the Synod of Laodicea (AD 363). Next came the Council of Carthage in AD 419, which reaffirmed the 27-book canon of the New Testament Scriptures. In addition, the council placed the book of Hebrews with the Pauline epistles, since it had been separated from Paul's epistles at the Synod of Carthage (AD 397).

The canon of the New Testament, by implication from the factors that formed it, should be viewed as closed. It is a reasonable view that the New Testament canon was completed by the first century AD, by which time all the apostles had died. On dealing with this issue, it is important to consider the passage in Hebrews 1:1-2, which states that God has spoken through Christ as final revelation.

In light of this it must be noted that the apostles did not write any new revelation, but rather explained what had already been revealed in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is clear that there is no new revelation that is to be given from God apart from Jesus Christ, and this means that prophets (such as Muhammad and Joseph Smith) who offer new revelation apart from the work of Jesus Christ are to be deemed false.