



The History of the Bible  
Session 11: Topic 2.2  
The Canonization of the New Testament

Study by  
Lorin L Cranford

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2.2 Canonization:

**How did the New Testament come together as a collection of documents?**

We understand the coming together of the twenty-seven documents of the New Testament into a single document, or a unified collection of documents, as the process of 'canonization.' Grasping this process means we must know what canonization as a word means (topic 2.2.1), along with the history of the three hundred year process of canonization before the New Testament became firmly established as the collection of documents that we have today. This history involves both designing (topic 2.2.2) and assembling (topic 2.2.3) the New Testament.

**2.2.1 Definitions:**

From the Wikipedia article on the Canon of the New Testament, we find a helpful introduction to this topic, mostly defining the idea of canon in regard to sacred scriptures:

The biblical canon is an exclusive list of books written during the formative period of the Jewish or Christian faiths; the leaders of these communities believed these books to be inspired by God or to express the authoritative history of the relationship between God and his people.

There are differences between Christians and Jews (as well as between different Christian traditions) concerning which books meet the standards for canonization. The different criteria for, and the process of, canonization for each community dictates what members of that community consider to be their Bible.

At this time, all of the below canons are considered to be closed; that is, most adherents of the various groups do not think that additional books can be added to their Bible. By contrast, an open canon would be a list of books which is considered to be open to additional books, should they meet the other criteria. Each of the canons described below was considered open for a time before being closed. Generally, the closure of the canon reflects a belief from the faith community that the formative period of the religion has ended, and that texts from that period can be collected into an authoritative body of work.

The relationship between the closing of the canon and beliefs about the nature of revelation may

be subject to different interpretations. Some believe that the closing of the canon signals the end of a period of divine revelation; others believe that revelation continues even after the canon is closed, either through individuals or through the leadership of a divinely sanctioned religious institution. Among those who believe that revelation continues after the canon is closed, there is further debate about what kinds of revelation is possible, and whether the revelation can add to established theology....

A canonical text is a single authoritative text for each of the books in the canon, one which depends on editorial selections from among manuscript traditions with varying interdependence. Significant separate manuscript traditions in the canonical Hebrew Bible are represented in the Septuagint and its variations from the Masoretic text, which itself was established through the Masoretes' scholarly collation of varying manuscripts, and in the independent manuscript traditions represented by the Dead Sea scrolls. Additional and otherwise unrecorded texts for Genesis and the early chapters of Exodus lie behind the Book of Jubilees. These manuscript traditions attest that even canonical Hebrew texts did not possess any single authorized manuscript tradition in the 1st millennium BC.

New Testament Greek and Latin texts presented enough significant differences that a manuscript tradition arose of presenting diglot texts, with Greek and Latin on facing pages. New Testament manuscript traditions include the Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Bezae, Textus Receptus, Vulgate, and others.

### 2.2.1.1 Establishing a definition

From the above article, one can understand 'canon' as the authoritative list of writings regarded as sacred scripture. The origin of the English word<sup>1</sup> with this particular meaning is from the Greek word κανών (kanon), meaning 'rule,' 'principle,' among many others. Oftentimes one reads 'canon list' meaning a listing of authoritative writings. Also the 'canon of the New Testament' simply designates the list of documents understood to properly belong to the Christian scriptures of the New Testament. For the beginning student of the Bible, this terminology is perhaps completely new and unfamiliar. For those who have worked in this field of biblical studies for any length of time, the terms are familiar and well understood.

The definition of the word then is understandable: the canon of the New Testament simply designates the list of documents that are properly included in the New Testament. These documents are included because they are considered sacred scripture as divinely inspired writings.

The question arises then, 'Who's list?' Fortunately within the vast array of Christian traditions very little variation of listing exists. The vast majority of Christian groups have in one way or another adopted the rather universal list of twenty-seven documents as its official New Testament.

Baptists have uniformly adopted the standard canon list from the earliest times. The Philadelphia Confession of Faith in 1742 listed the books of the Bible considered canonical. The earlier London Baptist Confession in 1689 had set the pattern for British Baptists, and was then followed by the American Baptist tradition beginning with the Philadelphia Confession. Baptist since these earliest days have uniformly followed this pattern with their official declarations of what constitute Holy Scriptures.

### 2.2.1.2 Closed / Open Canon Issue

From the earliest of times the issue of the canon limits has been discussed and debated. As the below history outlines, the second through the fifth centuries was largely the era of canon development. With the large number of documents floating around during the period claiming authoritative status, various Christian groups had to make choices of which document or set of documents to decide upon as authoritative.

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<sup>1</sup>Merriam-Webster online Dictionary:

1can·on: Pronunciation: \ka-nən\ Function: noun

Etymology: Middle English, from Old English, from Late Latin, from Latin, ruler, rule, model, standard, from Greek kanōn

Date: before 12th century

1 a: a regulation or dogma decreed by a church council b: a provision of canon law

2 [Middle English, from Anglo-French, from Late Latin, from Latin, model] : the most solemn and unvarying part of the Mass including the consecration of the bread and wine

3 [Middle English, from Late Latin, from Latin, standard] a: an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture b: the authentic works of a writer c: a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works <the canon of great literature>

4 a: an accepted principle or rule b: a criterion or standard of judgment c: a body of principles, rules, standards, or norms

5 [Late Greek kanōn, from Greek, model] : a contrapuntal musical composition in which each successively entering voice presents the initial theme usually transformed in a strictly consistent way

From the time of the Latin Vulgate in the early fifth century on the issue of the Bible was a closed discussion. The canon became fixed by 500 AD, that is, it became a 'closed canon.' The issue was a 'non-issue' and thus raised little or no discussion until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. Martin Luther rejected the Apocrypha as sacred scripture for the canon of the Old Testament. Additionally, he questioned the level of usefulness of some of the writings in the New Testament. Using a modified pattern from both Origen in the third century and Eusebius in the fourth century, he created the concept of a 'canon within the canon.' For him, along with the other reformers -- John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli -- as well, the canon of scripture was closed, and excluded the Apocrypha from the Old Testament. The NT writings of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation tended to be regarded as less valuable sources of divine insight and thus were reduced to a secondary status inside the canon of the New Testament. Thus for the next two to three centuries these documents functioned somewhat as an appendix to the rest of the New Testament documents. But beginning in the 1900s this pattern shifted with the rather universal adoption of all twenty-seven documents listed in the sequential order going back to that of Athanasius in 367 AD.<sup>2</sup>

Historic Christianity<sup>3</sup> in both Eastern Orthodoxy, and western Christianity in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism today uniformly understand the canon of the Bible to be closed, that is, fixed and unchangeable. Only cult groups with some attempted identification with Christianity such as the Mormon Church, Christian Science etc. claim an open canon. This is a matter of convenience in order to give credibility to writings such as the *Book of Mormon*, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy. Christianity anchored to the Bible has vigorously rejected as false these aberrations from historical Christian belief. One of the arguments used against the cultic groups is the concept of a closed canon reaching back to the early church in regard to the New Testament, and to the Hebrew scriptures for the Old Testament.

### 2.2.2 History of the Process: Designing the Vehicle

When we begin thinking about the canon of the New Testament, we need to think in terms of a several centuries long process in which early Christians increasingly gained access to various writings that could become sources of insight into what Christians were supposed to believe and how they should behave themselves in daily living. A part of the challenge was to distinguish which **(1)** writings should possess high authority and be regarded as sacred scripture, and **(2)** those which might offer some helpful insight but should not be considered as inspired scripture. Additionally, **(3)** a third category of writings presented the greatest challenge: those which should be considered dangerous because they taught false ideas about Christianity and could lead Christians into heresy, both in belief and practice. Because various Christian communities were scattered all over the Mediterranean world, different conclusions about these issues naturally developed. As time passed different lists of authoritative writings would surface. But gradually a common listing began appearing until it became rather universally adopted by the fourth century.

Many of the writings **(3)** that were used but gradually fell by the wayside with a "heresy" label are known today as the New Testament Apocrypha. Only in the last century have manuscripts of these documents surfaced with archaeological discoveries. Previously most of what we knew about them came from criticisms of them by the Church Fathers.

The middle group **(2)** which were often considered of great value but not to be regarded as sacred scripture include first the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. These individuals lived and worked in the first half of the second Christian century. These individuals and writings include the Didache, the writings of Clement of Rome (2 letters), Ignatius of Antioch (7 short letters), Polycarp of Smyrna (2 documents -- one by him and one about his martyrdom), the Shepherd of Hermas, as well as some fragments of a few other Christian leaders. In some Christian circles toward the end of the second century and well into the third century, some of these writings show up on canon lists, while some of the 27 documents in our New Testament do not appear.

The later groups of the Church Fathers -- the Apologists in the late second and third century; the Latin and Greek Fathers; and other categories -- produced many writings that helped shape the idea of the canon of the New Testament in these early centuries.

Two individuals played an important role at the end of this period in helping settle this issue for most Christians. In 367 AD, Athanasius of Alexandria Egypt issued an Easter Letter to the churches in that part of the world with instructions etc. In this letter he lists the authoritative scriptures that were commonly accepted

<sup>2</sup>For a tabular listing of the canonical books of the Bible by different Christian traditions, see "Books of the Bible" in Wikipedia.com.

<sup>3</sup>Nonetheless, a full dogmatic articulation of the canon was not made until the Council of Trent of 1546 for Roman Catholicism,<sup>[30]</sup> the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563 for the Church of England, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 for British Calvinism, and the Synod of Jerusalem of 1672 for the Greek Orthodox" ["Canon of the Bible," Wikipedia online].

by Christians generally and that should be exclusively used as scripture by Christians in Egypt and North Africa. It lists the same 27 books that compose the canon of the New Testament universally adopted today among Christians. Next came the work of Jerome in translating both the Old and New Testaments into Latin, this translation came to be known as the Vulgate. Jerome adopted the list of Athanasius for the New Testament. He began this work in 382 AD and completed it in 405 AD. Athanasius as a leader of Eastern Christianity helped close the issue of canon for the New Testament in that tradition. Jerome's Vulgate pretty much settled the issue for Western Christianity.

The only variation from this listing of 27 documents has been the Syrian Orthodox Church, which has had trouble accepting the 2 Peter, 2 - 3 John, Jude and the Book of Revelation growing out of its use of the Peshitta, a Syriac translation dating back to the early 400s. Modern Syriac Christian translations usually contain these writings based on a seventh century translation. They held for a long time to the idea of a three fold general letters section -- James - 1 Peter -- 1 John. This was widely adopted early on, but gradually was expanded by most Christian groups into a seven fold section with the addition of 2 Peter, 2-3 John, and Jude. Adoption of this seven fold general letters section came much slower for Syrian Christians.

For Christians in the West, this list of 27 documents has continued to be regarded as the scripture of the New Testament. The Council of Trent (1545) made this list official for Roman Catholics. Protestant Christians, especially Martin Luther, pretty much accepted this list of 27 documents. But for Luther a struggle developed not about whether the 27 documents should be considered scripture or not. Rather, he went back to the Church Father Origen in the third century AD and found a basis for adopting a "Canon within the Canon" listing. He proposed differing levels of canonicity inside the New Testament canon, largely based on how strongly each document stressed "justification by faith in Christ," as is described below:

Initially Luther had a low view of the books of Esther, Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. He called the Epistle of James "an epistle of straw," finding little in it that pointed to Christ and His saving work. He also had harsh words for the book of Revelation, saying that he could "in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it." [3] He had reason to question the apostolicity of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation because the early church categorized these books as antilegomena, meaning that they were not accepted without reservation as canonical. Luther did not, however, remove them from his editions of the Scriptures. His views on some of these books changed in later years.

Luther chose to place in the Apocrypha, an inter-testamental section of his bible, those portions of the Old Testament found in the Greek Septuagint but not in the Hebrew Masoretic text. These were included in his earliest translation, but were later set aside as "good to read" but not as the inspired Word of God. The setting aside (or simple exclusion) of these texts in/from Bibles was eventually adopted by nearly all Protestants (See Biblical canon).

This listing of some books more as an appendix at the back of the Luther Bibel continued until the 1904 revision, which then shifted them to the standard sequential listing found in other translations. It's easy to criticize Luther at this point. But I have challenged preachers over the past 40 years to take a look at their sermon files. Very few preachers have preached sermons from all 27 documents in the New Testament. Most have concentrated their preaching and teaching ministry on a dozen or so of the 27 books of the New Testament. While we would not openly adopt Luther's position on a "Canon within the Canon" the reality is that our actual "canon of the New Testament" is those parts of the New Testament that we teach and preach from.

From a Roman Catholic perspective, George J. Reid (Catholic Encyclopedia) provides a very accurate and helpful summary:

The idea of a complete and clear cut canon of the New Testament existing from the beginning, that is from Apostolic times, has no foundation in history. The Canon of the New Testament, like that of the Old, is the result of a development, of a process at once stimulated by disputes with doubters, both within and without the Church, and retarded by certain obscurities and natural hesitations, and which did not reach its final term [in Roman Catholic circles] until the dogmatic definition of the Tridentine Council [13 December, 1545].

Most Christian groups today would regard the canon of the Bible as "closed." That is, God in His providence has guided us into the listing of all the documents that Christians should regard as sacred scripture. Some cultic groups down the way have taken the view that the canon is still "open" to the addition of more documents to be regarded as sacred scripture at some level. The Mormons have the Book of Mormon; Christian Scientists have the writings of Mary Baker Eddy.

### **2.2.2.1 The second Christian century (100 to 200 AD)**

The key individuals etc. for the second Christian century that played important roles in the canonization of the New Testament are Marcion, the Muratorian fragment, the Diatessaron, Tertullian and Irenaeus of Lyons.

Other writings and church fathers will contribute to the discussion as well during this era.

Although it is not completely clear how the dynamics worked, a major impetus that propelled the process of canonization came from a renegade Christian leader on the Italian peninsula, Marcion of Sinope. His radical approach to a canon of New Testament scriptures coupled with an equally radical view of Christianity caused a stiff reaction from more traditional Christian leaders. The booming success of Marcion's movement on the Italian peninsula in quickly coming to dominate the Christian communities there forced reaction and criticism of him. Just how widely the written NT documents were being used in Christian communities around the Mediterranean world is not real clear. But a wide variety of Christian writings beyond those in our New Testament were produced during this second century. Most of these were coming either from Christian leaders of different movements or else from unnamed members of many of these movements who wrote and attached the name of a first century leader to the document in order to gain credibility for their writing. Many of these writings now fall under the label New Testament Apocrypha; English translations of most of these documents are now available through the internet for those desiring to read the contents and read about the documents. Thus some of the movement toward a canon in the second century was reactionary and was driven by hostile forces. When one comes to the late second century fathers of Tertullian and Irenaeus, the pattern is still to assert what is authoritative over against what is heretical and should be rejected. Not until the third century does a less emotional approach become more common in these discussions.

#### 2.2.2.1.1 Marcion, (ca. 150 AD)

This summary from the Wikipedia article on the "Biblical canon" offers a helpful overview:

Marcion of Sinope: c. 150, was the first of record to propose a definitive, exclusive, unique canon of Christian scriptures. (Though Ignatius did address Christian scripture, before Marcion, against the heresies of the Judaizers and Docetists, he did not publish a canon.) Marcion rejected the theology of the Old Testament, which he claimed was incompatible with the teaching of Jesus regarding God and morality. The Gospel of Luke, which Marcion called simply the Gospel of the Lord, he edited to remove any passages that connected Jesus with the Old Testament. This was because he believed that the god of the Jews, YHWH, who gave them the Jewish Scriptures, was an entirely different god than the Supreme God who sent Jesus and inspired the New Testament. He used ten letters of Paul as well (excluding Hebrews and the Pastoral epistles) assuming his Epistle to the Laodiceans referred to canonical Ephesians and not the apocryphal Epistle to the Laodiceans or another text no longer extant. He also edited these in a similar way. To these, which he called the Gospel and the Apostolicon, he added his Antithesis which contrasted the New Testament view of God and morality with the Old Testament view of God and morality. By editing he thought he was removing judaizing corruptions and recovering the original inspired words of Jesus and Paul. 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. Henry Wace in his introduction [4] of 1911 stated: "A modern divine. . . could not refuse to discuss the question raised by Marcion, whether there is such opposition between different parts of what he regards as the word of God, that all cannot come from the same author." The Catholic Encyclopedia of 1913 stated: "they were perhaps the most dangerous foe Christianity has ever known." Adolf von Harnack in *Origin of the New Testament* [5], 1914, 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 it gradually formulated its New Testament canon in response to the challenge posed by Marcion.



The precise impact of Marcion on the process of canonization of the New Testament is debated among New Testament scholars in modern times. The older view is that Marcion by his adoption of a splintered canon triggered the process of canonization by orthodox churches in reaction to his work. But increasingly this view is questioned at the point of Marcion having played such a major role in this process. Most scholars today understand the process as more complex than this, although Marcion was a factor he was only one of several dynamics moving Christianity in general toward a canon of New Testament scripture. I suspect modern scholarship is moving the right direction.

#### 2.2.2.1.2 Muratorian Canon, (ca. 170 AD)

This summary from the Wikipedia article on the "Biblical canon" offers a helpful overview:

Muratorian fragment [6]: this 7th century Latin manuscript is often considered to be a translation of the first non-Marcion New Testament canon, and dated at between 170 (based on an internal reference to Pope Pius I and arguments put forth by Bruce Metzger) and as late as the end of the 4th century (ac-

According to the Anchor Bible Dictionary<sup>[3]</sup>). This partial canon lists the four gospels and the letters of Paul, as well as two books of Revelation, one of John, another of Peter (the latter of which it notes is not often read in the churches). It rejects the Epistle to the Laodiceans and Epistle to the Alexandrians both said to be forged in Paul's name to support Marcionism.

The fragmentary nature of the existing manuscripts of this ancient document limit its helpfulness.

The fragment is a seventh-century Latin manuscript bound in an eighth or seventh century codex that came from the library of Columban's monastery at Bobbio; it contains internal cues which suggest that the original was written about 170 (possibly in Greek), although some have regarded it as later. The copy "was made by an illiterate and careless scribe, and is full of blunders" (Henry Wace<sup>[1]</sup>). The poor Latin and the state that the original manuscript was in has made it difficult to translate. The fragment, of which the beginning is missing and which ends abruptly, is the remaining section of a list of all the works that were accepted as canonical by the churches known to its anonymous original compiler. It was discovered in the Ambrosian Library in Milan by Father Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672 – 1750), the most famous Italian historian of his generation, and published in 1740.<sup>[1]</sup>

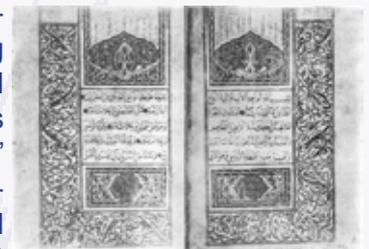
It provides some insight into the evolving process of canonization at the end of the second century. From this we are made aware of the widespread acceptance of four gospels, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul excluding Hebrews, 'two letters' of John, but which two we're not sure, Jude. The Apocalypse of Peter is clearly rejected as having worthwhile spiritual value.

Thus by the late second century Christian churches are forming a canon of New Testament scriptures, but this is 'in process' and far from settled.

### 2.2.2.1.3 Diatessaron, (150 - 160 AD)

This summary from the Wikipedia article on the "Biblical canon" offers a helpful overview:

Diatessaron: c. 173, a one-volume harmony of the four Gospels, translated and compiled by Tatian the Assyrian into Syriac. In Syriac speaking churches, it effectively served as the only New Testament scripture until Paul's letters were added during the 3rd century. Some believe that Acts was also used in Syrian churches alongside the Diatessaron, however, Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 4.29.5 states: "They, indeed, use the Law and Prophets and Gospels, but interpret in their own way the utterances of the Sacred Scriptures. And they abuse Paul the apostle and reject his epistles, and do not accept even the Acts of the Apostles." (There were many books with the title of 'Acts', written about the same time by different writers. Moreover, at one time the Gospel of Luke and the biblical 'Acts' appear to have been one continuous document.) In the 4th century, the *Doctrine of Addai* lists a 17 book NT canon using the Diatessaron and Acts and 15 Pauline epistles (including 3rd Corinthians). The Diatessaron was eventually replaced in the 5th century by the Peshitta, which contains a translation of all the books of the 27-book NT except for 2 John, 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude and Revelation and is the Bible of the Syriac Orthodox Church where some members believe it is the original New Testament, see Aramaic primacy.



This document represents a failed effort to combine the four gospels into a single narrative. The importance of this for our consideration of the canon is that time and divine providence convinced Christianity in general of the value of the four separate stories of Jesus. In the Syriac speaking branch of early Christianity, several attempts were made to alter the sources of Christian understanding, but without success.

### 2.2.2.1.4 Tertullian, (ca 160 - 220 AD)

This summary from the Wikipedia article on Tertullian provides some insight into his view of scripture in the discussion about the *regula fidei*.

5. With reference to the rule of faith, it may be said that Tertullian is constantly using this expression and by it means now the authoritative tradition handed down in the Church, now the Scriptures themselves, and perhaps also a definite doctrinal formula. While he nowhere gives a list of the books of Scripture, he divides them into two parts and calls them the *instrumentum* and *testamentum* (*Adv. Marcionem*, iv. 1). He distinguishes between the four Gospels and insists upon their apostolic origin as accrediting their authority (*De praescriptione*, xxxvi.; *Adv. Marcionem*, iv. 1-5); in trying to account for Marcion's treatment of the Lucan Gospel and the Pauline writings he sarcastically queries whether the "shipmaster from Pontus" (Marcion) had ever been guilty of taking on contraband goods or tampering with them after they were aboard (*Adv. Marcionem*, v. 1). The Scripture, the rule of faith, is for him fixed and authoritative (*De corona*, iii.-iv.). As opposed to the pagan writings they are divine (*De testimonio animae*, vi.). They contain



all truth (*De praescriptione*, vii., xiv.) and from them the Church drinks (*potat*) her faith (*Adv. Praxeam*, xiii.). The prophets were older than the Greek philosophers and their authority is accredited by the fulfilment of their predictions (*Apol.*, xix.-xx.). The Scriptures and the teachings of philosophy are incompatible, in so far as the latter are the origins of sub-Christian heresies. "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" he exclaims, "or the Academy with the Church?" (*De praescriptione*, vii.). Philosophy as pop-paganism is a work of demons (*De anima*, i.); the Scriptures contain the wisdom of heaven. However Tertullian was not averse to using the technical methods of Stoicism to discuss a problem (*De anima*). The rule of faith, however, seems to be also applied by Tertullian to some distinct formula of doctrine, and he gives a succinct statement of the Christian faith under this term (*De praescriptione*, xiii.).

One would need to clearly understand the distinction between Rule of Faith and scripture in Tertullian. The Rule of Faith, *regula fidei* in the Latin, represented at this point the largely oral transmission of Christian belief that had developed by the end of the second century. It was separate from the emerging New Testament scriptures but was thought to accurately reflect understanding of them. Thus the doctrinal system incorporated in the Rule of Faith stood as the growing official doctrinal stance of western Christianity. Whether a writing adhered to this belief system or not largely determined whether the writing was orthodox or heretical.

But for canonization interests, Tertullian reflects a rather well established concept of there being a New Testament of sacred scriptures. He does reflect a strong view of the divine inspiration of these documents being used as scripture.

#### 2.2.2.1.5 Irenaeus of Lyons, (ca. 125 - 202 AD)

This summary from the Wikipedia article on the "Biblical canon" offers a helpful overview:

Irenaeus of Lyons: c. 185, claimed that there were exactly four Gospels, no more and no less, as a touchstone of orthodoxy. He argued that it was illogical to reject Acts of the Apostles but accept the Gospel of Luke, as both were from the same author. In *Against Heresies* 3.12.12 [7] he ridiculed those who think they are wiser than the Apostles because they were still under Jewish influence. This was crucial to refuting Marcion's anti-Judaizing, as Acts gives honor to James, Peter, John and Paul alike. At the time, Jewish Christians tended to honor James (a prominent Christian in Jerusalem described in the New Testament as an apostle and pillar, and by Eusebius and other church historians as the first Bishop of Jerusalem) but not Paul, while Pauline Christianity tended to honor Paul more than James.



This church father represents a view point established in the western Mediterranean region of Lyons in what is now modern France. He served there from 161 to his death except for a short period in Rome around 177 or 178 AD. Most of his discussion of the writings of the New Testament are in the context of his ongoing fight with Gnosticism and thus he never discusses the issue of canonization directly like either Origen or Eusebius. Thus the insight to be gleaned from his writings is limited, but does reflect a strong positive stance toward the gospels, Acts and the writings of Paul in particular.

#### 2.2.2.2 The third Christian century (200 to 300 AD)

While the second century largely reflects ongoing conflict with Marcion and emerging Gnosticism in the emerging ideas of the New Testament as a body of sacred scripture, the third century provides a more reflective consideration of the writings of the New Testament as scripture. Yet the extent writings of the church fathers on this topic during the third century is very limited. Origen provides unquestionably the greatest detail on this topic.

#### 2.2.2.2.1 Origen, (185 - 254 AD)

See "Development of the New Testament Canon," Theopedia for this brief summary

In the early 300's [actually, the early 200s], Origen lists the four Gospels, Paul's 13 letters, one letter each of Peter and John, and the Revelation. He also notes that Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude, amongst other documents were debated by some.



Richard Carrier, *The Formation of the New Testament Canon*, has a more helpful summary

In 203 A.D. Origen became head of the Christian seminary at the age of 18, a true prodigy. Due to a dispute with the bishop of Alexandria, Origen was expelled from that church and his post around 230 A.D., and he went and founded a second seminary at Caesarea which stole the spotlight from Alexandria. Origen is crucial in the tradition because he is known to have

traveled widely, West and East, and was a voracious scholar and prodigious writer and commentator on the OT, NT and other texts. He is also exceptional in being a relatively skeptical scholar. Even though only a fraction of his works have survived, even those fill volumes (M 135-6). He completes what had already been going on by this point by declaring certain texts to be equally inspired alongside the OT and calling them, as a corpus, the “New Testament” (De Principiis 4.11-16).

Origen declared the Tatian four in 244 A.D. as the only trustworthy, inspired Gospels (M 136-7), simply because they are the only Gospels that no one “disputes” (M 191; cf. Eusebius, Church History 6.25), although we have seen that these “disputes” were usually doctrinal in nature (for instance, Origen is not counting the opinion of men like Marcion with whom he disagrees doctrinally, cf. V), and the trust placed in the Tatian four was likely out of respect for the decisions of the first Christian scholars (Justin and his pupil Tatian). There is no sign that Origen was employing here any objective historical or textual criteria. Nevertheless, Origen also declares that the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Book of James* (the *Protoevangelium Jacobi*) are also trustworthy and approved by the church, and he puts some trust in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, and even calls the book of Hermas “divinely inspired” (c. 244-6 A.D., *Commentary on Romans* 10.31). Like his tutor, Clement, he also includes the *Didakhe* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* as scripture (M 187). Yet he still passes on as authentic various oral traditions of the sayings of Jesus that are found nowhere else (M 137).

Origen doubts the authenticity of 2 (and 3) John and 2 Peter, and in 245 A.D. admits some doubts about the author, not the validity, of the Epistle to the Hebrews (M 138), suggesting that it may have been written by Luke or Clement of Rome, not Paul -- and for this he uses the evidence of significant differences in style and quality of language; but Origen’s tutor, Clement of Alexandria, suggested it was originally written by Paul in Hebrew and translated into Greek by Luke or Clement. Origen writes at length on the brother of Jesus but he never mentions the Epistles of James as being by him (Commentary on Matthew 2.17). It appears that, thanks to Origen’s exhaustive scholarship (perhaps tinted slightly by the pressure to remain orthodox and exclude perceived heretics), and received tradition beginning with Tatian, the NT was almost entirely accepted in its present form by 250 A.D., and not much changed from its apparent form in 180, though nothing as yet was ‘official’.

Origen became the first church father to distinguish in writing between accepted and disputed documents as sacred scripture. This division of documents into those that were widely held as Holy Scripture and those where differing views about their inspiration existed further acknowledges the developing process of canonization. To be sure, Origen is mostly reporting what was taking place in the early 200s, rather than arguing a particular viewpoint. In his writings he also makes it clear that many other documents are to be rejected since they advocated heresy. Those books that would eventually “make it” into the New Testament were being tested and challenged by Christian experience during this century. Much persecution of Christianity occurred during this time. And so these documents had to prove their worth to Christians often facing death.

### 2.2.2.3 The fourth Christian century (300 to 400 AD)

The fourth century represents the solidification of the canonization process. Eusebius at the beginning of the century represents a still developing process but Athanasius and Jerome at the end of the century reflect a process that has pretty much solidified into a set canon that is extensively adopted throughout both eastern and western Christianity. To be sure the Syriac speaking Christian tradition had gone its own direction different from either Orthodox or Roman Catholic Christianity. But this represented only a small segment of the larger Christian tradition by this point in time. With Jerome and the Latin Vulgate the canon of the New Testament becomes closed and will remain so in the future.

#### 2.2.2.3.1 Eusebius, (263 - 339 AD)

This summary from the Wikipedia article on the “Biblical canon” offers a helpful overview:

Eusebius, around the year 300, recorded a New Testament canon in his *Ecclesiastical History* Book 3, Chapter XXV:

“1... First then must be put the holy *quaternion* of the Gospels; following them the Acts of the Apostles... the epistles of Paul... the epistle of John... the epistle of Peter... After them is to be placed, if it really seem proper, the Apocalypse of John, concerning which we shall give the different opinions at the proper time. These then belong among the accepted writings.”

“3 Among the disputed writings, which are nevertheless recognized by many, are extant the so-called epistle of James and that of Jude, also the second epistle of Peter, and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong



to the evangelist or to another person of the same name. Among the rejected [Kirsopp Lake translation: “not genuine”] writings must be reckoned also the Acts of Paul, and the so-called Shepherd, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to these the extant epistle of Barnabas, and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles; and besides, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject, but which others class with the accepted books. And among these some have placed also the Gospel according to the Hebrews... And all these may be reckoned among the disputed books”

“6... such books as the Gospels of Peter, of Thomas, of Matthias, or of any others besides them, and the Acts of Andrew and John and the other apostles... they clearly show themselves to be the fictions of heretics. Wherefore they are not to be placed even among the rejected writings, but are all of them to be cast aside as absurd and impious.”

The Apocalypse of John, also called Revelation, is counted as both accepted (Kirsopp Lake translation: “Recognized”) and disputed, which has caused some confusion over what exactly Eusebius meant by doing so. From other writings of the Church Fathers, we know that it was disputed with several canon lists rejecting its canonicity. EH 3.3.5 adds further detail on Paul: “Paul’s fourteen epistles are well known and undisputed. It is not indeed right to overlook the fact that some have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it is disputed by the church of Rome, on the ground that it was not written by Paul.” EH 4.29.6 mentions the Diatessaron: “But their original founder, Tatian, formed a certain combination and collection of the Gospels, I know not how, to which he gave the title Diatessaron, and which is still in the hands of some. But they say that he ventured to paraphrase certain words of the apostle [Paul], in order to improve their style.”

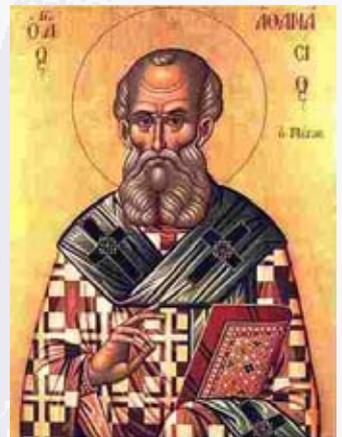
What is clear from Eusebius in his Church History at the beginning of the fourth century is a fairly well defined canon of the New Testament. The four gospels are in place universally. Along with them are Acts and the letters of Paul. In the general letter section is First Peter and First John as undisputed scripture. Revelation may possibly belong in the New Testament, but he isn’t totally sure. Among the uncertain documents are James, Second and Third John, Jude

#### 2.2.2.3.2 Athanasius of Alexandria

This summary from the Wikipedia article on the “Biblical canon” offers a helpful overview:

Athanasius: in 367, in Festal Letter 39 [12] listed a 22 book OT and 27-book NT and 7 books not in the canon but to be read: Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobit, Didache, and the Pastor (probably Hermas). This list is the very similar to the modern Protestant canon. Other differences are his exclusion of Esther and his inclusion of Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah as part of Jeremiah.

The impact of Athanasius on the rest of the Christian world is usually considered substantial. To be sure, Pope Damasus of Rome in 382 published a list identical to that of Athanasius. A synod in Hippo in 293 repeated the list of Athanasius except for the Letter to the Hebrews. But in 397 the synod in Carthage repeated his list with a complete listing of the twenty-seven documents. Sometimes he is labeled the father of the canon of the Bible, but his somewhat unusual designation of a few of the Old Testament documents raises questions about this label. In regard to the New Testament, however, he stands as a singular influence shaping the understanding of the canon of the New Testament.



#### 2.2.2.3.3 Jerome

In translating the Greek New Testament into Latin, Jerome largely followed the model established by Athanasius of Alexandria in selecting which documents to include in his NT. When his Latin Vulgate translation quickly became the standard translation for western Christianity, the canon of the NT was permanently settled in the west.

Regarding Jerome’s influence on the canon of the Bible, it is largely through the influence of his translation of the Bible into Latin. The decisions he made regarding the selection of documents to include and the sequential listing of those documents played a decisive role in setting the issue of the canon of the Bible for centuries to come. The Latin Vulgate of Jerome rapidly became the Bible of western Christianity, so much so that the study of Hebrew and Greek diminished greatly until the Protestant Reformation. This widespread adoption of the Latin translation set in concrete the canon of both testaments of the Bible for centuries to come.



### 2.2.3 History of the Process: Assembling the Pieces

The sequence of putting the groups of the writings together into a finalized list begins with the letters of Paul. It then moves to the gospels. The result is a Jesus and apostle (Paul) list of authoritative writings. The book of Acts comes in as a bridge between Jesus and apostle groups. The apostle section is expanded to include other apostles. First this is set in a threefold, i.e., trinitarian based symbolism, list including James, 1 Peter, and 1 John. The next stage is to expand this into a sevenfold listing with the addition of 2 Peter, 2-3 John, and Jude. Finally, a representative apocalypse is added: the Book of Revelation. The pattern of expansion occurs over a three century period, but not uniformly among all Christian groups. Differing views by Christians in different places existed. Developing views existed in many groups over an extended period of time. But the process of “weeding out” began to come together by the beginning of the 300s for the entire collection. Some sections, however, came together very early, namely the Pauline collection and the gospels.

Putting the picture of this process together in precise detail with great certainty is impossible, because of the lack of data. The information touching on how this all happened is spotty and not always reflecting the same viewpoint. The two most important sources are those of Origen and Eusebius who discuss the issues in much greater detail. And they are not just making personal judgments about the process. Instead, they describe the process mostly in terms of widely held viewpoints among various communities of faith.

The generally recognized guidelines for accepting and rejecting potential candidates for canon listing followed a twofold pattern: **1) traceable connection to one of the original apostles and to Paul**, either directly or indirectly; and **2) whether or not the use of the document produced spiritual health** in both belief and behavior. This was mostly measured by the *Regula Fidei*, the Rule of Faith. This was the orally transmitted understanding of the Christian faith that stood along side the written documents. As I contend in the above linked lecture notes, the modern student of this process who approaches it from a theological angle, rather than just from a strictly historical view, will additionally note the providential presence of God in the process helping the communities to sift out that which wasn't intended to be included. Many, many more candidates for inclusion appeared during these centuries, including both some of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers and the documents of the New Testament Apocrypha. But in the end, only 27 documents stood the test of time.

The process of bringing these documents together seems to have developed in the following order: Paul; Jesus; Acts; other apostles; Revelation.

#### 2.2.3.1 The Pauline Collection

The very limited data that is available suggests that the letters of Pauline were the first group of documents to be brought together to be copied and distributed among the various Christian communities that the apostle had established on his missionary journeys. This process developed rapidly during Paul's writing ministry in the 50s and early 60s of the first century. By the end of the century strong indications suggest that collections of Paul's writings were already in circulation. 2 Peter 3:15b-16 provides the earliest indication of this:

So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.

Paul became the most influential writing apostle of Christianity, and his insights contained in the collection of his letters play a considerable role in shaping Christian understanding.

#### 2.2.3.2 The Gospels

From all indications by the church fathers in the second century, the four gospels -- Matthew, Mark, Luke, John -- began circulation as a collection of documents in the early second century. By 160 AD, Irenaeus strongly defends this fourfold gospel understanding. These evidently came together with the Pauline collection reflecting a Jesus and Paul, i.e., the Lord and the apostles, collection of authoritative writings.

#### 2.2.3.3 Fitting in Acts as a paper clip

With the increasing emphasis on the church and upon the apostles, the book of Acts comes to stand between Jesus and the apostles as something of a 'paper clip' holding the two major sections together. At what precise point this began to surface is not clear. But most likely it took place during the second century. The identification of Luke as its writer played a major role in its acceptance over the other fourteen or so supposed acts of the apostles in the New Testament Apocrypha collection.

#### 2.2.3.4 The Other Apostles Collection

The general epistles, or catholic epistles as sometimes labeled, began under a trinitarian symbol. This meant James, 1 Peter, and 1 John were viewed as authoritative scripture. This seemed to be the dominant

orientation through the third century. But eventually the symbolism of the number seven superseded the trinitarian view. This meant the addition of 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and Jude to the list, and thus completed the seven documents in this section of the New Testament. By the end of the fourth century a seven fold general letter section of the New Testament is firmly established.

The Letter to the Hebrews ultimately is tucked in between the Pauline collection and the general letter collection reflecting its eventual association with the writings of Paul, but also indicating that it never gained a firm footing as a Pauline writing since it stands outside the Pauline collection in the New Testament.

#### 2.2.3.5 Adding Revelation

This book came last not only sequentially in the canon list, but last in time to gain a firm footing for inclusion in the New Testament at all. The Wikipedia article on “Revelation” summarizes the early history well:

In the 4th century, Gregory of Nazianzus and other bishops argued against including this book in the New Testament canon, chiefly because of the difficulties of interpreting it and the danger for abuse.<sup>[8]</sup> Christians in Syria also reject it because of the Montanists’ heavy reliance on it.<sup>[9]</sup> In the 9th century, it was included with the Apocalypse of Peter among “disputed” books in the *Stichometry* of St. Nicephorus, Patriarch of Constantinople. In the end it was included in the accepted canon, although it remains the only book of the New Testament that is not read within the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Thus our New Testament came together over time, and in the way that we know today. Lots of human factors were at work in this process, but people of faith also contend that God was providentially at work through the human factors helping weed out the writings that did not contain the ‘breath of God’ in divine inspiration, and thus could not serve legitimately as sacred scripture.

How do I learn more?

Online

Wikipedia, “The Canon of the Bible”:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_canon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_canon)

Catholic Encyclopedia, “The Canon of the New Testament”:

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03274a.htm>