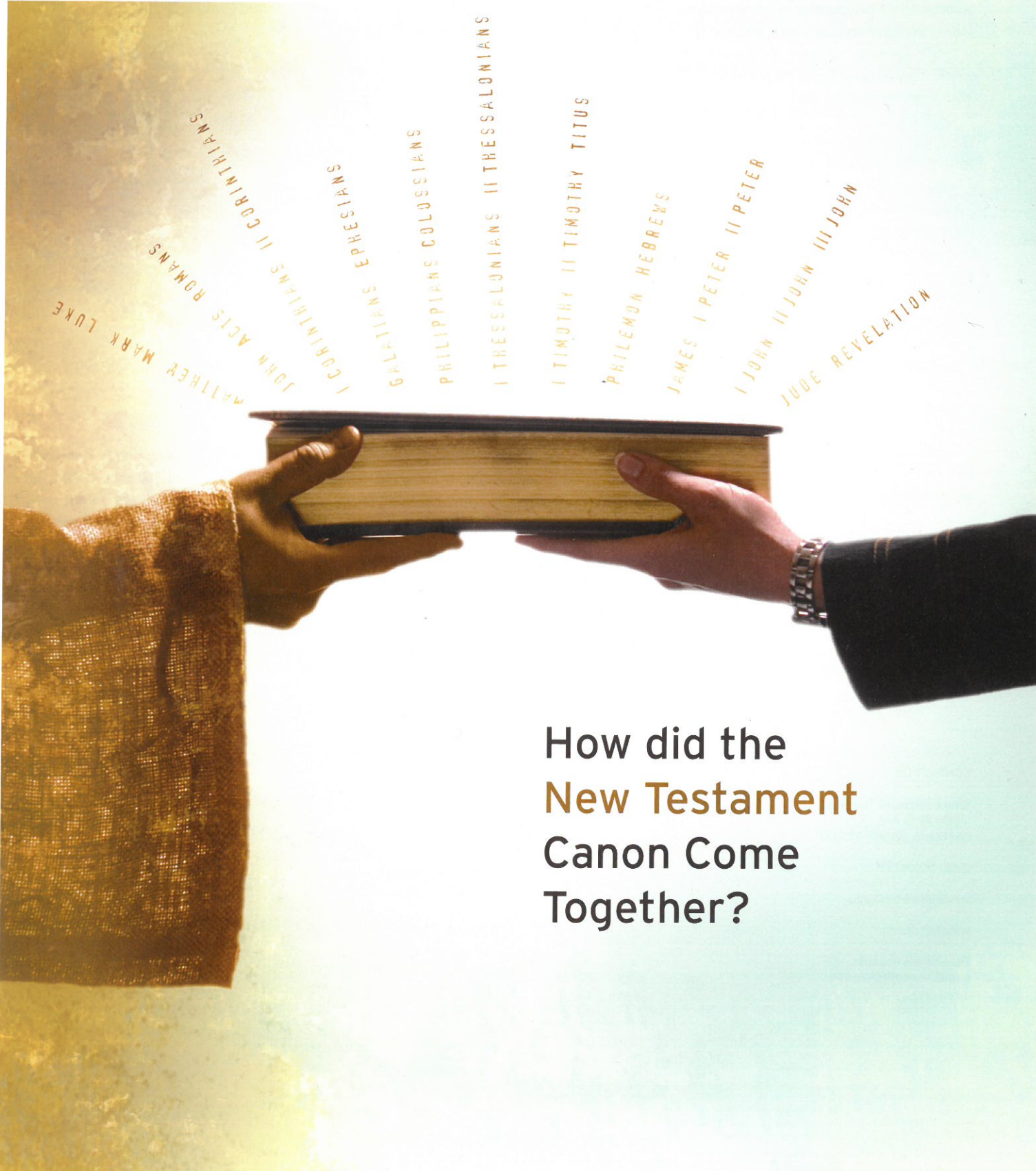


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How did the  
**New Testament**  
Canon Come  
Together?



# HOW DID the NEW TESTAMENT

MATTHEW MARK LUKE  
JOHN ACTS ROMANS  
I CORINTHIANS II CORINTHIANS  
GALATIANS EPHESIANS  
PHILIPPIANS COLOSSIANS  
I THESSALONIANS II THESSALONIANS



# CANON COME TOGETHER?

KENNETH BERDING

I TIMOTHY II TIMOTHY TITUS  
PHILEMON HEBREWS  
JAMES I PETER II PETER  
I JOHN II JOHN III JOHN  
JUDE REVELATION

Recent discussions in the public square have given rise to questions in many people's minds about how we got our **New Testament**. This article will discuss how the New Testament canon came together.





## To keep things clear, early church history will be divided into seven stages so that we can focus upon what was happening at a particular stage regarding the question of the limits of the New Testament canon.

The reader will discover that the church did not arbitrarily decide which books should be in the New Testament; early Christians simply acknowledged the books that were apostolic and orthodox.

### Stage 1: 30s-50s

After Jesus' resurrection, the stories about Jesus and his teachings were passed along orally by the apostles, who were committed to guard the message they proclaimed. From the very beginning of the church, these oral teachings of Jesus were viewed alongside the Old Testament Scriptures as authoritative and binding on all followers of the "Way," as early Christians were called. Furthermore, the apostles' own teaching was authoritative and binding. Acts 2:42 says that the new believers "were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching." The apostles functioned not only as transmitters of the teaching of Christ, but also as prophets in their own right.<sup>1</sup> Thus, from the very beginning, orthodox Christians accepted three streams of authority: 1) the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament), 2) the teachings of the Lord, and 3) the teachings of the apostles.<sup>2</sup>

### Stage 2: 50s-70s

During this period, the first written documents of the apostolic circle (e.g., Paul, James, Peter) mediated the authoritative instruction of these apostles to particular congregations or groups of congregations. Soon, the first written Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke) and Acts were written down

as the apostles began to die off. The gradual loss of guardians of the oral tradition necessitated preserving written records.

There is a self-authentication represented in these writings that is tied to the authority of the apostles who wrote them (cf. Eph 3:5; 2 Thes 2:15; 1 Cor 14:37; and 2 Pet 3:16 which refers to Paul's letters as "scripture"; cf. Rev 22:18-19). The authority of these writings was not transferred back onto the documents by later church decisions; the original recipients of these writings were expected to understand that the authority conferred upon the apostles—who were prophets in their own right—meant that the readers should obey the instructions they received.

### Stage 3: 70s-90s

Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in A.D. 70 and Jewish Christians were scattered. Thus, people who had heard the teaching of the apostles were more likely to reside not in Palestine, but in such places as Asia Minor and Rome. John, who was apparently the last living apostle, composed the last apostolic books to be written: the Gospel of John, 1-3 John, and the Revelation. But even though written records now existed, the oral teaching of Jesus continued to play an important role for those who had known the apostles and had been trained by them.

### Stage 4: 90s-150s

By the end of the first century and beyond, although there were still a few around who felt connected to the apostolic period and who valued the orally-mediated teachings of Jesus (e.g. Papias<sup>3</sup>), written documents played an increasingly important role for Christians. Christians began extensively using the new technology of the day, the codex (book) format, rather than scrolls when they copied their writings. The codex allowed collections more easily to be gathered together than did scrolls.<sup>4</sup>

It has been common for critical scholars to assert that orthodox Christians only began to form collections of Christian writings after Marcion formed a "canon" consisting of a truncated version of Luke and the Pauline letters (except the Pastorals) some time around A.D. 150.<sup>5</sup> But most scholars—including more critical scholars—now consider this idea to be overly skeptical and to be an exaggeration of Marcion's role in the process.<sup>6</sup>

During this period of the "apostolic fathers,"<sup>7</sup> there is evidence that Paul's letters were already circulating as a collection<sup>8</sup> and were regularly being referred to by Christians authoritatively, as were other writings of the apostles. Separately, the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) were probably already circulating together at this time.<sup>9</sup>

## Stage 5: 150s-200s

David Trobisch has argued convincingly (in my opinion) that the New Testament, containing the same 27 books as are found in our New Testament (though in a slightly different order than they are presently arranged), was published at some point in the middle of the second century. Unlike earlier discussions of canon, Trobisch's arguments are based primarily upon evidence from early manuscripts of the New Testament rather than from statements in the church fathers.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that questions were not sometimes raised about particular books; it does mean that the 27 book collection circulated widely from this point forward.

Conflicts with three aberrant groups in particular, (1) Marcionites, with their truncated "canon," (2) Gnostics, who had begun to compose additional gnostic "gospels," and (3) Montanists, who claimed to be recipients of new divine revelation, may have contributed to the acceleration<sup>11</sup> of discussions among orthodox Christians of which books were acceptable and which were unacceptable. Thus, orthodox Christians such as Irenaeus had to affirm the authority of more books than did the Marcionites, exclude Gnostic literature, and stake a claim that the apostolic writings were qualitatively different (in terms of authority) than the new revelations of the Montanists.

Writers from this period and beyond acknowledged authoritative writings by referring to what had been "handed down." The early ecclesiastical writers did not regard themselves as deciding which books to accept or reject. Rather, they saw themselves as acknowledging which books had been handed down to them."<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, during this period—and perhaps even before—various authors began to use or suggest in some way the expression "New Testament," which suggests that they conceived of authoritative writings as cohering in a single collection, rather than simply as unconnected individual writings or various small collections of writings.<sup>13</sup>

By the end of the second century, the four Gospels, Acts, all thirteen of Paul's letters, 1 Peter and 1 John were fully accepted everywhere.<sup>14</sup> It should not escape our notice that these documents about which there was no doubt comprise 86% of our present New Testament.

## Stage 6: 200s-360s

Probably the best way to understand the third and fourth centuries is to view the canon as substantially in place, with questions arising occasionally about individual books. The books sometimes questioned were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, Jude, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation.<sup>15</sup> But even these books were widely accepted, and contrast sharply in terms of use and attestation with non-canonical books. It should be remembered that the manuscript evidence presented by Trobisch becomes very strong in the third century. Though some Christians in some quarters occasionally questioned whether a given book should have been included among the other inspired writings, it seems that the twenty-seven books of our New Testament were widely circulating—sometimes together—during this century and beyond.

In 303 Diocletian ordered an empire-wide persecution of Christians in which Christian books were confiscated and burned.<sup>16</sup> Christians apparently knew which books were sacred and which were not. They had to know which books they could and could not hand over to the officials who wanted to destroy them.

After Christianity was legalized by Constantine, Constantine financed the copying of fifty copies of the "sacred Scriptures" and appointed Eusebius to oversee the task.<sup>17</sup> It should be remembered in this regard that before Constantine, there were no church councils because Christians were an often persecuted and shunned minority. But they also knew which of their writings were worth preserving from the flames of their persecutors.

"The early ecclesiastical writers did not regard themselves as deciding which books to accept or reject. Rather, they saw themselves as acknowledging which books had been handed down to them."

## Stage 7: 360s onward

Although complete lists of the twenty-seven books of our New Testament may have existed earlier, the first extant list of these books that has no additions or deletions is Athanasius's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter (ca. 367). Most lists henceforth included the same books with the exception of Revelation, which is not found on a number of lists from the church in the East.

**Summary:** The teachings of the Lord and his apostles were considered self-authenticating and authoritative from the days they were first spoken/written. As the apostles died off, orthodox Christians continued to use the writings of the apostles as authoritative. Such Christians recognized a distinction between the writings of the apostolic circle and later Christians who wrote edifying material. The church did not establish a canon of its choosing; it is more proper to speak of the church recognizing the books that Christians had always considered to be an authoritative Word from God.





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## NOTES

- 1 "The apostles are the New Testament counterpart to the Old Testament prophets (see 1 Cor. 2:13; 2 Cor. 13:3; Gal. 1:8-9; 11-12; 1 Thess. 2:13, 4:8, 15; 2 Peter 3:2)." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), p. 1050.
- 2 These continued to be the three streams of authority for Christians in the post-apostolic period. Note 1 Clement 45-47; Ignatius, Epistle to the Philadelphians 9.1-2; and Irenaeus, Haer. 2.2.5. Polycarp mentioned the three streams about 120, "As he [Christ] himself commanded us and the apostles who preached the gospel to us and the prophets who announced beforehand the coming of our Lord" (Pol. Phil. 6.3).
- 3 Papias, Interpretation of the Lord's Oracles, quoted in Eusebius, *H.E.* 3.39.1-4.
- 4 See David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 19-21.
- 5 Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott*, 2d ed. (Hinrichs, 1924), 210-15, 441-44; Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker (Fortress, 1972), 148.
- 6 See John Barton, "Marcion Revisited," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Hendrickson, 2002), 342-344.
- 7 The "apostolic fathers" are the first set of Christian literature written after the apostolic age. Normally included in this collection are: 1 Clement, 2 Clement, seven letters of Ignatius, Polycarp's letter(s) to the Philippians, The Martyrdom of Polycarp, The Didache, The Letter of "Barnabas," The Shepherd of Hermas, The Letter to Diognetus, and fragments from Papias.
- 8 See Kenneth Berding, review of Paul Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament* in *WTJ* 64 (2002), 416-417 for comments about Polycarp's probable possession of the entire Pauline corpus and Polycarp and Paul (Brill, 2002), 33-125 for a comprehensive analysis of Polycarp's biblical allusions.
- 9 See Graham Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997): 317-46 for arguments. Note also Everett Ferguson's comment in "Factors Leading to the Selection and Closure of the New Testament Canon: A Survey of Some Recent Studies," in *The Canon Debate*, p. 304, that the separation of Luke from Acts attests to an already extant collection of the four Gospels. Since they are parts one and two of the same book, they had to be separated to make the four-fold Gospel. "And this separation presumably occurred before Marcion, for he accepts Luke but not Acts."
- 10 Trobisch's argument is based upon the recurrent abbreviation in NT manuscripts of nomina sacra, the use of the codex form, commonalities in arrangement of the four earliest "complete editions," and the book titles. Trobisch, *First Edition*.
- 11 Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Clarendon, 1987), p. 99.
- 12 Ferguson, "Factors," in *The Canon Debate*, p. 295. On the same page, Ferguson gives these examples: "In reference to the Gospels, for instance, Irenaeus spoke of 'The gospels handed down to us from the apostles' (Haer. 3.11.9), and 'The gospel handed down to us by the will of God in scriptures' (ibid., 3.1.1). Clement of Alexandria specified 'The four gospels that have been handed down to us' (Strom. 3.13.93). Serapion of Antioch rejected the Gospel of Peter as 'pseudepigraph,' 'knowing that we [orthodox Christians] did not receive such writings' (Eusebius, H. E. 6.12.3)."
- 13 Including Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen, and perhaps also Melito of Sardis and an anonymous anti-Montanist tract. See Trobisch, *First Edition*, pp. 43-44.

## Recognize How Did They Decide the Canon? Patristic Criteria of Authenticity

Starting from the second half of the second century onward, there is clear evidence that there were certain criteria which regularly surfaced in Christian discussions of authoritative books.<sup>1</sup> Three of these were most important. In other words, the following are the tests used by Christians in the first centuries after Christ to be sure that the books being appealed to as authoritative Scripture by Christians were in fact authoritative Scripture.

**1. Orthodoxy.** Was this document in agreement with the accepted body of Christian doctrine (the rule of faith)?

**2. Apostolicity:** A given document had to have been written by one of the original apostles or by a member of the broader apostolic circle. Members of the original Twelve included: Matthew, John, Peter. Members of the broader apostolic circle included: Mark, Luke, Paul, James, Jude and the author of Hebrews.

**3. Antiquity:** The writing had to come from the time of the apostles. This would have excluded almost all writings written after A.D. 70 except those written by John, who was anyway one of the Twelve. Note that from the perspective of later church fathers, any and all writings from the apostolic period to which they had access were included. Everything after the time and circle of the apostles could not be included.

<sup>1</sup> See F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (InterVarsity Press, 1988), 255-269 for a fuller discussion.

**14** Our main evidence for this are statements in Irenaeus and the Muratorian Fragment. Recently, since an article by Sundberg in 1973, some have argued that the fragment is actually from the fourth century (See A. C. Sundberg, "Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 [1973]: 1-41.) But this flies in the face of the statement in the fragment that the Shepherd of Hermas "...was written by Hermas in the city of Rome quite recently, in our own times, when his brother Pius occupied the bishop's chair in the church of the city of Rome." See rejoinder to Sundberg by E. Ferguson, "Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance," *Studia Patristica* 18.2 (1982): 677-683.

**15** Hebrews: The main issue was authorship. Since one of the main criteria was that a document had to come from the time of the apostles, this became difficult for Hebrews since it was not known whom the writer was. But this sermonic letter was evidently written by someone from the time of, and among the broader apostolic circle, as it shows evidence of having been written by someone who knew Timothy (13:23) and before the ceasing of temple sacrifices in A.D. 70 (10:1-2; 8:13).

James: There was apparently a bit of hesitancy toward acceptance of James, as Eusebius seems to indicate (Eusebius, *H.E.* 3.25.3) when he says that it was a "disputed" book, though Eusebius himself seems to have accepted it as genuine since he often quoted James. Clement of Alexandria much earlier apparently wrote a commentary on James, though it is no longer extant. See B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, 6th ed. (Macmillan, 1898; repr. Baker, 1980), pp. 357-58. 2 Peter: There were occasional doubts about whether Peter wrote it. But, as E. M. B. Green notes, even though it is the least externally attested book of the New Testament, it "has incomparably better support for its inclusion than the best attested of the rejected books." E. M. B. Green, *2 Peter Reconsidered* (Tyndale, 1961), p. 5 as cited in D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1992), pp. 434.

Jude: It was used often by writers around the end of the 2nd century and into the 3rd century. But Jude's reference to the book of Enoch created a problem, especially in the 4th century and onward, by people who could not believe that a canonical writer would refer to a piece of non-canonical literature.

2 John and 3 John: They were so small that they were easily overlooked.

Revelation: Justin Martyr attributed it to the apostle John. Clement of Alexandria cited it as Scripture. The main reason some people in the Eastern church had trouble with acceptance of this apocalypse was because of its visionary content, its materialistic eschatology, and, for some, its millenarianism.

**16** Eusebius, *H.E.* 8.2.1 and 4.

**17** Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 4:34, 36-37.