

How the Canon of the New Testament Came to Be

Sources:

F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Intervarsity Press, 1981).

Paul Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations* (Baker, 1999).

How did the New Testament itself as a collection of writings come into being? Who collected the writings, and on what principles? What circumstances led to the fixing of a list, or canon, of authoritative books?

The early church councils did not decide which books got in and which books didn't. They *recognized* which biblical books were already accepted as authoritative within the broad Church. Here are some principles used by the early churches in determining the New Testament canon:

1. Authorship: Was the book written by an apostle or their co-worker?
2. Consistency: Is the book consistent with the other recognized books?
3. Acceptance: Has it received broad acceptance in the rest of the Church?

The historic Christian belief is that the Holy Spirit, who controlled the writing of the individual books, also controlled their selection and collection, thus continuing to fulfill Jesus' promise that He would guide His disciples into all the truth (Jn 16:12-15). This implies the necessity of spiritual discernment. What, however, does historical research reveal about the origin of the New Testament canon. Some say that we receive the 27 books of the New Testament on the authority of the Church; but even if we do, how did the Church come to recognize these 27 and no others as worthy of being placed on a level of inspiration and authority with the Old Testament canon?

It is not quite accurate to say that there has never been any doubt within the Church itself of any of our New Testament books. A few of the shorter Epistles (e.g. 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude) and the Revelation were much longer in being accepted in some parts of the Church than in others; while elsewhere books which we do not now include in the New Testament were received as canonical. Thus the Codex Sinaiticus (c. 330-360 complete NT and half of the Septuagint) included the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas, a Roman work of about AD 110 or earlier, while the Codex Alexandrinus (c. 400-440) included the writings known as the First and Second Epistles of Clement. The inclusion of these works alongside the biblical writings may indicate they were accorded some degree of canonical status.

The earliest list of New Testament books of which we have definite knowledge was drawn up at Rome by the heretic Marcion about 140. Marcion distinguished the inferior Creator-God of the Old Testament from the God and Father revealed in Christ, and believed that the Church ought to jettison all that pertained to the former. He rejected not only the entire Old Testament but also parts of the New Testament which seemed to him to be infected with Judaism. So Marcion's canon consisted of two parts: (a) a revised edition of Luke; and (b) ten of the Pauline

Epistles (the three 'Pastoral Epistles' being omitted). Marcion's list, however, did not represent the current verdict of the Church but a deliberate deviation from it.

Another early list, dated about the end of the second century, is commonly called the Muratorian Fragment, because it was first published in Italy in 1740 by Cardinal Muratori. It is unfortunately mutilated at the beginning, but it evidently mentions Matthew and Mark, because it refers to Luke as the third Gospel; then it mentions John, Acts, Paul's nine letters to churches and four to individuals (Philemon, Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy), Jude, two Epistles of John, and the Apocalypse of John and that of Peter. The Shepherd of Hermas is mentioned as worthy to be read in the Church but not to be included in the number of prophetic or apostolic writings.

The first steps in the formation of a canon of authoritative Christian books, worthy to stand beside the Old Testament canon, which was the Bible of Jesus and His apostles, appear to have been taken about the beginning of the 2nd century, when there is evidence for the circulation of two collections of Christian writings in the Church.

At a very early date it appears that the four Gospels were united in one collection. They must have been brought together very soon after the writing of the Gospel according to John (c. 85). This fourfold collection was known originally as 'The Gospel' in the singular, not 'The Gospels' in the plural. There was only one Gospel, narrated in four records, distinguished as 'according to Matthew,' 'according to Mark,' and so on. About AD 115 Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, refers to 'The Gospel' as an authoritative writing, and as he knew more than one of the four Gospels it may well be that by 'The Gospel' he means the fourfold collection which went by that name.

About AD 170 an Assyrian Christian named Tatian turned the fourfold Gospel into a continuous narrative or 'Harmony of the Gospels,' which for long was the favorite if not the official form of the fourfold Gospel in the Assyrian Church. It was distinct from the four Gospels in the Old Syriac version. It is not certain whether Tatian originally composed his Harmony, usually known as the Diatessaron, in Greek or in Syriac; but as it seems to have been compiled at Rome its original language was probably Greek, and a fragment of Tatian's Diatessaron in Greek was discovered in the year 1933 at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates. At any rate, it was given to the Assyrian Christians in a Syriac form when Tatian returned home from Rome, and this Syriac Diatessaron remained the Authorised Version of the Gospels for them until it was replaced by the Peshitta or 'simple' version in the fifth century.

By the time of Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons in Gaul (AD 180), the idea of a fourfold Gospel had become so widely accepted in the Church at large that he referred to it as an established and recognized fact as obvious as the four cardinal points of the compass or the four winds:

For as there are four quarters of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and as the Church is dispersed over all the earth, and the gospel is the pillar and base of the Church and the breath of life, so it is natural that it should have four pillars, breathing immortality from every quarter and kindling the life

of men anew. It is manifest that the Word, the architect of all things, who sits upon the cherubim and holds all things together, having been manifested to men, has given us the gospel in fourfold form, but held together by one Spirit.

When the four Gospels were gathered together in one volume, Acts was separated from Luke although it is the second part of that gospel. Acts was apparently received as canonical by all except Marcion and his followers. Indeed, Acts occupied a very important place in the New Testament canon, being a pivotal book of the New Testament since it links the Gospels with the Epistles. Its record of the conversion, call, and missionary service of Paul clearly shows his apostolic authority which also gives his 13 letters Biblical authority.

The collection of Paul's writings was brought together about the same time as the collecting of the fourfold Gospel. As the Gospel collection was designated by the Greek word *Euangelion*, so the Pauline collection was designated by the one word *Apostolos*, each letter being distinguished as 'To the Romans,' 'First to the Corinthians,' and so on. Before long, the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews was bound up with the Pauline writings. It was likely written after Paul's death and its author is an associate of Paul's the well-known co-worker Timothy (Hebrews 13:23). Acts, as a matter of convenience, came to be bound up with the 'General Epistles' (those of Peter, James, John and Jude).

The only books about which there was any substantial doubt after the middle of the second century were some of those which come at the end of our New Testament. Origen (185-254), the influential Church theologian from Alexandria, mentions the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen Paulines, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation as acknowledged by all. He says that Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude, with the 'Epistle of Barnabas,' the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, and the 'Gospel according to the Hebrews,' were disputed by some. Eusebius (c. 265-340), church historian and bishop of Caesarea mentions as generally acknowledged all the books of our New Testament except James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, which were disputed by some, but recognized by the majority. In 367 Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, laid down the twenty-seven books of our New Testament as alone canonical. Shortly afterwards Jerome (347-420) and Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo, followed his example in the West. The process farther east took a little longer. It was not until c. 508 that 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation were included in a version of the Syriac Bible in addition to the other twenty two books.

It was especially important to determine which books might be used for the establishment of Christian doctrine, and which might most confidently be appealed to in disputes with heretics. In particular, when Marcion drew up his canon about AD 140, it was necessary for the orthodox churches to know exactly what the true canon was, and this helped to speed up a process which had already begun. It is wrong, however, to talk or write as if the Church first began to draw up a canon after Marcion had published his.

Other circumstances which demanded clear definition of those books which possessed divine authority were the necessity of deciding which books should be read in church services (though

certain books might be suitable for this purpose which could not be used to settle doctrinal questions), and the necessity of knowing which books might and might not be handed over on demand to the imperial police in times of persecution without incurring the guilt of blasphemy.

One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and general apostolic authority, direct or indirect. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa — at Hippo Regius in 393 and at Carthage in 397 — but what these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities.

There are many theological questions arising out of the history of the canon which we cannot go into here; but for a practical demonstration that the Church made the right choice one need only compare the books of the New Testament with those early works that were excluded, or even with the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, to realize the superiority of our New Testament books to these others.

The Church did not, in spite of the breach with Judaism, reject the authority of the Old Testament, but received it as the Word of God following the example of Christ and His apostles. Around AD 150, Justin Martyr, classified the 'Memoirs of the Apostles' along with the writings of the prophets, saying that both were read in meetings of Christians (*First Apology* chapt 67).

The oldest manuscripts of the LXX include 2nd century BCE fragments of Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Rahlfs nos. 801, 819, and 957), and 1st century BCE fragments of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and the Minor Prophets (Rahlfs nos. 802, 803, 805, 848, 942, and 943). Relatively complete manuscripts of the LXX postdate the Hexaplar rescension and include the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus of the 4th century and the Codex Alexandrinus of the 5th century. These are indeed the oldest surviving nearly-complete manuscripts of the Old Testament in any language.