

Understanding the Formation of the New Testament

The New Testament canon is made up of different books which were regarded as being divinely inspired (inspired by God) by the early church. The term *canon* held the original meaning of “measuring reed” but later acquired a metaphorical one meaning “a standard.” The New Testament canon consists of those books accepted as the standard governing Christian beliefs and conduct.

During the pre-canonical period, Christians did not have what we call the New Testament. Their only form of the Bible was the Old Testament and most did not own one. The early Christians depended upon not only the Old Testament, but also oral tradition concerning the words and deeds of Jesus and upon the messages from God which were told to them through Christian prophets of that day. Many of these New Testament books (letters) were not distributed geographically to the other churches and areas at the time they had been written. This took a while to happen. These Christian writers also wrote many other books and letters. Some of these were considered good and others bad or inferior.

Paul’s letters and those of the Gospels received indictment into the canon very quickly opposed to most others. These are called the *homologoumena* or “the confessed.” Other letters took longer to arrive to canonicity. This was mostly due to their lack of circulation amongst believers and their brevity. Opposed to the willing acceptance of Paul’s letters, that of Hebrews and 2nd Peter were questioned and debated. The book of Hebrews was questioned because of the uncertainty of its author and 2nd Peter was hesitantly adopted because of the style difference between its Greek and that of

1st Peter. This raised doubts about 2nd Peter's apostolic claim. Letters such as these are called the *antilegomena* or the "contradicted."

Quotations from our early church fathers of the New Testament books help us to recognize what they regarded as canonical at that time.¹ This is not the only means by which we arrive at our canon but is very helpful to the process. After time passed, a list of these "chosen" books was compiled by a man named Marcion. Marcion's canon dates from ca. A.D. 144. It consists of only Paul's letters and the book of Luke, which has omitted material. However, the church as a whole had accepted the books left out by Marcion. Proof of this is found in the reaction of Orthodox Christians against them--as these are now found in the New Testament today. The New Testament books we have today were recognized overall by the fourth and fifth centuries. All others were excluded from the canon. During these two centuries, church councils created existing belief and practice concerning this canon.

The early church evaluated all of these books when choosing which would be canonized and which would be "trashed." The idea of creating a canon and having one implies in itself that God has guided the early church in these tasks. The truly inspired texts were canonized while the others were not. This process, once again, did not happen over night. It took many years to develop this canon. A lot of time and effort, prayer and fasting, and debating and studying went into this process. When differences of opinions arose, it would be debated. A book was never accepted without evaluation and/or debate. If one was to read the *subapostolic writings* and the *New Testament apocrypha* one will discover that critical judgment went into these decisions.

¹ A later attestation to inspired books which parallels our canon today was made by Athanasius around A.D. 296-373).

The Subapostolic writings are the books written during the period after the twelve apostles by the “apostolic fathers.” They themselves did not belong to the Twelve but succeeded them in leadership of the church. Some of these writings include: *1st and 2nd Clement; Letters of Ignatius; the Letter of Barnabas; Shepherd of Hermas; Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and the *Writings of Papias*.

Examples:

“This teaching of theirs [Christians] has not been discovered by the intellect or cogitation of busy people, nor do they advocate a human dogma, as some do...They live in their own father lands, but as sojourners. They share all things as citizens, and endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland; and every fatherland, a foreign country. They marry as all do, but they do not expose their offspring...They pass their time on earth, but have their citizenship in heaven” (*Letter to Diognetus* 5:3, 5-6, 9).

“I am dying willingly for God’s sake, if you do not hinder it...Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, through which I can attain to God. I am God’s heat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread of Christ. Rather, entice the wild beasts that they may become my tomb...Then I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ” (*Letter of Ignatius to the Romans* 4:1-2, on the way to martyrdom).

The New Testament Apocrypha consists of fanciful and heretical books. They do not gain acceptance as being canonical by any major branch of the Christian Church.

Example:

“Even so my mother, the Holy Spirit, took me by one of my hairs and carried me away onto the great mountain Tabor” (Jesus in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, according to Origen, *Commentary on John* 2.12.87).

There were various suggestions for required criteria to prove canonical acceptance. There were two main suggestions. The first of these was the edification and moral effect a single writing had, along with its agreement with oral tradition of apostolic doctrine. The second deals with apostolicity. This one is more crucial than the first. This requires a text to be authored by an apostle or apostolic associate and the date of the writing must be within the apostolic period.

Examples:

- Mark is associated with Peter and Paul
- Luke is associated and worked alongside of Paul
- The author of Hebrews shows a close theological contact with Paul's theology.
- James and Jude were half/step brothers of Jesus and associates of the early church apostles in Jerusalem.
- Traditionally, all other authors in the New Testament were apostles: Matthew, John, Peter, and Paul.

Jesus affirmed the full authority of the Old Testament as scripture but He made his words and deeds equally authoritative, promising the apostles that the Holy Spirit would remind them of his ministry, teach them of its significance, and reveal to them further truth. Look at Luke 24:44. The New Testament canon consists of the authoritative record and interpretation of God's self-revelation through his son Jesus Christ on earth. Through all that Jesus did, his words and deeds did not fall below his view of the Old Testament as God's word. The closing of the canon created by limiting it to the apostolic book's, rose out of recognition that God's revelation in Jesus Christ his son needs no improvement.

During the apostolic age, they did not have notebook paper, typewriters, or computers to copy their words. They primarily used what is known as papyrus. This was usually shipped from Egypt and at times expensive and scarce. Papyrus is like thick notebook paper made out of a papyri plant. It takes many days to create and becomes brittle after a while. Because of this it does not last long periods of time.

This material was used for most of the New Testament. Most of its authors used scrolls and a few used codices (bound books). Among Christians, the codex became a popular format. An author would usually dictate to a secretary who was called an *amanuensis*. Sometimes they were given the freedom in the word choice of a document which is attributed to some of our textual issues.

Copying became more and more of a demand. The original document is called the *autograph*. The first copies of these New Testament letters were copied by hand in the event that an individual or a church wished to obtain their own personal copy for study. As time went on the demand grew for these copies. A reader began to dictate to a group of copyists (often done in copying the Old Testament and in the Hebrew schools). As this began, like in the Old Testament, errors of sight and sound, inadvertent omissions and repetitions, marginal notes, and deliberate theological and grammatical “improvements” slipped into the texts. A concern for textual purity led to the comparing of manuscripts. Eventually, after these documents began to become more and more valued, longer lasting materials were used in place of papyri. The two most prominent were *vellum* (treated calf skin) and *parchment* (sheep skin).

The earliest known manuscripts were written in all capital letters. As time progressed they began to be written in small, cursive letters. Word divisions, punctuation marks, and chapters and verses did not exist. The earliest manuscript we have is from the 2nd century. The very earliest of these is the Ryland’s Fragment of John from A.D. 135. Most of the variant readings have to do with spelling, word order, and other inconsequential items.

Textual Criticism is the study of the original wording of the New Testament. By comparing Greek manuscripts, ancient translations, quotes in the early church father’s writings, and lectionaries, scholars can decide among variant readings with a fair degree of certainty.

John Wycliffe produced a translation from Jerome’s Latin Vulgate in 382. William Tyndale then translated from the original Greek in 1525 and the Roman Catholic

Dovay Version appeared in 1582. The widely known King James Version, or “Authorized Version,” came to be in 1611. But, even within the last 150 years, numerous papyri have been found that these early translators did not know about. This accounts for the reasons for all of the current day translations. Among these are: ASV (1901); RSV (1946); ERV (1881); NEB (1961); NAS (1963); Jerusalem Bible (1966); TEV (1966); NIV (1978); ESV (2001); and the NET (2011). When it comes to a translation, we must remember that no one translation is perfect. We also must remember that one should base their belief of a certain translation off of the original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic rather than off of what they *think* is best. Arguing for one translations accuracy over another based upon knowledge of only the English language and hear-say is similar to the blind leading the blind. Check your sources!²

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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² For further study concerning translations, there is no better source (assuming one does not know the original languages) than Jack P Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation*, 2nd ed. (Hester Publications, 1991).