

LESSON 6



Historical Theology

III. How the New Testament was Created¹

It is easy to forget that the earliest Christians did not yet have the New Testament. They had the Scriptures of Judaism – what is now called the Old Testament – but they had no writings of their own until Paul started to write to the churches he had founded, sometime in the late 40s and early 50s AD, a couple of decades after the crucifixion of Jesus. The gospels were not written till later still, probably in the 70s-90s AD. Until then, the stories about Jesus and his sayings must have circulated orally. A generation or two of Christians thus managed without a written record of Jesus. In ‘New Testament times,’ there was no New Testament.

Many suggest information about Jesus prior to it being written down in the gospels were the “traditions” referred to by the apostle Paul.

Article Seventeen – What is Progressive Revelation?

Article Eighteen – A Study of Canonicity

Article Nineteen - THE NEW TESTAMENT AS IT GAINED ACCEPTANCE BY THE EARLY CHURCH

A. Agreeing on the Gospels

How did the individual letters and gospels come to be regarded as holy scripture, alongside the older corpus of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible? In *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown popularized the theory that it was not until the fourth century that the Church decided what was to be in the New Testament, selecting from a vast body of gospels and other books that had been written by Christians of various persuasions.

In particular, he claimed that the Church authorities conspired to suppress many gospels that presented Jesus in very human terms and had a positive view of the body, in favor of an altogether more ethereal idea of Christianity and its founder. Until then, he asserted, Christian scripture had been much more of a free-for-all. Thus, the turning point for the Christian faith lay in the second half of the fourth century, when ‘orthodox’ bishops tendentiously [one sided] excluded ‘heretical’ writings from the Christian biblical canon, at councils such as Laodicea (363 AD), Rome (382 AD), and Hippo (393 AD). The mood was summed up in the 39th Festal Letter of bishop Athanasius, in 367 AD, which listed exactly the books that now form the New Testament as the only ones to be accepted and believed.

Video - Mike Licona - The Target of Canonicity <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXGtKQsMO3s>

“The vast majority of New Testament books were clearly recognized as inspired Scripture and thus part of the Bible. To put this in perspective, roughly 11 of the 260 chapters of the New Testament were disputed.”²

Like so many conspiracy theories, Brown's is fatally flawed. There were indeed a good many gospels besides the four now in the New Testament, but they were almost all much later in origin than the canonical ones, the sole possible exception being the Gospel of Thomas – a collection of Jesus' sayings that includes some not now in the New Testament. There are also letters and apocalypses – that is, books purporting to offer revelations from God in the same way as the Book of Revelation – claiming to come from various apostles, but they are also from the late second century at the earliest. These texts are occasionally cited by early Christian writers, but overwhelmingly less than the books that found their way into the New Testament. Like the decisions of the various councils, Athanasius' Letter is not innovative but records the books on which Christians were already agreed – with just a small penumbra [uncertainty] of doubt about a few marginal cases such as the second and third Letters of John.

B. Between Significance and Scripture

The turning point, at which our present New Testament books ceased to be occasional writings and became scripture, was really in the second century. By the time of Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165 AD) and Irenaeus (ca. 130-202 AD) we find extensive quotations from New Testament books; while the First Letter of Clement, addressed to the church in Corinth, quotes Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

Within the New Testament itself there is already a hint that Paul's letters are coming to be regarded as scriptural, like the Old Testament: the second Letter of Peter, a canonical though pseudonymous work probably from the late first century, says that there are obscurities in Paul's writings which perverse people twist to their own liking 'as they do the other scriptures' (**2 Peter 3:16**). By the 240s, Origen (184-253 AD) could write a commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew, just as he also wrote one, for example, on the Old Testament book of Joshua. By then Matthew was, simply, Scripture. Quotations from what we know as the New Testament far outweigh those from works later rejected as heretical. To cope with that, any conspiracy theory would need to show that the works of a host of Christian writers had been heavily redacted by 'orthodox' editors.

There was certainly a stage before the now-canonical gospels and epistles were seen as parts of the Bible. Between being written in the first century and coming to be regarded as scripture in the latter half of the second, there was a time when they were not yet cited using formulae such as 'it is written', which marks out quotations from the Old Testament. They were seen as something different from Old Testament Scripture, because they were known to be recent works. But their newness made them if anything more, rather than less, important than the old scriptures, and there are early second-century works that actually cite them more than they do the Old Testament.

C. Acceptance into 'The Bible'

The distinction between scripture – old, venerable and of Jewish origin – and the books that would come to form the New Testament, is most vividly apparent in the fact that the latter were **not written on scrolls, but in codices**. The codex was an informal vehicle, something like **a notebook in status**, which did not catch on as a form of text for high-level writings until well after this. But Christians used it from the beginning for their own works, as if to assert that these were not 'biblical', even though they were of enormous importance for the nascent [budding / emerging] Church.

Thus, there are **four stages** in the formation of the New Testament.

1. The books were written a considerable time after the time of Jesus himself [decades NOT centuries].
2. In the early second century they were regarded as hugely significant, in some ways more so than the Old Testament, yet they were not themselves 'scripture'.
3. By the end of that century they were coming to be treated as parts of a bipartite Bible consisting of Old and New Testaments.
4. And finally, in the fourth century, ecclesiastical writers began to list them formally, recognizing decisions already taken in the past that these were the Christians' own scriptures. The major turning point lies in the second century shift towards scriptural status for these books: **the fourth-century rulings do little more than acknowledge formally what was already in practice the case.** There was no conspiracy.

Our next section will explain this further.

IV. What Happened Historically to Cause the Twenty-Seven Books of the New Testament to Be Recognized as Scripture?³

The books that make up the New Testament canon of Scripture were used authoritatively by the church from the very beginning. However, like the Old Testament, their collection, and distinction from other written documents, was a gradual and continuous process that took a couple of centuries to complete.

In the year **A.D. 367, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, Egypt**, as was his custom, sent out an Easter letter to the churches in Egypt. In this particular letter, he specified the twenty-seven books that make up the present New Testament as the only sacred books that were to be recognized as part of a "New" Testament canon.

As far as we know, **this is the first formal recognition of these specific books as the divinely inspired New Testament Scripture.** This brings up a number of important questions. What was the process that led the church to come to this understanding? How did we get from the time when the Apostles wrote the New Testament books to the recognition by Athanasius? What do we know about the historical forces that led to the formation and acceptance of the New Testament canon? A number of important observations need to be made.

We Can Divide the Developments into Four General Periods

First, for convenience sake, we can place the development of the New Testament canon in four basic periods.

1. They are: the Apostolic Era (A.D. 30-100);
2. the second generation of Christians (A.D. 100-150);
3. the move from the oral to written Word and the period of examination (A.D. 150-350);
4. and the time of formal recognition (A.D. 350-397).

While these categories overlap, they do provide a general framework to understand how the books of the New Testament developed from originally being written to their formal recognition by the church.

A. Period 1: The Apostolic Era (A.D. 30-100)

The first period we want to examine is the time when the Apostles of Christ, as well as other eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry, were still living. This would be approximately from A.D. 30-100.

1. The New Testament Had Its Origin in Jesus Christ

The New Testament is all about Jesus Christ; He is the promised Messiah and the Savior of the world. The entire story centers on him. Once He ascended into heaven after His resurrection, His twelve disciples, and those whom He specially chose, faithfully passed on the things that Jesus said and did. They were the authoritative interpreters of His message and ministry.

2. The Apostles Doctrine Was Taught

The believers in the early church were taught the doctrine of the Apostles. The doctrine, or teaching, of the Apostles had the authority of the Lord Jesus behind it. The Bible says the early church learned the doctrine of the apostles from the very beginning. The Book of Acts explains it this way:

- And they [the believers] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

The Apostle Paul commanded Timothy to hold on to the sound teachings of Jesus. He wrote the following:

- Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (2 Timothy 1:13-14 ESV)

Paul said that authoritative tradition was to be passed on to others. He also wrote to Timothy:

- The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Timothy 2:2 NASB)

The *New English Translation* renders this verse as follows:

- And what you heard me say in the presence of many others as witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be competent to teach others as well. (2 Timothy 2:2 NET)

At the beginning, this tradition was passed on by word of mouth. However, soon after Jesus' ascension, these traditions about Him were committed to writing. These writings were copied, recopied, read out loud, circulated, and exchanged between churches. The result was the New Testament. The twenty-seven books that make up the New Testament were written during a period of approximately sixty years (A.D. 40-96).

3. The Authoritative Writings of Paul Were Collected Early

The New Testament writings were collected at a relatively early date. We know that there was an early collection of Paul's writings. Peter wrote:

- And regard the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as also our dear brother Paul wrote to you, according to the wisdom given to him, speaking of these things in all his letters. **Some things in these letters are hard to understand**, things the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, **as they also do to the rest of the scriptures.** (2 Peter 3:15-16 NET)

Peter does not tell us exactly how many letters of Paul were known and circulated. However, what this does tell us is that before Peter's death, some of the letters of Paul circulated as a group.

There is also an early existing Greek manuscript that has a collection of Paul's letters. This manuscript is known as P46. It contains eight of Paul's letters plus the Book of Hebrews. It has been recently argued that this manuscript should be dated in the late first century; that is, before A.D. 100. If this dating is correct, it would give further evidence of the early authority that Paul's writings had in the church. Even if it is not to be dated in the first century, this collection of Paul's letters is still an early testimony to the authority of his writings. What we do know for certain is that the writings of Paul were circulating as a unit during the time the New Testament was still being written.

4. The Four Gospels Were Soon Brought Together

At first, the four gospels were circulating as independent writings among believers. However, by the beginning of the second century, they were brought together and began to be circulated as a unit. This demonstrates the acceptance of these works, and only these works, as the authoritative explanation of the life of Jesus Christ.

5. There Was a Distinction Between Authoritative and Non-Authoritative Writings

Even at an early date, there was already a distinction being made between the authoritative writings of the apostles and their associates, and the writings of others who did not possess Jesus' unique authority. We read about this in the Book of Revelation. It says:

- I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Revelation 22:18-19 RSV)

Consequently, the idea of authoritative, versus non-authoritative, "New" Testament writings was made at an early date.

6. The Testimony of Clement of Rome

The earliest written work outside of the New Testament that mentions some of the New Testament writings is the work of Clement (A.D. 95). He was a contemporary with the Apostles.

Clement was part of a group of writers known as the “Apostolic Fathers.” Each of them had some personal knowledge of Jesus’ apostles, but was not part of that group.

In fact, Clement is mentioned by name by the apostle Paul. We read the following in Philippians:

- Yes, I say also to you, true companion, help them. They have struggled together in the gospel ministry along with me and Clement and my other coworkers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:3 NET)

In a letter that Clement wrote to the church at Corinth, he refers to a number of Paul’s writings; Ephesians, Romans, First Corinthians, First Timothy, and Titus. Clement also cites the Book of Hebrews, and First Peter.

In addition, Clement quotes parts of verses that are found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. It is not certain that he is citing the written text of the gospels, or merely quoting these sayings of the Lord from memory. While he refers to the Old Testament as “Scripture,” he does not call any New Testament writings by that specific term. However, he does cite them in such a way as to recognize their authority. It is clear that the words of Jesus are at least as authoritative as the Old Testament prophets.

What is also clear from Clement’s own writings is that they do not carry the same authority as the writings of the apostles. He realized the distinction between his words and those of Jesus and the apostles.

Summary of Period 1: There Was No Pressing Need for a Canon

The believers in Jesus shared the same sacred Scripture with the Jews; the Old Testament. However, the coming of Jesus into the world made a new Scripture necessary; a set of writings that would testify to Him. Thus, in this first period, the New Testament documents were written, copied, and circulated among the people of God. The spoken and written words of the apostles were considered as the authoritative words of Christ. The letters of Paul, as well as the four gospels, circulated as units. Consequently, they held absolute authority. The concept of authoritative writings for a “New” Testament was already present. However, since eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus were still alive, no authoritative canon of Scripture was absolutely necessary.

B. Period 2: The Second Generation of Christians (A.D. 100-150)

In the early years of the church, there was no New Testament canon of Scripture. While authoritative documents were written and circulated, as far as we know, no collection of these documents had been

made. Authority was in the living Apostles and their doctrine of Jesus Christ. After the Apostles died, their teachings were held as having the highest authority. The written documents became more important as time went on.

However, the second generation of Christians seemed to prefer the oral testimony to the written as long as there were living witnesses to the teachings of the apostles. A number of important things occurred during this fifty-year period. They include the following:

1. The Writings of Those Who Came after the Apostles Were Not Uniquely Authoritative

The second generation of Christians is known as the “Apostolic Fathers.” **It is clear that the writings of these men, who lived after the time of the apostles, did not have the same authority as those whom Jesus personally chose.** It was only the apostles who were chosen and commissioned by Jesus. Since those who came after the apostles were not eyewitnesses to the events in Jesus’ life, and were not given His unique authority, they can add nothing to God’s revelation to humanity.

In fact, **the Apostolic Fathers made a distinction between their writings and those of the apostles.** They recognized that their writings were not authoritative in the same sense as the writings of Jesus’ apostles. Consequently, they looked back upon that which was spoken or written by these men.

This is a further indication that believers did not establish the canon of Scripture but merely recognized the words of those whom God divinely appointed to speak and write His Word. It was the authority of Jesus Christ which revealed the extent of the canon. We can consider the following evidence from this period:

The Testimony of Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius of Antioch was also one of the Apostolic Fathers. Like Clement, he recognized the authority of Jesus and the apostles.

In the year A.D. 115, Ignatius wrote seven letters on his way to being thrown to the lions. In his letters, Ignatius made the distinction between his writings, and those of the apostles. In his letter to the Romans, he made the following comparison between himself and Peter and Paul. He wrote:

I do not enjoin you as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles, I am a convict; they were free, but I am a slave to this very hour. (Ignatius, Letter to the Romans, 4.3)

Ignatius also uses the phrase, “It is written,” as well as the word, “Scripture,” in referring to a written gospel. He also emphasizes that Jesus Christ is the ultimate authority. Indeed, His authority is greater than the Old Testament.

In his writings, Ignatius acknowledged a number of New Testament books, yet he never considered his own writings to have any divine authority. He realized that there was a definite boundary between the time of the apostles and afterward.

Second Clement

The written gospel is also referred to as Scripture in a work known as Second Clement, or the Second Letter of Clement. This document, dated anywhere from A.D. 100 to A.D. 150, is not the work of the biblical Clement; the author is not known. This document is actually the contents of a sermon. In this sermon, the gospel writings are again referred to as Scripture. Like the other early writings that have come down to us, the words of Jesus and the apostles are considered to be at least as authoritative as the Old Testament Scripture.

The Letter of Barnabas

The letter of Barnabas was composed about A.D. 130. Although attributed to Barnabas, the traveling companion of Paul, it was not written by him. It is usually assumed to have been written about the middle of the second century.

In this work of, (Barnabas 4:14) the formula “it is written” is used in reference to the New Testament where Barnabas cites Matthew 22:14. Again, this may be an indication of its view of the authority of the New Testament. However, his work is not much help in understanding the extent of the New Testament canon.

The Testimony of Polycarp

Polycarp was another of the “Apostolic Fathers.” He was a personal disciple of the apostle John. In his letter to the Philippians, he combined an Old Testament reference, Psalm 4:4, and a New Testament quotation, Ephesians 4:26. He introduced it with the phrase, “as it is said in the Scripture.” This is found in his [Polycarp's] letter to the Philippians in 12:4.

This seems to indicate that Polycarp considered Paul’s writings on the same level as the Old Testament; divinely authoritative. If this is the case, then we have another early witness to Paul’s authority.

2. A Possible Early Witness to the New Testament: The Gospel of Truth

The earliest possible reference we have for the New Testament canon of Scripture comes from a work called the Gospel of Truth (A.D. 140-145).

The Gospel of Truth was discovered alongside other **Gnostic texts in the Nag Hammadi Library in Egypt** (in 1945). Scholars have dated it to the 2nd century and have connected it with an early Gnostic teacher named Valentinus (who lived from 100-160AD). It is a poetic “homily” rather than a “gospel”, and is now considered one of the most artful Gnostic writings of all time.⁴

A man named Valentinus probably wrote this work in the city of Rome. The writer is well-acquainted with the four gospels, the letters of Paul, Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation. He may also have been aware of the Book of Acts, 1 Peter and 1 John, and perhaps other New Testament books. He cites these writings as authoritative Scripture. His seems to be the earliest known witness to a “New” Testament.

The Gospel of Truth seems to show that before the middle of the second century, a collection of New Testament writings was known in Rome and was accepted as authoritative. These writings are virtually identical with our New Testament. This evidence alone gives us the New Testament in the middle of the first half of the second century.

3. The Heretic Marcion Produced an Alternative Canon

Another reason why an authoritative canon had to be universally acknowledged was because of the work of the heretic Marcion. He created his own canon during this period. Marcion accepted only the Gospel of Luke (minus the first two chapters) and ten of Paul's letters. In his list of Paul's letters, he called the letter to the Ephesians, "to the Laodiceans." Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and anything in the New Testament that he considered to be "too Jewish." His Scripture consisted of what he called the gospel and the apostle.

It is popular in some circles to assume that the church created the canon in response to Marcion. However, this is certainly not the case. His heretical canon was a reaction to the canon the church already received and accepted. The church was not reacting to him; he was reacting to the church! Paul's letters were circulating as an authoritative collection and were considered to be Scripture during his own lifetime. The four gospels also circulated as a unit at an early date. Thus, any list or canon that Marcion would have created would have been in response to the authoritative writings about Jesus; namely the four gospels, and the authoritative explanation of Jesus' ministry, Paul.

Summary of Period 2: No Formal Canon Was Made at This Time in History

The New Testament documents became more widely known during this period. They were cited as authoritative by Christians. In addition, we find that the writings of other Christians during this period were not assumed to be of the same weight as the writings of the apostles. While these other writings could be useful and edifying, they were not the Word of God. Only the apostolic writings carried this unique authority of Christ. Letters from such people as Ignatius, Polycarp, and Clement lack divine authority and fail to add to God's revelation. However, the early church, at this time, made no formal establishment of a new canon of Scripture. Neither did they speak of a canon. They did not seem concerned about the issue. Various churches had portions of the New Testament writings and this seemed to be satisfactory to them.

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¹ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/how-new-testament-was-created/> Unless otherwise noted, all material under Part 2 comes from the aforementioned resource.

² Ryan M. Reeves and Charles E. Hill, *How We Got Our Bible*, Zondervan, 2018, p. 25.

³ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/stewart_don/faq/right-books-in-the-new-testament/question6-new-testament-scripture.cfm Unless otherwise noted, all material under Part 3 comes from the aforementioned resource.

⁴ <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/why-shouldnt-we-trust-the-non-canonical-gospel-of-truth/>

