

Q & A about the New Testament Canon

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Question 1: What are the 27 books that make up the New Testament?

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, I-II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I-II Thessalonians, I-II Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, I-II Peter, I-III John, Jude, and Revelation.

Question 2: When did the New Testament Canon get finalized?

The Alexandrian bishop Athanasius, in 367 A.D., was the first to maintain the New Testament consisted of the 27 books that make up today's New Testament. However, this is misleading because the author of the Muratorian Canon, dated to about 170 A.D., accepted 22 of the 27 books that came to be included in the New Testament. In other words, there was general agreement early on about which books should be accepted as authoritative. As biblical scholar F. F. Bruce has written, "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."¹

Question 3: What criterion was used to determine canonization?

First: The book had to be written near the time of Jesus, or in the first century.

Second: It had to be written by an apostle or a companion of an apostle.

Third: It had to be widely used throughout the early Christian Church.

Fourth: Most importantly, it had to be orthodox, communicating correct teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Question 4: What are 30 examples of books that did not meet this criterion?

Gospels: Infancy Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Truth, Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Judas, Gospel of Phillip, Gospel of the Egyptians, Gospel of Perfection, Gospel of Matthias.

Acts of individual apostles: Acts of John, Acts of Peter, Acts of Paul, Acts of Andrew, Acts of Thomas, Acts of Phillip, Acts of Timothy, Acts of the Martyrs, Acts of Paul and Thecia, Acts of Peter and Andrew.

Apocalyptic writings: Apocalypse of Peter, Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter, The Teaching (Didache) of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Paul, Coptic Apocalypse of Paul, Apocalypse of Stephen, Apocalypse of Thomas, Apocalypse's of James (2).

These thirty writings and many others failed to meet one or more of the four criteria, because: (1) They were written in the second, third or fourth centuries, and (2) not by an apostle or companion of an apostle. (3) Neither were they circulated widely among the early Christian churches. New Testament scholar, Paul Pavao has written: "For all the hype surrounding the Gospels of Thomas and Judas nowadays [and others], they get almost no attention from pre-Nicene [325 A.D.] writers. ... The Muratorian Canon [also] makes no mention of these gnostic writings and you'll find that no other list of canonical books from before the Council of Nicea includes them, either."² (4) Finally, it was common for authors to write forged documents using the name of an apostle in order to get a hearing for their own point of view. These writings are usually distorted and fanciful, claiming many highly supernatural events or acts accomplished by Jesus or the apostles. Or they provide detailed esoteric knowledge about ethics, the afterlife, cosmology, or the fate of the world.

Question 5: Who were the prominent church fathers that wrote about early Christianity before the Canon was finalized in 367 A.D.?

100-200 A.D.: Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Justin Martyr of Samaria, Barnabas of Alexandria, Irenaeus of Lyons, Hermas of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian of Carthage.

200-367 A.D.: Origin of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Epiphanius of Salamis.

Question 6: Why are the early church fathers writings important?

The first thing to realize about the writings of the early church writers from 100-367 A.D., is how extensively they quote from many of the books in their writings that now make up the New Testament. Even without any New Testament manuscripts, the evidence is strong that they believed in the reliability of these documents. Biblical scholar Harold Greenlee has written: "These quotations [from early church fathers] are so extensive that the NT could virtually be reconstructed from them, without the use of NT MSS."³ The

following chart reveals the many quotations found in their writings from the New Testament before it was finalized in 367 A.D.⁴

Scriptural Books	100-200 A.D. writings	200-300 A.D. (excepting Origen)	Origen of Alexandria (died. ca. 251)	300-367 A.D. writings
Matthew	3826	3519	7565	4172
Mark	1463	246	650	438
Luke	3252	992	3093	2069
John	2018	1713	5119	2912
Acts	679	532	660	966
Romans	902	675	3827	973
1 Corinthians	1622	1020	3572	1252
2 Corinthians	400	328	1264	408
Galatians	424	235	778	333
Ephesians	537	431	1176	405
Philippians	182	240	527	283
Colossians	256	297	726	307
1 Thessalonians	110	87	202	89
2 Thessalonians	55	98	87	55
1 Timothy	249	217	381	209
2 Timothy	125	143	246	115
Titus	69	94	118	81
Philemon	11	13	5	23
Hebrews	287	198	1114	634
James	78	73	104	59
1 Peter	250	200	495	194
2 Peter	51	45	52	34
1 John	233	183	395	154
2 John	15	8	11	18
3 John	4	4	4	12
Jude	35	11	28	20
Revelation	426	916	406	204

Question 7: How many New Testament manuscripts have been found and what do these manuscripts indicate?

Manuscripts for New Testament texts now date to as early as 135 A.D. Biblical scholar Raymond Brown has commented: “Approximately 3,000 mss. of the Greek NT (part or whole) have been preserved. ... These witnesses to the text of the NT do not agree among themselves in myriad ways [almost all are copying errors], but relatively few of the differences are significant.”⁵ In other

words, the script in the New Testament books today is effectively unchanged and contains the same meaning as they did from earliest times.

*Question 8: What are some of the oldest New Testament manuscripts that have been preserved?*⁶

P52: The oldest New Testament manuscript discovered to date is the John Rylands Papyrus 457, consisting of a scrap smaller than a library index card on which is inscribed part of John 18:31-34. It has been dated to 135 A.D., and is on permanent display at the John Rylands University Library in Manchester, England.

P46: Among the oldest manuscripts is also the Chester Beatty Papyrus II, consisting of 86 pages, and dated to about 200 A.D. These pages contain a number of the Pauline epistles from Romans to II Thessalonians. It is housed at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, Ireland. Part of the collection is also at the University of Michigan.

P66: The Bodmer Papyrus II, around 200 A.D., contains a text of much of the Gospel of John, and is close to the text of Codex Sinaiticus (see below). It is housed at the Cologny-Geneva Switzerland: Bibliotheca, Bodmeriana.

P75: The Bodmer Papyrus XIV-XV, about 225 A.D., contains Luke 2:18-18:18 and Luke 22:4-John 15:8. The text of these pages is close to Codex Vaticanus (see below). It is housed in the Vatican Library, Rome.

Codex Vaticanus: This codex of books, dates to about 350 A.D., and lacks the last part of the New Testament, but is thought by most scholars to be best witness to the original New Testament text. It is housed in the Vatican Library, Rome.

Codex Sinaiticus: This codex of books dates to about 350 A.D., and contains the whole New Testament. It is housed in the British Library, London.

*Question 9: What is the general consensus of biblical scholars today regarding who wrote each book of the New Testament?*⁷

Four Gospels and Acts

The four Gospels in the New Testament are written in the third person by highly educated, literate Greek-speaking Christians. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (two apostles of Jesus and two companions of the apostles) played an important role in their formation, but the Gospels themselves were not

authored by the uneducated and Aramaic-speaking apostles of Jesus. Here is a likely scenario of how the four Gospels came to be written in their finished form.

Gospel of Matthew: As a tax collector for Rome, the apostle Matthew could both read and write Aramaic (a Hebrew dialect), and wrote up his experiences with Jesus and they were circulated among the early Christian communities. The Gospel of Matthew was written in Greek about 80-85 A.D., using several sources. This anonymous Greek writer honored Matthew for his early contribution and called the Gospel after his name.

Gospel of Mark: This gospel should probably be called after Peter. Peter spoke Aramaic, so when speaking to Greek audiences in Rome or Corinth, he took along Mark as his translator who did speak Greek. Mark wrote up his experiences with Peter and they circulated among the early Christian communities. About 65-70 A.D., an anonymous Greek wrote up what became the Gospel of Mark, and honored Mark by calling this gospel after him.

Gospel of Luke and Acts: Luke was a physician, a gentile Christian, and early companion to the apostle Paul on several of his journeys. Luke wrote up his experiences with Paul in Greek and perhaps Aramaic and they circulated among the early Christian Churches. About 80-85 A.D., the Gospel of Luke and Acts was written by an anonymous Greek. He used Luke's experiences with Paul plus the Gospel of Mark and other oral and written material, and perhaps part of Matthew. Luke was honored by this unknown Greek author by calling his Gospel after him.

Gospel of John: The apostle John, like Peter, spoke Aramaic but probably could not read or write. John's experiences with Jesus were circulated among the early Christian Churches in Aramaic. Around 90-95 A.D., an anonymous Hellenistic Christian, perhaps a disciple of John, gathered previously written and oral material and wrote the Gospel of John, which is over ninety percent different from the other three. John was honored for the role he played in the early formulation of this Gospel by having it named after him.

Fourteen Epistles of Saint Paul

Fourteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament have traditionally been attributed to the apostle Paul. Today, seven of these epistles are undisputed by scholars as being written by him, with varying degrees of argument about the remaining seven.

Romans, I-II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, I Thessalonians and Philemon: These seven are almost universally accepted as entirely authentic and written by the apostle Paul.

Ephesians, Colossians, II Thessalonians, I-II Timothy and Titus: Today, these six books are believed by *some* biblical scholars to have been written by Paul's disciples sometime after his death. They accept as true that followers wrote these letters in his name in order to deal with problems that had arisen 10-30 years later. They point out the inconsistencies of vocabulary with Paul's other letters, writing style, and theological beliefs. For example, compare I Timothy 2:11-15 on the role of women with Galatians 3:28.

Hebrews: Hebrews was disputed by some when being considered for the Canon, but came to be seen as written by the apostle Paul and therefore included. Today, Hebrews is universally rejected as being written by Paul (Paul never said he wrote Hebrews). The general consensus is that the author of Hebrews is unknown.

Seven General Epistles

The last seven epistles in the New Testament (James, I-II Peter, I-III John and Jude) were written by various authors. The Muratorian Canon in 170 A.D. did not include Hebrews, James, I and II Peter, and III John. It seems that some of the early church fathers questioned these writings but not the majority, so they were included in the finalized Canon in 367 A.D.

James and Jude: The epistles of James and Jude were believed to have been written by James and Jude, two brothers of Jesus, and thus were included in the Canon in 367 A.D. Today, most scholars believe the two authors of these two books are unknown.

I-II Peter: I Peter both today and anciently was regarded as being written or dictated by the apostle Peter. However, II Peter early on was suspect, but was included late in the Canon. Today, almost all scholars believe II Peter was penned by an unknown writer claiming to be Peter. It was likely written by a disciple of Peter after his death. Sixty percent of the vocabulary is different between I and II Peter.

I-III John: These three letters were thought to have been written by the apostle John, and thus were included in the Canon. Today, most biblical scholars reject that the Apostle authored the Gospel of John or the three letters that

bear his name. Many scholars believe that whoever wrote this Gospel also wrote the three letters because they are highly related in style and content with the Gospel of John. The author of these Greek written books is unknown.

Book of Revelation

Revelation's was included in the New Testament Canon because it was believed to have been written by the apostle John. Today, most scholars believe it was written by a Christian seer named John, but not the Apostle. Early on, there was some question about the canonization of the book, and the Eastern Roman Empire churches rejected it for many centuries. Many scholars then and now believe its writing style is quite different from the style of the Gospel of John and thus written by a different John. Furthermore, in the Apocalypse of John, Christ is depicted as being responsible for the violence of the end-times before his return, whereas in Jesus's Apocalypse, found in Matthew 24-25, he is not.

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 25.
2. Paul Pavao, the Muratorian Canon, *Christian History for Everyone*, 2014. Accessed March 1, 2016 at: www.christian-history.org/muratorian-canon.html
3. J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (rev. ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 56.
4. Compiled from the first four volumes of *Biblia Patristica: Index des citations et allusions bibliques dans la littérature patristique* (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1975, 1977, 1980, 1987), in S. R. Llewelyn and R.A. Kearsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity 7* (Marrickville; New South Wales, Australia: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1994) 260.
5. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 48.
6. Ibid., Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 50.
7. Ibid., 127 & 158, 172 & 208, 226 & 267, 280 & 322, 334 & 368, 384 & 389, 396, 402, 457, 468, 484, 503, 512, 542, 560, 591-592, 600 & 610, 621 & 626-627, 639, 654 & 662, 673, 684 & 693, 706 & 718, 726 & 741, 749 & 756, 762 & 766, 774 & 802.