

WHERE DID THE NEW TESTAMENT COME FROM?

The question of where the New Testament came from is an extremely important one. It is where we get our knowledge of who Jesus is, why he came, and why it should matter to us. And as a part of the Bible, it claims authority over every part of our lives. But if we are to accept it as our authority, then it is fair to ask how the 27 books of the New Testament were compiled and who wrote the contents.

The way we're going to approach this will be like we're following footprints. Our starting point will be the end of the footprints, the point at which the New Testament books were made into an official list. Then we will trace the footprints back to where they began and see how close they get to the events they record and who recorded them.

The books making up the New Testament were officially named at the councils of Carthage, in 393, and Hippo, in 397. The reason these books made the list is that they met certain criteria.

1. The books had to have been written during the time the apostles were still alive.
2. The books had to have been written by an apostle or by an associate who preserved an apostle's teachings. The only exceptions are James and Jude, brothers of Jesus who became his followers after his death.
3. The books had to have been generally accepted by the church and been used in worship services continuously since they were written.
4. The teaching of the books had to cohere and agree with accepted and undisputed scripture.
5. The books must be inspired by God. As such, they must display a self-evidencing quality and the power to transform lives.

The books meeting the criteria form what is called the canon of the New Testament because all teaching had to bow to its authority. "Canon" comes from the Greek word meaning measure or rule.

Now, let's start moving backwards. The oldest list we have containing all 27 books and only these 27 books comes from a letter written in AD 367 by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria.

In 325 church historian Eusebius published a history of the church which included information about the books that were being used as Scripture. He relied on the writings of the church fathers because they quoted so heavily from the writings they considered authoritative. Following the importance given to certain writings and the criteria of the canon, Eusebius divided the books into four categories:

- canonical
- widely accepted
- rejected
- heretical

The canonical books were books whose authorship and authority had rarely been in question. Eusebius counted 22 books in that category including:

- The four Gospels
- Acts
- the fourteen letters of Paul (including Hebrews)
- 1 John
- 1 Peter and
- Revelation (though he notes there were some who doubted John's authorship)

The books that were widely accepted but still debated were

- James
- Jude
- 2 Peter
- 2 John and
- 3 John

This accounts for all the books that make up the New Testament.

There were several books that had the appearance of Scripture and that some churches used for instruction and worship yet failed to be included in the New Testament. These books ultimately fell short of the canon requirements for being either forgeries or non-apostolic. Eusebius mentions five of them including:

- The Acts of Paul
- The Letter of Barnabas
- The Shepherd of Hermas
- The Diadache, or the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles
- The Apocalypse of Peter

Although Eusebius doesn't try to list all the heretical writings he knew of, he does mention the Gospels of Thomas, Peter, Matthias, and the Acts of Andrew, John. He also rejects any gospel except the four accepted ones and any of the other works claiming to document the life of an apostle.

Two good examples of the authority the church fathers gave to the books of the New Testament are Origen and Tertullian. Around AD 230, Origen quoted almost 18,000 times from the New Testament in his writings. He also notes that the gospels, Acts, Paul's 13 letters, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation were universally accepted, and that the other six books were widely accepted.

And writing around AD 200, Tertullian quoted over 7,000 times from 23 of the 27 New Testament books. In total, the church fathers quoted from the 27 New Testament books over 36,000 times. In fact, all but 11 verses of the New Testament can be reconstructed using only quotes from the church fathers.

Somewhere around 180 to 200 the oldest known list of books in the New Testament canon was compiled. The Muratorian Canon, as it has come to be known, includes 23 books:

- the Gospels
- Acts
- the 13 letters of Paul (not counting Hebrews)
- Jude
- 1, 2, and 3 John, and
- Revelation

However, the question of what was and was not Scripture really began in earnest around AD 140. The question arose because of an influential heretic named Marcion. Marcion thought the Old Testament and the New Testament revealed two different Gods. Marcion created a canon of Scripture that completely excluded the Old Testament and included ten of Paul's letters and the Gospel of Luke. But even these were edited to remove elements of Judaism and any hint of the Old Testament. Marcion tried to justify his edits by claiming that apostolic preaching about Jesus was a distortion.

As early as AD 115, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, referred to "The Gospel" as an authoritative writing. The Gospel contained the four canonical gospels and circulated as a unit bound together as a codex, like a book and not on separate scrolls. About the same time Paul's letters, and later Hebrews, were also collected into a single codex called "The Apostle." Later, a third collection contained Acts, and the letters of Peter, James, John, and Jude.

One of the more striking attestations of the authority and origin of the Gospels is in a writing of Irenaeus. Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, who was personally taught by some of the apostles. Irenaeus passed on the history of the Gospels that he had learned from Polycarp. According to Irenaeus, Matthew wrote his gospel first, Mark wrote down Peter's teachings, Luke wrote Paul's teachings, and John wrote his last.

Matthew published his gospel among the Hebrews in their own language, while Peter and Paul were preaching and founding the church in Rome. After their departure Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also transmitted to us in writing those things which Peter had preached; and Luke, the attendant of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel which Paul had declared. Afterwards John, the disciple of the Lord, who also reclined on his bosom, published his gospel, while staying at Ephesus in Asia.

This history was corroborated around 100-107 AD by Papias, a friend of Polycarp's. Papias was a "hearer" of John or even a disciple of his, and claimed to know many of John's intimate friends. There is some question as to whether he is referring to the apostle John or John the Elder, but either way Papias claims at the very least to get his knowledge from disciples of the apostles. Papias wrote that John taught that Mark wrote down Peter's teachings, and that Matthew wrote his gospel.

Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourse, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.... So then Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language, and every one interpreted them as he was able.

Clement, the bishop of Rome, wrote a letter to the Corinthians around AD 95 that quoted from ten different New Testament books. According to Eusebius, Clement also records that the teachings of Peter were written down by his follower Mark and that when Peter learned of the writing he approved of it.

It should be noted that most contemporary scholars do not agree with the ancient history of Matthew. The majority opinion is that Mark was written first and that Matthew relied on Mark's account when he wrote his Gospel. This is because the two Gospels share many exact or near exact wordings of the same accounts, and where they differ in their treatments of the same event, Matthew is generally the more extensive and detailed account. Interestingly, this reliance of Matthew on Mark speaks to the authority with which Mark wrote since Mark was not an apostle like Matthew. Why would Matthew rely on Mark unless he had accurately preserved the teaching of another apostle? Also, the oldest fragments of Matthew that we have are not in Hebrew or Aramaic, as Papias and Polycarp say, but in Greek. However, the scholars who believe that Matthew was the first Gospel written suggest that there was an earlier, abbreviated or more primitive version of Matthew that was written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Mark may have used this for some material when composing his gospel. Matthew then revised and expanded his account using material from Mark's gospel.

One of the more interesting arguments for the authorship of the Gospels is simply who these anonymous books are credited to. John is the type of prominent person whose name we would expect to find attached to a gospel. But although Matthew was an apostle, he is not one of the more prominent ones. Wouldn't the book carry more weight if it were attributed to Peter or James? The fact that it bears a "lesser" apostle's name is itself a good reason to accept the tradition. This is even more persuasive with Mark and Luke since they were not apostles at all. And yet their writings were quickly considered authoritative. As we saw above, Peter knew about Mark's writings and gave them his blessing. And, Paul is said to refer to Luke's Gospel as "my Gospel."

In contrast to that are the dozens of apocryphal writings that claim apostolic authorship in their texts and yet were not considered authoritative. The claim of apostolic authorship was not enough to attain an authoritative status. The best explanation for the names affixed to the four Gospels is that these were in fact the authors. The best explanation for their early and quick acceptance is that they preserved the teachings of the Apostles accurately.

According to Clement, John wrote his Gospel because he was wanted to augment the first three Gospels. John mentions landmarks in Jerusalem as if they still existed at the time of writing, such as the Sheep Gate. Since Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70 and the Sheep Gate was among the destruction, there is a good argument that all four Gospels were written prior to AD 70. In addition, there is no mention of Jerusalem's destruction in the Gospel. As a fulfillment of a prophecy made by Jesus it seems unlikely that it would be omitted by John. However, there appear to be points in his Gospel where John uses the present tense when referring to things of the past. This leaves the question of the date of writing open to any time just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem to around AD 98 when John died. Most scholars who reject a pre-AD 70 date, place the writing in sometime between AD 80 and 85.

Luke's Gospel was probably conceived as a two volume set consisting of Luke and Acts. The book of Acts ends with Paul in a Roman prison. Prior to that, Luke documents many of Paul's other imprisonments, trials, persecutions, and various other abuses that he suffered. But Luke does not document the beheading of Paul. This suggests that Acts was written before Paul's execution. It seems highly unlikely that Luke would mention Paul's other persecutions but not his martyrdom. Thus, Acts can be reasonably dated before the death of Paul sometime between AD 62 and 65 during the persecution of Nero. The Gospel of Luke shortly preceded Acts, probably in the very early 60s.

Like Matthew, Luke may have borrowed material from Mark. If the indications that Luke's gospel was written in the early 60s are correct and if Luke used Mark, then Mark was written no later than AD 60. This goes against some tradition that says Mark wrote his gospel after Peter's death around AD 64-65. But other tradition says Peter blessed Mark's gospel. Although the arguments are by no means conclusive, the date for the writing of Mark that seems to make the most sense is the late 50s.

Many modern scholars place Matthew between AD 70 and 100. However, these scholars reject the early tradition that says Matthew wrote his gospel. Also, like John, Matthew mentions customs and landmarks that were no longer reference points after the destruction of Jerusalem. This makes a date prior to AD 70 reasonable. The oldest tradition, as mentioned earlier, says Matthew was written prior to Mark rather than relying on Mark. But this may refer to an early Hebrew or Aramaic version of the book and that there is a difference between the canonical Matthew and the Matthew mentioned by the church fathers. Matthew then, if he relied on Mark, can be dated no earlier than AD 60. Though it is by no means conclusive, the canonical version of Matthew can be placed sometime in the 60s.

The earliest parts of the New Testament were written by Paul. In order to date Paul's writings we can take the events from his letters and from Acts and try to reconcile them with what we know from archeology and other historical markers. We know that Paul died during the persecution of Nero around AD 64-67, so the writings must obviously be dated before that.

The main anchor used in dating Paul's chronology is found in Acts 18:12, when Paul is brought before Gallio. "While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack against Paul and brought him to the judge's bench." In 1905, an inscription from the Emperor Claudius to Gallio was discovered that fixed the date of Gallio's rule between AD 51 to 52. Because Paul's encounter with Gallio happened a year or so into his second missionary journey, the Jerusalem Council mentioned in Acts 15:6-30 that preceded the second missionary journey probably took place around AD 48. The Jerusalem Council was preceded by Paul's visit to Jerusalem for the purpose of famine relief (Acts 11:27-30). First century historian Josephus dates this famine around 45 or 46, which puts Paul's visit between 45 and 47. In Galatians 2:1 Paul says that after 14 years he went up to Jerusalem again. He either means from his conversion or his first visit to Jerusalem three years after his conversion. Although it is debated, many scholars prefer the view that the fourteen years should be counted from the time of Paul's conversion because the conversion is the main reference point in the passage, and it makes most sense of all the events that must be accounted for in Paul's life. This puts Paul's conversion around AD 31 to 35. The two most likely dates for the crucifixion of Jesus are AD 30 and 33. Thus, this span of AD 31 to 35 fits in with either date and shows how early Paul's conversion was.

The ability to date Paul is important because of passages like 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

*For I passed on to you as most important what I also received:
that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
that He was buried,
that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,
and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.
Then He appeared to over 500 brothers at one time,
most of whom remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.
Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles.*

Last of all, as to one abnormally born, He also appeared to me.

Note that Paul says he is passing down what he had received. Also note the grammatically unnecessary repetition of the word “that.” This indicates this passage is most likely a creed. And because Paul’s conversion was one to three years after the crucifixion, this creed is very likely one of the oldest parts of the New Testament, dating within one to three years of Jesus’ death.

The importance of this is enormous because of the content of the creed. According to the creed, Jesus was a real person who died, was buried, was raised from the dead, and then appeared in a resurrected, glorified state to His followers both corporately and individually. Also important is the appeal to the Scriptures as the proper way to understand Jesus, that Jesus is to be seen through the lens of the Old Testament. Critics of the New Testament who say that a legend developed many years after the fact that attributed divinity to Jesus cannot account the content of this creed.

But this is not the only creed in the New Testament. Other creeds include 1 John 4:2, Phil 2:6-11, 2 Tim 2:8, Romans 1:3-4; 4:25; 10:9, 1 Tim 3:16; 6:13, 1 Cor 11:23, and Luke 24:34. Using information contained only in these creeds that pre-date the New Testament, we find that

- Jesus is the only way for salvation
- that we must confess this with our mouths and our hearts
- that was both fully human and fully divine
- was betrayed
- offered his body and blood in the institution of the Lord’s Supper
- that he offered himself on the cross in obedience to the father in payment for our trespasses
- rose from the dead in fulfillment of prophecy for our justification
- appeared to Peter and the other disciples as well as over 500 other people
- ascended to glory
- and gives life to all things

That is quite a lot of information that existed in creedal form prior to the completion of the New Testament. The inclusion of the creeds in scripture by the apostles speaks to the accuracy of the creeds since if they were inaccurate the creeds would have been corrected, condemned, or abandoned by the apostles.

Aside from the rejected books mentioned earlier and those of the New Testament canon, no other books were ever seriously considered for inclusion. Though there are dozens of books claiming to be scripture, none of them met the criteria to even be considered, let alone rejected. They excluded themselves. These books were written after the apostolic age and were either pseudepigraphal, meaning falsely attributed or forged, or the books were apocryphal, meaning hidden away. To advocates, apocryphal books were hidden from the uninitiated. To the orthodox, they were hidden because of their heresies.

It is interesting to note that the process of the formation of the New Testament created a filter that made it more likely to exclude authentic Scripture than to include false writings. The long process insured a healthy debate from many different perspectives. And yet the large majority of the books enjoyed a sustained and overwhelming support for inclusion. As a result, it’s better to think of the books as having been recognized, not chosen.

In tracing back the footprints, we see the New Testament has a very strong chain of tradition

surrounding its authorship by eyewitnesses or those who wrote down what the eyewitnesses reported. The books which are not included in the New Testament, useful though some may be, have no place in the canon given the criteria for inclusion. Thus, the New Testament was written by people who could reliably document the events they recorded with authority.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Apologetics Study Bible Articles:

How Can We Know the Bible Includes the Correct Books? by Norman L. Geisler, 724.

Is the New Testament Trustworthy? By Darrell L. Bock, 1452.

What About “Gospels” Not in Our New Testament, by Graham H. Twelftree, 1503.

Could the Gospel Writers Withstand the Scrutiny of a Lawyer? By John Warwick

Montgomery, 1511.

Doug Powell, *The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics*

Chapter 6, Where Did the New Testament Come From?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does the process of canonization convince you that we have the right books? Are there any weak points in the process?
2. If a book were discovered today that could be dated to the apostolic age and could be directly tied to an apostle, should it be added to our canon?
3. How would you answer the claim that the New Testament books were chosen by one powerful faction of Christians and that many other books that could have been included were rejected?
4. Recently, a book was published called *The Five Gospels* which included Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Thomas. Is there anything wrong with this, and, if so, what?
5. At what point would oral tradition have played a part and what safeguard was in place to insure the oral tradition was accurate? (The Apostolic age, when the apostles were alive and preaching. Because they were alive, they could correct or approve the oral tradition being shared.)