

Complete Canon – New Testament

There are 27 “books” that are commonly recognized as constituting the New Testament canon (writings regarded as the authoritative revelation of God to mankind). Why do Christians consider these books authoritative and not others?

Again, of major importance, if not the most important consideration when it comes to identifying authoritative writings, is authorship; that is, who wrote the book or books. (For more on authorship, see the Authoritative Authors section.)

So, which writings should be included in the New Testament portion of the Bible?

Like the Old Testament, we find a fairly well-defined New Testament canon as early as the mid 200s AD, certainly no later than the late 300s and perhaps as early as the mid to late 100s.

Some might wonder why it would take 200+ years following the birth of Christ to identify the writings that should be considered “sacred”. That this process took some time may be easy to understand when one considers 1) the widespread geographical areas to which the individual writings were directed, 2) the persecution the church underwent during the first 300 years of Christianity, 3) the cultural differences among the people to whom the writings were addressed, and 4) the difficulties that would have been present in copying and sharing writings during that time period.

Writings of early Christian leaders (Matthew, Peter, John, Paul, etc.) were directed to different locations in Turkey and Greece, to Rome, and to Palestine. How easy would it have been, in those times, to make a copy of a writing sent to a church group in Turkey and then have it shared with a church group in Greece or Rome?

As to persecution, Christianity was under considerable official and unofficial persecution through the first 300 years. Claudius (41-54 AD), Nero (54-68 AD), Domitian (81-96 AD), and Trajan (98-117 AD) each took actions against Christians. Under the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 AD), persecutions against Christians became more intense in various regions. According to one source, Septimus Severus (193-211 AD) issued an edict forbidding conversion to Judaism or Christianity. Decius (249-251 AD) required all citizens to participate in pagan religious sacrifice, something many Christians refused to do. In 257 AD, Valerian (253-260 AD) ordered Christian clergy to sacrifice to the gods of the state. In 258 AD, clergy became subject to the death penalty and the property of Christians could be seized. Official Roman persecution reached a height with a series of edicts issued by Diocletian (284-305 AD). In 303 AD, he prohibited all Christian worship and commanded that Christian churches and writings be destroyed. In another edict, he ordered that Christian clergy be arrested if they failed to offer sacrifice to pagan deities. This was extended to all Christians in 304 AD. (Oddly, in later 304, Diocletian became seriously ill and abdicated the throne. Hmmm....)

Official persecution began to be undone by edict beginning in 311 AD and Christianity became the official Roman state religion in 380 AD with Emperor Theodosius’ edict of Thessalonica.

For more information on the persecution of the early Christian church, see:

- Persecution in the Early Church: A Gallery of Persecuting Emperors.
<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/persecution-in-early-church-gallery>
- Persecution in the Early Church. <http://www.religionfacts.com/persecution-early-church>
- Persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution_of_Christians_in_the_Roman_Empire

Again, how easy would it have been, against this backdrop of persecution for early Christians to gather, identify, and share “sacred” writings?

Nonetheless, we find early writers identifying writings important to the Christian church.

Perhaps the earliest list of New Testament books dates from c. 170 AD although it is found in a manuscript from the 600s. The so-called Muratorian fragment lists 23 books as accepted writings. The books listed are: Luke (called the third book of the Gospel), John, Acts, Corinthians (1st and 2nd), Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Galatians, Thessalonians (1st and 2nd), Romans, Philemon, Titus, Timothy (1st and 2nd), Jude, John (1st and 2nd), Wisdom, Apocalypse of John [Revelation], and the Apocalypse of Peter.

As Luke is referred to as “the third book of the Gospel”, it could be said to imply the acceptance of the first two Gospels, Matthew and Mark, although it cannot be stated with 100% certainty. In any event, 20 (or 22 counting Matthew and Mark) of the 27 books accepted as canonical New Testament books are in the list. Missing are Matthew, Mark, Hebrews, James, 1st and 2nd Peter, and 3rd John. Books added are Wisdom and the Apocalypse of Peter.

For more information, see:

- The Muratorian Fragment. <http://www.bible-researcher.com/muratorian.html>
- The Muratorian Canon. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/muratorian.html>
- At the End of the Second Century, the Muratorian Fragment lists 22 of our 27 NT books. <https://www.michaeljkruger.com/ten-basic-facts-about-the-nt-canon-that-every-christian-should-memorize-6-at-the-end-of-the-second-century-the-muratorian-fragment-lists-22-of-our-27-nt-books-2/>

In addition to Origen’s list of Old Testament writings (see above) found in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* (book 6, chapter 25) written c. 312-324 AD, we have Origen’s list of New Testament writings. Writing prior to his death c. 253 AD, Origen identified these books as authoritative: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, 1st Peter, 1st John, Apocalypse of John [Revelation], and several letters written by Paul (but Origen did not say how many or name them). Origen also suggested that there may have been a 2nd letter from Peter (of which he was doubtful) and 2nd and 3rd letters of John. Additionally, Origen commented on the Epistle to the Hebrews by saying that he thought it contained Paul’s thoughts but was probably written down by someone Paul taught. But he acknowledged that those who came before him had said it was written by Paul. So, with Origen, we have seven writings clearly identified and “several” writings of Paul’s (perhaps the 14 (including Hebrews) that are currently identified as written by Paul). Not an extensive list but also not without value.

It has been suggested that one can also discern Origen's canon from a writing dated to c. 250 AD. In it, Origen clearly identifies the gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the two letters of Peter, the letters of James and Jude, Acts, 14 letters of Paul's, and at least two letters from John; 25 writings altogether. Only missing is a clear reference to a third letter of John's and Revelation.

For more information on Origen's lists, see:

- Eusebius of Caesarea, Church History, Book 6, Chapter 25.
http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339_Eusebius_Caesariensis_Church_History_EN.pdf
- What is the Earliest Complete List of the Canon of the New Testament?
<https://www.michaeljkruger.com/what-is-the-earliest-complete-list-of-the-canon-of-the-new-testament/>
- Origen. Homilies on Joshua. Homily 7.
https://www3.nd.edu/~reynolds/holyland/linksholyland_files/origen%20homily%20on%20joshua.pdf

Dating to between 300 and 325 AD is Codex Vaticanus. It contains (although not in this order) Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude: 22 of the 27 books currently a part of the Christian New Testament. Missing are 1st and 2nd Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Revelation.

Dating to c. 350 AD is Codex Sinaiticus. It contains all 27 of the books currently a part of our New Testament along with two additional writings: the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas.

For more on the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, see:

- Don Stewart: How do the Earliest Complete Greek Manuscripts Help Us Understand the Extent of the New Testament Canon?
https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/stewart_don/faq/right-books-in-the-new-testament/question13-greek-manuscripts-extent-canon.cfm
- The New Testament in Codex Sinaiticus.
<https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2011/08/the-new-testament-in-codex-sinaiticus.html>

Writing c. 350 AD in Catechetical Lecture 4, Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, indicated that there were four gospels, the Acts of the Twelve Apostles, a total of seven letters written by James, Peter, John, and Jude, and fourteen letters from Paul, making a total of 26 writings. I don't think it would be too great a stretch, after comparing Cyril's description to that of the Muratorian fragment and Origen's writings, to conclude that the 26 writings he refers to are identical to 26 of the 27 books we have in the New Testament today and that only Revelation is missing.

For more on Cyril, see:

- Catechetical Lecture 4. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310104.htm>

The next early listing of writings valued in the early Christian church comes from Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria. Writing in 367 AD, Athanasius listed the following as having been

“handed down and confirmed as divine...”: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts of the Apostles, James, 1st and 2nd Peter, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, Jude, Romans, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1st and 2nd Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and the Revelation of John. His listing entirely matches the books included in the New Testament today.

For more on Athanasius’ writing, see:

- Athanasius of Alexandria. <http://www.ntcanon.org/Athanasius.shtml>

Writing in the mid to late 380s AD, Gregory of Nazianzus identified these as canonical New Testament writings: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 14 epistles of Paul, James, 1st and 2nd Peter, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, and Jude. Only Revelation is missing from the list. Interestingly, he stated the intended audience for each of the gospels (Matthew for the Hebrews, Mark for Italy, Luke for Greece, and John for all). As for other writings, he wrote; “...if there are any beyond these, they are not genuine.”

For more on the canon according to Gregory, see:

- Gregory of Nazianzus on the Canon of Scripture.
<http://www.bible-researcher.com/gregory.html>

It has been suggested that the New Testament canon was decided by a group of men during the Council of Hippo (393 AD); i.e. that a group of church authorities got together and decided which writings were to be recognized as authoritative and which would not.

It can be seen from the above that there was a fairly well-defined “New Testament” canon as early as 170 AD (Muratorian fragment); that this canon was basically unchanged to the mid 200s (Origen) and early 300s (Codex Vaticanus); and still basically unchanged to the mid and late 300s (Codex Sinaiticus, Cyril, Athanasius, and Gregory).

It, then, would be inaccurate to say that some men got together at a council in 393 (Hippo) or 397 (Carthage) or some other council and decided which writings would be recognized as New Testament scriptures and which writings would not. It would be more accurate to say that these councils simply recognized what was already in use throughout the church.

And it cannot be stated too frequently that use of the writings was based largely on the knowledge of who the writer was. Authoritative writings came from those closest to Jesus. Knowledge of the writer was undoubtedly passed along with the writing.

While the authorship of some Biblical texts has been disputed, it seems that the testimony of those alive closest to the time of the writing is to be preferred over the speculation of those living 1800 or more years after.