

## **VI     The New Testament Canon**

### ***A     The Content and Number of Books***

We have 27 books that we call our NT. Unlike the OT Canon, the content and number of books in the NT Canon is not disputed by the various branches of Christendom. The NT canon breaks down as follows.

**Gospels**            = 4 books (Matt, Mark, Luke, John)

**Acts**                = 1 book

**Epistles**            = 21 books

**Pauline** = 13/14 books (Romans, 1 & 2 Cor., Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thess., 1 & 2 Tim., Titus, Philemon, possibly Hebrews (Eastern Orthodox).

**Catholic** = 7/8 books (Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1,2,3 John, Jude)

**Apocalypse**      = 1 book (Revelation)

### ***B     The Historical Development of the NT Canon***

The above arrangement was not entirely agreed upon until the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, even then there were a few dissenters (e.g., Gregor of Nazianzus did not list Revelation in his accepted books). The following two documents represent the belief that these 27 books as the only inspired, authoritative books of the NT.

**In 367, Athanasius wrote his Festal Letter** to his congregation and included those books that were authoritative for the Church.

**In 397 we have the Council of Carthage**, which was a local council in North Africa heavily influenced by Augustine, that confirmed the same 27 books of the NT.

These are the earliest lists that include all the 27 books of our current canon. This does not mean that there weren't many prior to this that held to the 27 book canon, but we simply do not have their writings today. The chart on the following page shows the development of the early Church's acceptance of the Canon.<sup>27</sup>

See Chart on the next page

---

<sup>27</sup>The following chart comes from Geisler, Normal L., and Nix, William E., *A General Introduction to the Bible, Revised and Expanded*, page 294

## THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON DURING THE FIRST FOUR CENTURIES

| BOOK                              | INDIVIDUALS |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | COUNCILS     |        |  |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--------------|--------|--|
|                                   |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | TRANSLATIONS | CANONS |  |
| PSEUDO-BARNABAS (c. 70-130)       | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| CLEMENT OF ROME (c. 95-97)        | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| IGNATIUS (c. 110)                 | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| HEMARS (c. 110-50)                | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| DIDACHE (c. 115-40)               | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| PAPAS (c. 120-50)                 | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| IRENAEUS (c. 130-40)              | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| DIODORUS (c. 130-203)             | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| JUSTIN MARTYR (c. 150)            | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (c. 150-55) | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| TERTULLIAN (c. 150-201)           | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| ORIGEN (c. 150-230)               | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| CYRIL OF JERUSALEM (c. 185-234)   | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| EUSEBIUS (c. 260-340)             | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| JEROME (c. 340-420)               | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| AUGUSTINE (c. 400)                | X           | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |              |        |  |
| MARCION (c. 140)                  |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| MURATORI (c. 170)                 |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| APOSTOLIC (c. 300)                |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| CHESTNUT (c. 380)                 |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| ATTHANAS (c. 367)                 |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| TATIAN DIATESSARON (c. 170)       |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| OLD LATIN (c. 200)                |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| OLD SYRIAC (c. 400)               |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| NICEA (c. 325-40)                 |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| NIHRO (393)                       |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| CARTHAGE (397)                    |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |
| CARTHAGE (419)                    |             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |              |        |  |

x = Citation or allusion  
 = = Named as authentic  
 ? = Named as disputed

## **Some Observations about The Chart**

### ***1. The Apostolic Fathers (95-150 A.D.)***

Notice that the first 7 individuals in the chart either cited or alluded to many NT books, but seldom did they actually say “the Scripture says.” They regularly quoted the OT with that designation. Most of the NT quotes or allusions were introduced with “the Lord (Jesus) said” “The Apostles said,” “Paul said,” etc. Clearly, they held the source of these sayings as authoritative, but it would be pushing it to say that we know that the Apostolic Fathers had a clear idea of a NT canon being developed. ***The term “scripture” (graphe, γραφή) was commonly used to refer to a writing of antiquity***, so we would not expect to see it used to refer to the apostolic writings (for more info on this usage of *graphe* see John Barton’s *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

For an excellent summary of the Apostolic Fathers view of the New Testament writings, see the appropriate section in Bruce M. Metzger, **The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance**; Chapter 3.

### ***2. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Century***

From the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century through the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, we have quite a bit of agreement upon the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. Some of the Catholic Epistles had sporadic support during this time period along with Paul’s letter to Philemon.

### ***3. The 4<sup>th</sup> Century***

The fourth century saw the canon become solidified. Jerome, Athanasius, and Augustine all support the 27 book canon. The Councils (or Synods) of Hippo and Carthage both confirm these also.

## ***C The Reasons for the Development of the Canon***

This leads us to some of the reasons why the Church had a need to recognize which writings were of canonical status and which were not. The one word that can summarize all the reason below is “**heresy**.” Many heresies were quickly developing after the death of the Apostles. There were many voices claiming authority, and these voices were contradicting not only the Apostles teaching, but also each other.<sup>28</sup>

### **1 Gnosticism**

Gnosticism was a heresy that rose up in the late first century and became full blown by the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The Church had to react to their claims of special revelation that was clearly contradictory to the Apostles and derogatory to the Old Testament. Many of the so called “gospels” written during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century were gnostic in their theology (e.g, The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Mary, and The Gospel of Philip are three such Gospels, all written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century).

### **2 Marcion (c. 140 A.D.)**

The main points of the Heretic Marcion are:

- a Distinction between the Supreme God of goodness and the inferior god of justice who was the creator of the physical world and the god of the Jews.
- b The rejection of the Old Testament because it could not be reconciled with Marcion’s understanding of New Testament teachings.
- c Rejection of the 12 Apostles and their “distortion” of Jesus teaching.
- d Acceptance only of Paul’s letters (10 of them, not the Pastorals) and Luke’s Gospel. Marcion had to edit these books from false interpolations by the Jewish Church (i.e. Old Testament quotations and anything that implied Jesus true Humanity, such as the first four chapters of Luke).

### **3 Montanist**

Summarizing Metzger’s view of Montanist’s influence on the canonical process.<sup>29</sup>

Montanism was an enthusiastic and apocalyptic movement that broke out in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It claimed to be a religion of the Holy Spirit and was marked by ecstatic outbursts which it regarded as the only true form of Christianity. Soon after his conversion, Montanist fell into a trance and began to speak in tongues. He announced that he was the inspired instrument of the Holy Spirit (John’s paraclete). He had two women (Prisca and Maximilla) who followed him that likewise

---

<sup>28</sup>A very thorough study of the heresies of the early Church is Harold O. J. Brown, Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church. (Hendrickson Publishers, 1988); Also see Alister McGrath, Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth, (Harper One, 2009).

<sup>29</sup>Metzger, The Canon of the New Testament; 99-106.

had these ecstatic experiences. They both left their husbands and became his prophetesses. They believed that the New Jerusalem would shortly descend upon their town of Pepuza in Asia Minor; so they set up shop in that town and delivered many prophecies as they waited for this event.

Montanist's claim to divine revelation forced the Church to ask the question, "*where has God spoken authoritatively.*"

#### 4 Other Factors in the Early Church That Forced Discussion of Canon Issues

##### a Persecution

Prior to Constantine, Christianity was not always welcome in the Roman Empire. Persecution was not uncommon; sometimes it broke out with intensity. Part of persecution then (and now) included forcing the believer to renounce his/her faith. This usually also involved a *renunciation* and *destruction* of the sacred texts that supported their faith. Manuscripts had to be hid so that they would not be destroyed. This compelled the Church to answer the question, which books are from the Lord and which are not. As a side note, St Cyprian, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, was adamant that once a presbyter or bishop denied the faith they could not be let back into the ministry. There was a huge debate as to whether the baptisms they administered were valid. This argument went on for almost two hundred years till Augustine settled it for the western Church.

##### b Ancient Book Making

If you remember from page 4 of these notes, the manuscripts of the Bible went through a transition from being written and stored on *scrolls* to the *codex*. Remember that the codex was similar to our books today; vellum written on both sides and bound together. Since these could be large volumes, it was necessary to decide which books belonged in the Bible and which did not. We have extant today four codices from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century that contain the entire (or nearly the entire) NT. They are Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, Vaticanus (missing Revelation), and Ephraemi Rescriptus.

If you want to chase this concept down further, from the following books I learned that the early church preferred the codex over the scroll considerably more than the surrounding culture. Larry Hurtado gives the following statistics regarding the extant scrolls and codexes that we have. Regarding religious manuscripts in antiquity the percentage of scrolls that are Christian are 2.7%. But the percentage of codices are 73%.<sup>1</sup> One possible conclusion is that that Church preferred codices because they recognized that the contents of those codices were very important, dare we say, inspired. Besides Hurtado's book, see Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (Yale University Press, 1995), especially chapter 2. Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisted: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books*, (Crossway, 2012).

---

<sup>1</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins*. (Eerdmans, 2006), 43-93. See pages 90-93 for charts that illustrate the number and extent of different kinds of manuscripts.

## **D      *The Criteria for Canonization.***

As we just discussed, heresies in the early church forced believers to ask the question “*where has God spoken authoritatively?*” The majority of the church eventually came to the consensus in the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the 27 books we call the NT were God’s authoritative Word. Now, we want to ask the next obvious question; “*how did they know which books were to be canonized and which were not?*” In other words, what **criteria** did they use to determine canonicity?

### **1      Apostolicity**

Simply stated, was the document written by an actual apostle or one of the apostolic men (meaning those closely associated with an Apostle, e.g. Luke and Mark). An example of this can be found in Metzger. “When the writer of the *Muratorian Fragment* declares against the admission of the Shepherd of Hermas into the canon, he does so on the ground that it is too recent and that it cannot find ‘*a place among the prophets, whose number is complete, or among the Apostles.*’”<sup>30</sup>

This criterion starts with the New Testament teachings of an Apostle. They are given special authority to be the unique messengers of the Messiah. Paul says that the Church is built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets (Eph 2:20). In 3:5 of this same book, Paul makes it clear that the reason for the apostolic foundation was that ***their ministry was a revelatory one.*** The Apostles primary ministry was to be instruments through which the risen Christ built his church.

Other Scriptural support would be the idea of “tradition” in Paul’s writing. Paul regularly used three words to describe the teachings that he received from Christ and passed on to his disciples (e.g. Timothy). These three words are *paradosis* (“traditions”) and *paralambanō* (“to receive”) and *paradidōmi* (“to deliver”). ***Let’s look at 1 Cor. 11:23 and 1 Thess 2:13 for a couple of examples.*** Be careful and *Do not place your definition of “tradition” onto Paul’s definition.* He is not talking about traditions such as the size of the pulpit or whether ministers wear robes. For Paul the word tradition referred to the authoritative teaching that he received and is passing along as the word of God (see Gal. 1:9-12).<sup>31</sup> The early church held that apostolic teachings (i.e. “traditions”) were in fact authoritative over all believers lives. It started first with their oral teachings, then the writings.

*The last Scriptures to look at would be **John 14:26, 15:26-27; and 16:13-15.***

- *Are these promises just for the Apostles, or also for all believers?*

The criterion of apostolicity has plenty of support in the writings of the early church. An excellent survey of this material is R. Laird Harris’ book *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Scriptures*, (Greenville: A Press, 1995) :248-259.

### **2      Acceptance and Usage by the Church.**

This criterion required that a writing had to be commonly accepted among the churches of that day. Augustine stated that the Christian reader

---

<sup>30</sup>Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament.* 253.

<sup>31</sup>For a fuller explanation see Herman Ridderbos, *The Canon of the New Testament in Revelation and the Bible.* ed. By Carl F.H. Henry, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1958) : 192-195

*will hold fast therefore to this measure in the canonical Scriptures, that he will prefer those that are received by all Catholic Churches to those which some of them do not receive. Among those, again, which are not received by all, let him prefer those which the more numerous and weightier churches receive to those which fewer and less authoritative churches hold. But if, however, he finds some held by the more numerous, and some held by the churches of more authority (though this is not very likely to happen), I think that is such a case they ought to be regarded as of equal authority.*<sup>32</sup>

We will revisit this one when we come to the NT antilegomena.

### **3 The Rule of Faith (a.k.a. The Canon of Truth).**

This can be summarized as the agreement of a particular book with the basic Christian doctrine recognized as normative by the Church. According to Metzger many church fathers, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Hippolytus (all 2<sup>nd</sup> century), made reference to an accepted **rule of faith** that truth claims were compared to, this included written truth claims.<sup>33</sup>

Some argue against this criteria, saying that there was not an organized theology during the first few generations of the Church. This counterargument is not entirely correct though. In the NT itself we see clear evidence of a theology being developed that became authoritative. For example 1 John's demand for a Christian to believe in the incarnation; also Jude's insistence on defending the faith "once given to the saints." These both point to an agreed upon criteria by which other truth claims were to be judged.

Before there was sola scriptura, there was prima traditio

### **4 The Witness of the Spirit and the Self Authenticating Nature of the Scripture**

This fourth criterion is not so much explicit in the early church but rather among some of the Reformers, especially Calvin. Read below article IV of the Gallican Confession (1559) also known as the The French Confession of Faith. Calvin was the principle author of the first draft of this confession (see also his *Institutes*: book 1, chapter 7:1, 4,5). After reciting the 66 books of the Bible, the confession says,

We know these books to be canonical, and the sure rule of our faith, not so much by the common accord and consent of the Church, as by the testimony and inward illumination of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books upon which, however useful, we can not found any articles of faith.

There are a few modern authors who would agree with this stance. One is M. James Sawyer from Western Seminary. He wrote the article "***Evangelicals and the Canon of the New Testament***" in Grace Theological Journal, Volume 11, number 1 (spring 1990). He suggests that criteria 1-3 above all amount to the Church having authority over the canon, since the church determined its boundaries. This does not sit well with him. I can supply this article to anyone who would be interested.

---

<sup>32</sup>Quoted from Metzger, The Canon of the New Testament, 237.

<sup>33</sup>Metzger, 252.

## *E      The New Testament Antilegomena*

There were several books that the early Church struggled with regarding their status in the canon. This struggle had more to do with uncertainty about these books being Scripture, not with definite opinions against them. As Geisler and Nix suggest “these books were seldom considered anticanonical, or even uncanonical. Instead, they were given a sort of semi-canonical status, as has sometimes been accorded to the Old Testament Apocrypha.”<sup>35</sup> You can read extensively in both Bruce Metzger’s and F.F. Bruce’s books on the Canon to see all the details of their argument.

### **Hebrews**

Hebrews does not mention who the author is. The Eastern Church accepted it as canonical because they included it in the Pauline Epistles, but the Western Church held it as spurious, evidently not believing it was Pauline. Some pointed to Hebrews 2:3-4 as evidence that the author did not claim he was an apostle.

Heb. 2:3-4 how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, *it was confirmed to us by those who heard* [thus, the author was not one who heard directly from the Lord] God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

### **James**

Below is a quote from Martin Luther in the preface to his 1522 edition of the German Bible (he also had a low view of Hebrews, Jude, and the book of Revelation)

Though this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God. However, to state my own opinion about it, though without prejudice to anyone, I do not regard it as the writing of an apostle; and my reasons follow.

In the first place it is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works. It says that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered his son Isaac; though in Romans 4 St. Paul teaches to the contrary that Abraham was justified apart from works, by his faith alone, before he had offered his son, and proves it by Moses in Genesis 15. Now although this epistle might be helped and an interpretation devised for this justification by works, it cannot be defended in its application to works of Moses' statement in Genesis 15. For Moses is speaking here only of Abraham's faith, and not of his works, as St. Paul demonstrates in Romans 4. This fault, therefore, proves that this epistle is not the work of any apostle.

In the second place its purpose is to teach Christians, but in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. He names Christ several times; however he teaches nothing about him, but only speaks of general faith in God. Now it is the office of a true apostle to preach of the Passion and resurrection and office of Christ, and to lay the foundation for faith in him, as Christ himself says in John 15, "You shall bear witness to me." All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ. For all the Scriptures show us Christ, Romans 3; and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ, I Corinthians 2. Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter

---

<sup>35</sup>Geisler and Nix, 298.



or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it.

But this James does nothing more than drive to the law and to its works. Besides, he throws things together so chaotically that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper. Or it may perhaps have been written by someone on the basis of his preaching. He calls the law a "law of liberty," though Paul calls it a law of slavery, of wrath, of death, and of sin.<sup>3</sup>

Passages where James does references Jesus and the Spirit (or spirit)

James 1:1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

James 2:1 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

James 5:7 Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains.

James 5:8 You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

James 4:5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?

## **2 Peter**

The first issue some had was that 2 Peter is written in a very different style than 1 Peter. This can be solved by the fact 1 Peter was actually penned by Silas (known as an *amanuensis*)

1Pet. 5:12 ¶ Through Silvanus, our faithful brother (for so I regard *him*), I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!

The second problem is that 2 Peter quotes Jude extensively. The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of 2 Peter has many verbal parallels to the book of Jude. It is equally likely though that Jude quoted from 2 Peter.

## **2 & 3 John**

The author of these books is actually never named, he simply refers to himself as the "Elder," so that has caused some to doubt apostolic origin. Another reason is that their circulation was poor in the first few centuries, so they were not as well known to all as the other NT books were. But 1 John was clearly accepted as canonical and there are numerous similarities between the three books to conclude the same author.

## **Jude**

Jude quotes from the non-canonical book of *1 Enoch* and alludes to *The Assumption of Moses* implying they are authoritative.

Jude 9 But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."

Jude 14 ¶ It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, Jude 15 to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

- *How is this different from Paul quoting from non-Christian sources (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12)?*

## **Revelation**

Some have argued that the apocalyptic nature of Revelation caused some to doubt it. But this seems odd given the fact that many pseudepigraphal books in the early church were apocalyptic. One reason for the slow acceptance, especially by the Eastern Church is the premillennial teaching of Revelation 20. The 2<sup>nd</sup> century Church was clearly premillennial but this fell out of favor in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century. In part due to the fact that Marcion was premillennial. Remember that Gregory of Nazianzus did not include Revelation in his canon, in fact my understanding is that the Eastern Church does not read Revelation in their Church lectionaries to this day.

The following books that were considered by some as potentially canonical. It is curious that Codex Sinaiticus includes both the Shepherd and Barnabas.

- Shepherd of Hermes
- Epistle of Barnabas
- The Didache

## ***F      The Option of an Open Canon Today***

What think you of this option?