

The development of new testament canon

[Religion](#), [Bible](#)



Describe the development of New Testament Canon in period of time studied (35 marks) The New Testament Canon is described by Princeton Online Dictionary as, “ a collection of books accepted as Holy Scripture - the books of the Bible recognized by any Christian church as genuine and inspired. ” Basically the Canon is a selection of books used by the Church for public worship and also the books which the Church acknowledge as inspired scripture normative for faith and practice.

The term (the Greek ‘ kanon’ means ‘ reed’, which went on to mean ‘ measuring rod’ and then finally the list written in the column) was coined by Christians, but the idea is found in Jewish sources - Rabbinic Judaism recognizes the twenty-four books of the Masoretic Text, commonly called the Hebrew Bible. Evidence suggests that the process of canonization occurred between 200 BC and AD 50, while the formation of the Christian Canon was not until the first and second centuries. These canonical books have been developed through debate and agreement by the religious authorities of their respective faiths.

During the first and second centuries, there was not a Canon of Scripture set down as it is today; originally the information was passed by oral tradition, until they were written down as it became clearer that eye witnesses would all grow old and pass away. Firstly, it was the four Synoptic Gospels, and then around 85 AD, Paul’s letters were collected. However at this stage there was no sense of a Canon of Scripture, which is a closed list (which is books that cannot be added or removed).

Marcion of Sinope was the first well-known heretic in the history of the early church, and he was the first Christian leader in recorded history to propose <https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-new-testament-canon/>

and delineate a canon (about 140 AD) which included 10 epistles from St. Paul as well as parts of the Gospel of Luke which today is known as the Gospel of Marcion - he famously attacked the Gospel of Luke with a penknife, and left only the parts he agreed with. This dividing of the books was viewed as a heresy, and so the church felt they had to organize the books in the right way to defend Christianity.

In the first and second century, the early church accepted the Hebrew canon of Scripture as authoritative, and this was an influence on the formation of the New Testament canon. The church felt that because they regularly read the Old Testament within worship, they needed to make a link to the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. Surely these were authoritative enough to be included? Indeed, the teaching of Jesus was respected as much as the Old Testament, the Apostles writings too, especially after their death. Gradually, the term ' Scriptures' was used to group these books together.

In 153 AD, Justin Martyr confirmed that the Gospels were read in the services in Rome, along with the Old Testament prophets, "... the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits... ". The main criterion to be included in the canon was apostolicity, and to gain this the books had to be written by or ' sponsored' by an Apostle, contain Christ-honoring content compatible with oral tradition and contain spiritually fruitful use of the books within the church from the Apostolic age onwards.

Firstly, Paul's letters were brought together at the end of the first century, and then the four synoptic gospels were added fifty years later. However John's gospel took longer to be accepted, particularly by the Gnostics and then the Montanists. Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis in 130 AD, witnessed

the Apostolic credentials of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and near the end of the second century, Irenaeus spoke of the apostolic origins of all four when he said, " Matthew published his gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue...

Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his gospel". In 200 AD, a canon list from this period was created and is now known as the Muratorian canon. It includes all the books accepted as Scripture by the Church at Rome, which includes the gospels, Acts, thirteen of Paul's epistles, 1st and 2nd John, Jude and Revelation.

Wright says, " Hebrews is missing altogether which is surprising since it was used by Clement of Rome a century earlier. " However he explains how it was not accepted in the West, probably due to doubts about who wrote it were brought forth by Montanist use. At this period, it was generally accepted that all New Testament books were included, except James, 2nd Peter, 2nd and 3rd John, Jude, Hebrews and Revelation (which was only partially excluded, as its apostolic origins were questioned).

Within the third and fourth century, the position of the canon was strengthened. Apostolic Fathers, such as Tertullian, Clement and Origen all used the New Testament scriptures regularly in doctrinal discussion, and often commented on the books themselves. Eusebius tells us that the only books still disputed at the beginning of the fourth century were James, 2nd Peter, 2nd and 3rd John and Jude. "... we must set in the first place the Holy

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quaternion of the Gospels; which are followed by the book the Acts of the Apostles.

After this, we must reckon the epistles of Paul; following which we must pronounce genuine the extant forms epistle of John, and likewise the epistle of Peter. After these we must place, if it really seems right, the Apocalypse of John... there is the extant the epistle of James, and that of Jude; and the second epistle of Peter; and the second and third of John... ” However not everybody agreed with the New Testament Canon - in the late second century, there was the production of several ‘ acts’ of the Apostles which were not recorded in Acts.

Furthermore, a number of ‘ gospels’ appeared which included the childhood of Jesus, or the life of Pilate. However these were mainly imaginative and some originated from fringe Christian groups’ ideas, such as Docetists. However Irenaeus ruled out the possibility of there being more than four gospels by saying, “ since... there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds... it is fitting that she (she church) should have four pillars, breathing incorruption on every side and vivifying men afresh. These ‘ gospels’ included the gospels of Peter, Thomas and Matthias, and the Acts of Andrew and John. Eusebius said of the spurious writings, “ none of these has been deemed worthy of any kind of mention in a treatise by a single member of successive generations of churchmen; and the character of the style is also far removed from the apostolic manner, and the thought and purport of their contents is so absolutely out of the harmony with true orthodoxy as to establish the fact that they are certainly the forgeries of heretics... To conclude, it is easy to see how the New Testament Canon developed over a

period of four centuries. The canon list set out in detail in the Easter letter of Athanasius in 367 AD contains the 27 books to the exclusion of all others, however certain books such as Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache were permitted for private reading. Thus, while there was a good measure of debate in the Early Church over the New Testament canon, the major writings were accepted by almost all Christians by the middle of the third century.