

# Determining the Canon of the New Testament

These studies are designed for believers in Jesus Christ only. If you have exercised faith in Christ, then you are in the right place. If you have not, then you need to heed the words of our Lord, Who said, “**For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son, so that every [one] believing [or, trusting] in Him shall not perish, but shall be have eternal life! For God did not send His Son into the world so that He should judge the world, but so that the world shall be saved through Him. The one believing [or, trusting] in Him is not judged, but the one not believing has already been judged, because he has not believed in the Name of the only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son of God.**” (John 3:16–18). “**I am the Way and the Truth and the Life! No one comes to the Father except through [or, by means of] Me!**” (John 14:6).

Every study of the Word of God ought to be preceded by a naming of your sins to God. This restores you to fellowship with God (1John 1:8–10). **If we acknowledge our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness** (1John 1:9). If there are people around, you would name these sins silently. If there is no one around, then it does not matter if you name them silently or whether you speak aloud.

Who decided which books belonged in the New Testament and which books ought to be excluded? How did we get our modern New Testament? This short study of Canonicity will answer these questions.

Topics		
Charts, Maps and Short Doctrines		

**Preface:** The internet has been a great resource and, at the same time, it has been a source of great dishonesty. I recently found this graphic on my facebook page (I subscribe to some groups that I completely disagree with). This makes it sound as if one council met on one occasion and decided what stuff they wanted to put into the Bible. This is mostly false—this council did meet and made a determination as to which New Testament books were canonical; but so did many other individuals and groups; and this was a very organic process



which took place over a period of 300 or more years. Hopefully this doctrine will give you enough information so that you do not mistakenly believe graphics like this.

Whenever I speak of the *canon of Scripture* below, this will concern the New Testament canon primarily. Assembling the Old Testament canon is a completely different study.

Stephen Voorwinde poses some interesting questions and observations<sup>1</sup> in Vox Reformata 60, 1995: *After almost 2000 years of church history how can Christians be sure that they have the right Bible? Can we indeed be absolutely certain that we have exactly the right books in the Bible - no more and no less? As our standard of faith and practice can we confidently appeal to the canon of Scripture as a collection of authoritative writings to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken away? What if archaeology uncovered an ancient epistle of Paul or another apostolic writer? Could such a hitherto lost document be added to the canon? While we may dismiss such a question as hypothetical, there are similar questions which are only too painfully relevant in the life of the church today. Can God speak authoritatively today, and if so should such revelation be regarded as on a par with Scripture - or perhaps even be added to Scripture? In other words, is the canon closed? Moreover, whence do we have the information about which books are canonical? Many believers who begin a study of canonicity have these same questions in the back of their minds.*

1. Canonicity is the science of determining which books are inspired by God and, therefore, properly belong in the canon of Scripture.
  - 1) *Canon* is a transliteration of kanôn (κανόν) [pronounced kan-OHN], which means, 1) a rod or straight piece of rounded wood to which any thing is fastened to keep it straight; 1a) used for various purposes; 1a1) a measuring rod, rule; 1a2) a carpenter's line or measuring tape; 1a3) the measure of a leap, as in the Olympic games; 2) a definitely bounded or fixed space within the limits of which one's power of influence is confined; 2a) the province assigned one; 2b) one's sphere of activity; 3) metaphorically any rule or standard, a principle or law of investigating, judging, living, acting. Thayer definitions only. This is found in 2Cor.10:13,15,16 Gal.6:16 Phil.3:16 and does not actually refer to the canon of Scripture in these passages. Strong's #2583.
  - 2) However, we use this word today to indicate which books belong in the Bible and which do not; or, which books are in the canon of Scripture are which are not. This is specifically a study of the New Testament canon.
  - 3) The application of this word to the New Testament did not occur until the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.
2. The New Testament canon did not just appear out of nowhere. Quite a number of people and many groups had to figure out that the book of Matthew belongs in the New Testament, but the Shepherd of Hermes does not.
3. God did not personally place a gold star on this book and an "X" on some other book; He left it up to man to determine which books were Scripture and which were not.
4. However, men do not make a book canonical; they recognize if a book is inspired by God or not. To many unbelievers, this is a distinction without a difference, because they do not believe that the Bible is the Word of God in the first place.
5. This historical events run like this:
  - 1) Jesus, the Son of God, had a *very short* public ministry of 3 or so years, and He wrote nothing down.

<sup>1</sup> From <http://www.bible-researcher.com/voorwinde1.html> accessed October 30, 2013.

- 2) He gathered to Him 12 disciples, among others, who observed all that occurred. Two of these disciples wrote biographies of Jesus (Matthew and John).
  - 3) Two other men, closely associated with Jesus' disciples (after they had become Apostles), also wrote biographies of Jesus (called *gospels*). These are Mark and Luke. They did not see these events take place. Mark was closely associated with Peter; so, in many ways, the gospel of Mark is the gospel of Peter. Luke was a prominent member of the early church, closely associated with Paul, and he assembled a gospel which was quite thorough and in chronological order. He used many sources (as Paul was not an original disciple; and he did not observe Jesus in his life, insofar as we know).
  - 4) Paul, on the road to Damascus, persecuting believers, was stopped by the risen Christ, asking him, "Why do you persecute Me, Saul?" By persecuting believers in Jesus Christ, Paul (then Saul) was persecuting Jesus. Paul was converted because of this incident—he bled in Jesus Christ—and became the chief Apostle and the 12<sup>th</sup> Apostle (the man who replaced Judas, who betrayed our Lord).
  - 5) Paul then went throughout the ancient world within the Roman empire and proclaimed Jesus and the doctrine of the Mystery Age (the Church Age).
  - 6) Paul wrote many letters to various churches, dealing with their problems and questions, as did several other disciples.
  - 7) The Apostle John wrote 3 letters near the end of his life, and a book called Revelation, which was a vision which he had.
6. After John died, Christians needed to determine which of these ancient writings were of God. Again, there was no gold star on the gospel of Luke; Paul's letter to the Galatians did not begin with the words, "The letter is the Word of God and belongs in the canon of the New Testament." One could actually debate whether the authors of these books actually knew that they were writing Scripture.
  7. However, it became clear that some books were authoritative; and that many churches and individual Christians had been treating them as authoritative from the first.
  8. It should be stated that no one in this era, insofar as we know, made a list of the books of the New Testament and proclaimed them to be inspired. However, there is internal evidence which suggests the beginning of the recognition of a canon prior to A.D. 140.
    - 1) The title *Apostle* implies great authority. These would be the men who initially spread the gospel and the doctrines of the Church Age throughout the Roman empire and beyond. Paul, for instance could walk into any church and say, "This is what is true; and this stuff that these Judaizers are feeding you is just so much pap." Although some people in some churches questioned the authority of Paul and other apostles (which is clear in the epistles to the Corinthians), in general, their authority was absolute. Given that Jesus never wrote anything down, someone had to take the things which He said and did and tell these things to the world. On several occasions, Jesus spoke of others witnesses to His Person: "If I alone bear witness about Myself, My testimony is not deemed true. There is another who bears witness about Me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about Me that the Father has sent Me." (John 5:31–36; ESV capitalized) The Apostles, having seen the risen Christ, boldly proclaimed salvation in Jesus Christ, as well as the mystery doctrines of the Church Age. However, the Apostles would, at some point, die (if Jesus did not first return), and what would stand as a witness in their place?

- 2) Peter speaks of the writings of Paul, and gives them the thumbs up in 2Peter 3:15b–16 **Our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things difficult to understand, which letters the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.** This is one of the few internal witnesses, where Peter appears to be placing the writings of Paul equal to the Scriptures (which would have been the Old Testament). This would be the earliest and boldest statement as to the authority of the writings of Paul.
- 3) Prior to this, Peter, in this same letter, speaks of the authority of the early Apostles: **This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles.** (2Peter 3:1–2; ESV)
- 4) The gospels and the writings of Paul carry with them a air of authority. The gospels state the events and words of Christ without apology. Paul would make logical arguments from time to time and appeal to the Old Testament on many occasions, but the purpose was to buttress up whatever doctrine he was teaching. It is as if to say, “Okay, this is how we are to understand this doctrine. Now let’s look at that doctrine from a different perspective. Now here are some Old Testament quotations which support what I am teaching you.”
9. There had to be the logical transition from the verbal proclamations of those who saw the risen Christ to the written proclamations of these same men; to the recognition of their authority in the realm of written literature. Paul and Peter and John would only live so many years. How is the Word of Christ spread when the eyewitnesses to His glory have died off? Peter both spoke of the authority of the words of the Apostles, which he said needed to be remembered; but, at the same time, he said that already evil men were distorting the teachings of Paul. That is problematic. If Paul’s teachings are being distorted within days or months of him teaching, how do we know the truth, unless Paul is standing in front of us teaching? Therefore, there is a point at which saying, “I was taught by a guy, who learned under the ministry of another guy, who was in the church at Corinth when Paul taught.” There has to be an ultimate basis of truth; and it cannot be simply by word of mouth. Rather than receive the teaching of Paul 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> -hand, his teaching could be found in a collection of writings. Therefore, it became apparent to early theologians that these writings would be the best source of truth.
  - 1) Many early church fathers understood the authority of the original Apostles. Clement of Rome, writing in approximate A.D. 96, said, "The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the apostles from Christ. Both, therefore, came of the will of God in good order."<sup>2</sup>
  - 2) Voorwinde: *Ignatius of Antioch: Around 115 Ignatius stated that the teachings of the apostles are known through their writings. There is, however, no indication that he viewed the apostolic writings as Scripture parallel to the Old Testament.*<sup>3</sup> Obviously, there are no Apostles alive at this time, so Ignatius, without referring to the writings of the Apostles as Scripture, recognizes that that is where we are to find the teachings of the Apostles.
  - 3) The Epistle of Barnabas (circa 130) deals with the authority of the Old Testament and how it ought to be interpreted, and the problem of continuity/discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants. In this letter, he cites Matthew 22:14 with the formula "it stands written." Whether this was intentional on his part or an unconscious slip of the pen, we do not know. But this was the formula often used to cite Old Testament Scripture.

<sup>2</sup> From <http://www.bible-researcher.com/voorwinde1.html> accessed October 30, 2013. Voorwinde takes this from 1Clement 42:1,2, The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings, second edition, edited and translated by J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, edited and revised by M.W. Holmes, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992, 75.

<sup>3</sup> From <http://www.bible-researcher.com/voorwinde1.html> accessed October 30, 2013.



10. Both Jews and Christians, at the close of the first century, understood that the Old Testament which we have is the Word of God. They understood that these books were authoritative. It suddenly became clear that, suddenly, there were another set of books which should be authoritative.
11. The Old Testament, besides being a history of God's dealings with man, also looked forward to the coming Messiah (Messiah = Christ). There are very nearly whole chapters in the Old Testament which look to the future coming of Jesus. Gen. 22 Psalm 22 Isa. 53. There are many passages and verses which also look forward to the coming Messiah, going back as far as Gen. 3:15, where the future Messiah is called *the seed of the woman*.
12. Now that Jesus had come into the world, fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament (He must return again to fulfill a second set of prophecies), the record of His life and the information written by Paul and others needed to be gathered and recognized.
13. The idea that these books needed to be collected, recognized and then disseminated did not happen at some council near the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. This was a process which took place over a period of about 300–400 years (depending on whether you want to count the first century or not).
14. Furthermore, determining the canon was quite an organic process. No one group at one time set up the criteria. Individuals, churches and organizations all acted at various times in various ways to establish the canon. There were not a set of miracles which led to the recognition of the NT canon (much like the Old Testament canon was formed).
15. Stimuli in the collection and recognition of the canon of Scripture:
  - 1) Local churches were established by various Apostles (mostly by Paul in the Roman empire), and Paul began to teach them; and then pastor-teachers would take over. When a problem arose (and many did), these churches would often contact Paul with questions or with an enumeration of their problems. Sometimes their pastors might contact Paul. Paul could sometimes come to them; but mostly, he could address their concerns by letters (usually called *epistles* in the Bible). These churches would make copies of these letters and they would share them with other nearby churches.
  - 2) Teachers of false doctrine would come into these churches, claiming sometimes to be sent by Paul or by another Apostle; and they would teach false doctrines or legalism or claim new revelation from God. These churches needed a standard by which teachers could be measured; another name for *standard* is *rule* or *canon*.
    - (1) There would have been teachers of falsehoods all over the place, not dissimilar to the world today. So that people would not be led away by the teaching of false doctrine, there had to be some way of lining up the teachings of the teacher with the truth.
    - (2) Books of false teaching would also begin to crop up. The gospel of Saint Thomas is a fairly early book (dated somewhere between A.D. 40–140). That would have been a problem for early Christians. How exactly does one distinguish between the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of St. Thomas?
      - i The gospels, as we understand them, are a biography of Jesus. The **gospel of St. Thomas** is a collection of "secret" sayings of Jesus and said to have been written down by Didymos Judas Thomas.
      - ii Quite frankly, they are weird. Two examples: (7) Jesus said, "Blessed is the lion which becomes man when consumed by man; and cursed is the man whom the lion consumes, and the lion becomes man." (8) And he said, "The man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up from the sea full of small fish. Among them the wise fisherman found a fine large fish. He threw all the small fish back into the sea and chose the large fish without difficulty. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear." (114) Simon Peter said to him, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to

make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."

- (3) The gnostics in particular had begun to be a strong theological force in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., particularly in Egypt. With them came a large number of texts, which appeared to riff off from Christian documents.
  - 3) When evangelizing and doing missionary work, there needed to be some books which one could use with the locals, to leave with them.
  - 4) When translating authoritative books, there needed to be decisions made about which books to translate.
16. The requirements to be a part of the canon of the New Testament (taken from R. A. Baker and Voorwinde):
- 1) The author must have either been an apostle or the close associate of an apostle. This requirement alone helps to explain why some books were immediately accepted and why some (Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation) were not as quickly recognized. Being closely associated with an Apostle explains early acceptance of Luke (Luke was closely associated with Paul) and Mark (Mark was a disciple of Peter's).
  - 2) The document cannot contradict other "inspired" writings with respect to doctrinal teaching
  - 3) The document must share the overall "feel" and "character" of other inspired writings,
  - 4) The book must have been cited by early Christian writers and be accepted by the majority of churches.
  - 5) Luther suggests the centrality of Jesus Christ. A book with a different heart is less likely to be in the NT canon.
  - 6) Interestingly enough, these criterion are not met for every book in the New Testament; nor do we find all 4 of these criterion spelled out by any group or person involved in the early determination of the canon, according to R. A. Baker (Ph.D., Ecclesiastical History).<sup>4</sup>
  - 7) Let us add that, logically, these writings must come out of the 1<sup>st</sup> century.
  - 8) We do not have any evidence that these are the criteria for the choices of the New Testament books which are recognized as canonical; however, these are reasonable tests, and if we take these tests and work backwards, looking at both the accepted and rejected books, we would very likely end up with the same conclusion.
17. The interrelationship of the 27 books of the New Testament is sparse, but it does exist.
- 1) Although the gospels are hard to place in time, the book of Acts appears to have been written circa A.D. 63, which would mark the end of the events of this book. Had it been written after A.D. 70, then leaving out the martyrdom of Paul or the destruction of Jerusalem would be hard to explain. Luke references back to a previous document, his gospel, which therefore suggests that the book of Luke was written prior to the book of Acts.
  - 2) The book of Luke depends upon other documents and other accounts; so it is reasonable to assume that the books of Mark and Matthew were in existence and circulated by the time that Luke wrote his gospel. However, we do not find footnotes telling us that this section came from Mark, this section came from speaking to Peter, this section came from an oral tradition, etc. Luke did appear to want to get the events in their proper order (Luke 1:1–4).
  - 3) In the book of Acts, Luke records what Paul said to the Ephesian elders: **In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'** (Acts 20:35) Interestingly enough, this saying is not recorded in any gospel, which suggests that there was an existing oral tradition of what Jesus taught.

<sup>4</sup> From <http://www.churchhistory101.com/docs/New-Testament-Canon.pdf> accessed October 29, 2013.

- 4) Interestingly enough, Paul and other writers of the New Testament epistles make many allusions to the Old Testament; none of them quote the gospels. Many believe that this is evidence that they did not exist when the epistles were written. I think that this is evidence that, no one rushed to assemble a New Testament canon. The Apostles all used the Old Testament and they all used the revelation given them by God; and when Paul wrote a letter to the Colossians, he did not intend for it to have any doctrinal errors. But this is much different than Matthew writing a gospel, and, 15 years later, Paul picks it up and puts it on an equal footing with the Old Testament Scriptures. They just did not do this. I think that it took subsequent generations to realize that, those books and letters written by the Apostles and those closely associated with them could be seen as Scripture; and therefore, needed to be clearly identified and assembled. Tertullian, for instance might quote a few things that Paul says, in order to make a point, not fully realizing that, by quoting an epistle of Paul, he is recognizing the authority of the epistle itself. He probably sees himself as reasonably recognizing the authority of Paul, who wrote the quoted epistle.
- 5) However, Paul, in Colossians said that this epistle needed to be shared with the Laodicians (Col. 4:16), which meant that the authority of the epistle to the Colossians could be extended to another church.
- 6) Supporting a slow approach to understanding that there were books written after Jesus which should be considered as authoritative as the Old Testament, is a quote from Baker: *The earliest non-New Testament Christian documents (Barnabas, 1 Clement, and The Shepherd of Hermas) cite the Old Testament as "scripture" and only make allusions to New Testament texts. Ignatius of Antioch (107-120 AD) is full of allusions to, and paraphrases of, New Testament texts, but it is only when we come to the second century apologists that verified quotations from what we now call New Testament texts begin to be common.*<sup>5</sup> Christians in the first couple centuries clearly understood that the Old Testament was the Word of God. They were not quick to add these 27 books and say, "These are God's Word as well." This was a very difficult step for early Christians to take. Quoting an epistle of Paul and recognizing the authority of Paul was a common thing for early Christian writers and pastors to do; but to elevate his epistles to be equal to the books of the Old Testament? That was far more difficult for them to do.
18. Even though *the exact list of New Testament documents was confirmed at the third Synod of Carthage*<sup>6</sup> (397 AD), *this was a relatively small regional council and by this time the 27 New Testament documents had already been agreed upon by most of the church.*<sup>7</sup>
19. Establishing the canon was a long, organic process, which involved hundreds if not thousands of individuals who slowly moved into that direction: (1) there were individual pastors and Christian theologians; (2) there were early attempts to establish a canon of material which could be trusted and quoted; (3) there were early translations so that these words could be taken to people who spoke a different language (and the common people of Rome began to speak Latin rather than Greek)—and these translations meant, you had to figure out what should be translated; and finally, (4) there were church councils which came rather late to this party. It was these church councils which finally recognized that, yes, there was such thing as a New Testament canon. There were things written around the time of Jesus which ought to be considered the Word of God. It took early Christians into the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. before they were ready to consider this as a group.
20. **Individuals.**

<sup>5</sup> From <http://www.churchhistory101.com/docs/New-Testament-Canon.pdf> accessed October 29, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Remember that *cherry picking graphic* which has been circulated far and wide on the internet.

<sup>7</sup> From <http://www.churchhistory101.com/docs/New-Testament-Canon.pdf> accessed October 29, 2013.

- 1) Irenaeus of Lyons quotes from, or alludes to, almost all the documents that become the orthodox New Testament. However, he also refers to a few non-New Testament documents as "inspired" (1Clement, The Shepherd of Hermas).
- 2) Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 195–202) and Tertullian (A.D. 205–225) both made numerous references from almost every New Testament document. Based upon their citations, one could reconstruct the entire New Testament canon, excluding the 4 or 5 small epistles which they do not mention (like 3John and Jude).
- 3) Origen (circa 185–254), according to F.F. Bruce, "...acknowledged the four canonical Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline epistles and Hebrews, 1Peter, 1John and Revelation as 'undisputed' books."<sup>8</sup> He speaks of other specific books besides.
- 4) Irenaeus is associated with Asia Minor and Rome; Tertullian with Africa, Origen with the east. My point being, these are independent men from different areas, who came to very similar conclusions.
- 5) *An explosion of Christian literature comes in the fourth century with Lactantius, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, and the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus), John Chrysostoma, Jerome, Rufinus, and the great Augustine of Hippo (his Confessions was written in 396-97 AD). All of these writers illustrate how the New Testament had become settled with thousands of citations from the 27 "inspired" writings and fewer citations outside that list.*<sup>9</sup>
- 6) Athanasius (296–373), called the *black dwarf* by many of his enemies, had a checkered theological history, sometimes teaching orthodox Christian doctrine and sometimes coming to some odd conclusions (e.g., the Son of God must have had a beginning<sup>10</sup>). *During Athanasius's first year permanently back in Alexandria [he had been exiled on many occasions], he sent his annual letter to the churches in his diocese, called a festal letter...Athanasius listed what he believed were the books that should constitute the New Testament [writing]..."In these [27 writings] alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed," he wrote. "No one may add to them, and nothing may be taken away from them."*<sup>11</sup> His might be the first list still in existence which recognizes the same 27 books which we use today.
- 7) Because church councils found it necessary to meet and determine the canon, this further suggests a very natural and organic recognition of the canon. A Christian writer is going to quote from Mark, for example; and, at the same time, avoid the Gospel of St. Thomas. The former has been recognized for centuries as being a legitimate history; and the latter is recognized as being a book written by freaks. His appears to be the first complete list of the New Testament canon. The intent was to make a list of books which could be legitimately read during a church service. Obviously, our understanding of inspired writings has evolved from his view. See the Doctrine of Inspiration ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)).

## 21. **Lists** of New Testament canons.

- 1) Marcion, who has been deemed a heretic, in the 140's is the first person to put together a canon of New Testament writings, which included Luke and an edited collect of Paul's epistles.

<sup>8</sup> From <http://www.bible-researcher.com/voorwinde1.html>, accessed October 30, 2013, which cites F.F. Bruce, "Canon," Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, edited by J.B. Green and S. McKnight, Downers Grove/Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1992, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> From <http://www.churchhistory101.com/docs/New-Testament-Canon.pdf> accessed October 30, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> I do not know the full extent of his teaching in this area; quite obviously, the humanity of Jesus did have a beginning.

<sup>11</sup> From <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/theologians/athanasius.html?start=2> accessed October 30, 2013.



- 2) Tatian, a disciple of Justin, around A.D. 170-175, created a harmony of the four gospels known as the Diatessaron. This indicates that, from early on, there were 4 gospels understood to be legitimate.
  - 3) The oldest known orthodox list of the New Testament is known as the Muratorian canon. This document is dated by most scholars to have been written circa A.D. 170–200. It is an incomplete document discovered in an Italian library by Ludovico Antonio Muratori, a famous historian of his time. It lists all the books of our New Testament except Hebrews, James and 2Peter. Because of the incompleteness of this document, there is also a question as to whether 1Peter is mentioned. It also includes a book called the Apocalypse of Peter, which is possibly 2Peter.
  - 4) The list of Athanasius could be placed here as well.
22. **Ancient translations.** When the gospel of Jesus Christ spread beyond the Roman empire, obviously a variety of languages were encountered. Therefore, missionaries needed to determine which books and letters ought to be translated into the native tongue of the new believers. Similarly, the language of the Roman empire went from Greek to Latin; so that a Latin translation of the correct books had to be made.
- 1) St. Jerome not only made the first Latin translation, but he established a precedent. He began at first to translate the Old Testament from the Greek Septuagint; and later determined that it would be proper to translate it from the original Hebrew (he had to consult a number of Jewish rabbis and others in order to complete the Old Testament). The translation of both testaments into Latin was a 23 year project for Jerome, and a translation which stood the test of time for more than a millennium (the Council of Trent in 1546 declared it to be the only legitimate Latin text for the Scriptures). I personally use the English translation made from his Latin translation today; and find very few problems or differences with the accepted Hebrew text. With regards to the apocrypha, Jerome apparently saw them as religious reference texts, but did not consider them to be on the same level as the correct canon of Scripture.
23. Church **councils** gathered and formally recognized the canon which was already in existence.
- 1) Although we do not have any documents from the Council at Hippo in A.D. 393; it is referenced at the third Synod of Carthage in 397.

This information and a great deal more is summed up in two charts (the first two are JPEGs):  
 ([Chart 1](#)) ([Chart 2](#)) ([PDF](#) of both charts).

24. Circulation of documents.
- 1) This seems to have begun very early on; possibly even when the Apostles were still living. A letter of Paul would be received, and this would be copied and recopied. We may only conjecture how these copies traveled from one congregation to the next, but believers from different churches could be discussing things, and one of them tells the other of a problem they are having in their assembly; and the other says, "You know, we had that very same problem and Paul wrote us a letter about it. Let me see if we can make a copy for you to take back home." Or, the Apostles could be making fewer and fewer trips to the various churches, and, for spiritual food, epistles are exchanged.
  - 2) We know that for certain, at least according to F.F.Bruce, that in the early years of the second century, there were two Christian collections of authoritative documents were current. One was called "The Gospel" (with sub-headings "According to Matthew," etc.). The other was "The Apostle," i.e. the Pauline corpus (with sub-headings "To the Romans," etc.). These two collections appeared to be circulated separately, as a logical result of passing around both

the letters of Paul and the gospels which had been written.<sup>12</sup> At some point, these were joined together with the book of Acts placed between them, giving us today's structure of the New Testament.

25. Now let's look at this from a different view; this is a list of how things stood by the year A.D. 220<sup>13</sup>:

- 1) The Gospels: They are one of the best attested sections of the New Testament during this period. Irenaeus maintains that the Church recognizes four Gospels. There need to be four Gospels, he says, because there are four parts of the world and four winds. Few people understand why there are four gospels even today (although there is a clear explanation; which is a study for another time).
- 2) The book of Acts was acknowledged as the work of Luke, with a secure position between the Gospels and the letters of Paul.
- 3) All thirteen of Paul's epistles were universally received and accepted.
- 4) The epistle to the Hebrews is more difficult because there is no name affixed to it. To this day, no one really knows who wrote this epistle, apart from it not being one of the original twelve (Heb. 2:3). In a time when the words of the Apostles was being established, to whom could this letter be attributed? The Eastern Church which was strongly influenced by the Alexandrian theologians, Clement and Origen, readily accepted it as a letter of Paul. In the Western Church it was not accorded canonical status till late in the fourth century. This was because Pauline authorship of this epistle had at an early stage been denied in the West. Non-apostolic authorship was a dogmatic consideration.
- 5) The Catholic (General, Common) Epistles have various positions of recognition by this time. The book of James is an epistle over which there is again a sharp division of opinion. The Eastern Church accepted it without question, although in some circles as late as 325 it is regarded as a forgery. 1Peter by this time has a firm place in the canon whereas the opposite is true for 2Peter. Some spoke of the Apocalypse of Peter (which could have been 1 or 2Peter). In any case, there is no clear evidence of the recognition its canonicity before A.D. 350. In fact, 2Peter was rejected by the Syrian Church till the fifth century. 1John was generally received. From a historical perspective 2 and 3John have an uncertain position. After all, they are quite short and very personal. Only by the fourth century are they received as canonical. Jude is accepted in the Muratorian Canon and appealed to by Clement, Tertullian and Origen. However, it is not universally accepted. Around 360 it is not part of the canon in the Syrian and African Churches.
- 6) Finally, the book of Revelation has quite a secure position as authoritative at this time, although there is still some opposition—no doubt due to its bizarre contents. Irenaeus, Clement and Tertullian refer to it as "The Apocalypse" although the spurious Apocalypse of Peter was also circulating at the time.
- 7) Other Writings: Tertullian, Irenaeus and Clement cite the Shepherd of Hermas as Scripture. However, after 200 a series of ecclesiastical decisions began to loosen the bond between The Shepherd and other books. It is done rather mildly - it is to be read privately and for edification, but not to be read publicly with the prophets and the apostles. This attitude is already expressed in the Muratorian Canon which states: ".... it should be read, indeed, but it cannot be published to the people in Church either along with the prophets, whose number is complete, or with the apostles of these last days."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Partially paraphrased from <http://www.bible-researcher.com/voorwinde1.html> accessed October 30, 2013. He cites *The Spreading Flame*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958, p. 226.

<sup>13</sup> This was taken and paraphrased from <http://www.bible-researcher.com/voorwinde1.html> accessed October 30, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Quote from <http://www.bible-researcher.com/voorwinde1.html> accessed October 30, 2013. He quotes from Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958, p. 234.

- 8) The letters of Clement of Rome, especially 1Clement (A.D. 95), were used in worship services, particularly in Corinth. However, 1Clement never enjoyed widespread canonical recognition. The Apocalypse of Peter, the Didache, and the Acts of Paul (Latin) were other such documents. They were accepted for a time in limited circles, but eventually were excluded by all as authoritative.
26. The outliers:
- 1) *The Syrian Church: The Peshitta version which includes 22 New Testament books omits 2Peter, 2 and 3John, Jude and Revelation. The native (as opposed to the Greek speaking) Syrian Church recognizes only the more limited canon of the Peshitta to the present day.*
  - 2) *The Ethiopian Church acknowledges the canonical books of the larger Christian Church plus eight additional works dealing primarily with church order.*<sup>15</sup>
27. However, when all is said and done, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Coptic Orthodox, Orthodox Tewahedo, and Syriac Christians all have the same New Testament, as shown in this chart taken from Wikipedia:

Wikipedia Chart from **Biblical\_canon** accessed October 30, 2013.

28. Conclusion:

- 1) R. A. Baker: *The New Testament developed, or evolved, over the course of the first 250-300 years of Christian history. No one particular person made the decision. The decision was not made at a church council. The particular writings that became those of the New Testament gradually came into focus and became the most trusted and beneficial of all the early Christian writing.*<sup>16</sup>
- 2) I personally have never made an extensive study of those books which did not make it into

Books	Protestant tradition	Roman Catholic tradition	Eastern Orthodox tradition	Armenian Apostolic tradition [N 1]	Coptic Orthodox tradition	Orthodox Tewahedo traditions	Syriac Christian traditions
<i>Canonical gospels</i> [N 2]							
Matthew	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes [N 3]
Mark [N 4]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes [N 3]
Luke	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes [N 3]
John [N 4] [N 5]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes [N 3]
<i>Apostolic history</i>							
Acts [N 4]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Acts of Paul and Thedea [N 6] [N 5]	No	No	No	No (early tradition)	No	No	No (early tradition)
<i>Pauline epistles</i>							
Romans	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
1 Corinthians	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2 Corinthians	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Corinthians to Paul and 3 Corinthians [N 6] [N 7]	No	No	No	No – inc. in some mss.	No	No	No (early tradition)
Galatians	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ephesians	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Philippians	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Colossians	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Laodiceans	No – inc. in some eds. [N 8]	No – inc. in some mss.	No	No	No	No	No
1 Thessalonians	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2 Thessalonians	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
1 Timothy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2 Timothy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Titus	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Philemon	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>General epistles</i>							
Hebrews	Yes [N 9]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
James	Yes [N 9]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
1 Peter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2 Peter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes [N 10]
1 John [N 4]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2 John	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes [N 10]
3 John	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes [N 10]
Jude	Yes [N 5]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes [N 10]
<i>Apocalypse</i> [N 11]							
Revelation	Yes [N 5]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes [N 10]

<sup>15</sup> Both from <http://www.bible-researcher.com/voorwinde1.html> accessed October 30, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> From <http://www.churchhistory101.com/docs/New-Testament-Canon.pdf> accessed October 30, 2013.

the canon; however, the few which I have read clearly do not belong in the Bible (the Gospel of St. Thomas is a wonderful example of that). Or check out the [Shepherd of Hermas](#) and see if this fits into the New Testament in any way.

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## Bibliography

Norman Geisler and William Nix; *A General Introduction to the Bible*; Chicago; Moody Press, ©1986, pp. 277–317 (which book should be in every Christian's library). This would be the place to go for further study of the books which were left out of the canon (pp.298–317).

Stephen Voorwinde's *The Formation of the New Testament Canon* from [bible-researcher.com](#) accessed October 29, 2013.

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An article on Athanasius at [Christianitytoday.com](#), accessed October 30, 2013.

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