

The Canon of the New Testament

What books are in the New Testament

- 27 books
 - 4 Gospels
 - Acts of the Apostles
 - 13 Letters (Epistles) of Paul
 - Hebrews (sometimes attributed to Paul)
 - 7 Letters of others (called 'catholic' or 'general' epistles)
 - Revelation (of John, also called the Apocalypse)
- Almost every branch and tradition of Christianity agrees on this. But as always there are messy exceptions.
 - One notable exception is the Assyrian Church of the East (neither Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox), which rejects the books of 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude and Revelation
- The agreement among such sometimes disparate groups is an extraordinary testimony to the clear claim these books and no others make to be inspired.

How did the New Testament take shape?

- Neither Jesus nor the apostles left a definitive list of the books that should be included in the NT.
- It took time for the 27 books to become accepted by Christians as the word of God, and there were disagreements along the way. Some books were slower to be accepted than others.
- We can think of the history of the canon in three stages:
 1. God inspires the writings of the new covenant.
 2. Churches start using these books as "scripture".
 3. The Church recognises the "canon" as a definitive list of books which God inspired.

Is the New Testament the Word of God?

- In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul is primarily speaking about the Old Testament scriptures. Does the NT give us reason to believe that God would inspire more scriptures in view of the new covenant instituted by Jesus Christ?
- Consider the following (linear, not circular) reasoning:

The books of the NT have been accurately transmitted and prove themselves to be historically reliable concerning the life of Jesus and the apostles.



The historical testimony of the NT is compelling evidence that Jesus really rose from the dead.



If Jesus rose from the dead, we should believe that his claims are true - He is the Son of God.



This gives the teaching of Jesus (and his apostles) authority equal with God (and with the old testament).

- Matthew 7:29; John 8:28
 - Jesus did not view himself merely as a commentator or rabbi, but as having authority to declare truth and command obedience. His understands his words to come straight from the father
- John 16:12-15
 - Jesus, speaking to the apostles, anticipates them being given divine revelation beyond the words which he spoke to them. These words will be true, carry the authority of Christ and the Father, and even speak of the future (prophecy).
- 2 Corinthians 13:10
 - Paul as an apostle, recognises that he has been given authority over the churches. There are many similar statements throughout his letters.
- 1 John 1:5
 - John does not consider his message to originate with himself but with Christ

When did Christians begin to recognise the NT?

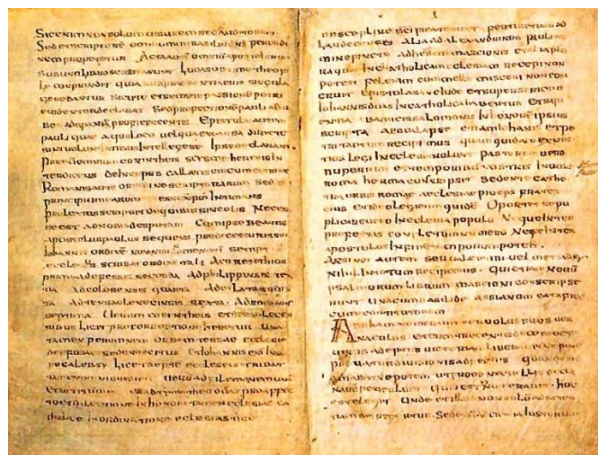
- While the recognition of some books took longer than others, it is generally the case that the NT writings were quickly received as the word of God, even within the lifetime of the apostle
- 1 Timothy 5:17-18, Luke 10:7
 - Paul quotes the gospel of Luke alongside Deuteronomy and labels it as "scripture"
- 2 Peter 3:15
 - Peter numbers the writings of Paul among the "scriptures"
- Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27
 - Paul expects (commands) his letter to be read publicly in the assembly - just as the Old Testament was read in the synagogue.
- The recognition continued immediately after the apostles had died.
 - 1 Clement (c. AD 96) quotes and alludes to between 11 and 15 of the NT writings, with notable exceptions being John's gospel and epistles.
 - 1 Clement 47
"Take up the epistle of the blessed Apostle Paul... Truly he wrote to you in the Spirit"
 - The books of the NT are abundantly cited and quoted as scripture throughout the writings of the early Christians.

When did the "canon" emerge?

- At first, the use of certain books was natural, casual and informal. Different regions had more or less familiarity with certain books (e.g. books written in Rome were first accepted in Rome). But over time, Christians began to realise that a list was needed to describe the books which were recognised as authoritative for the Church.
- These lists generally did not seek to impose a list of books on Christians but acted as a statement of the books in use by the Church, and a guard rail against heretical books which were popping up.
- This is very similar to how the Old Testament canon came about before the time of Christ.

Muratorian Fragment (c. AD 170-200)

- Considered to be the oldest preserved list of the books of the NT, probably from the late 2nd century.
- The beginning is missing and the list ends abruptly, making it incomplete.
- It is clear this was written in response to heretical groups (Marcion) who were inventing their own scripture to support their teaching.
- The list includes:
 - The four gospels (The first two are implied to be in the missing portion)
 - Acts
 - The epistles of Paul (which are enumerated)
 - Romans, Corinthians (2 epistles), Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians (2 epistles), Timothy (2 epistles), Titus, Philemon
 - Two forgeries are mentioned: an epistle to the Laodiceans, another to the Alexandrians, and "several others"
 - John's "epistles" (only 2 epistles, 1 John is quoted, but it is unclear which other epistle was included)
 - Jude
 - Revelation
- Omitted are:
 - Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, 2 or 3 John
- Other works mentioned:
 - Wisdom of Solomon
 - Apocalypse of Peter ("though some of us are not willing [this] to be read in the church")
 - "Hermas wrote the Shepherd very recently, in our times... it ought indeed to be read; but it cannot be read publicly to the people in church... [it cannot be included] among the apostles, for it is after their time" (the shepherd of Hermas is included in some early manuscripts of the new testament, but as we mentioned with the old testament, this does not tell us fully what Christians thought about it.)



Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History (c. AD 324)

- Distinguishes between "canonical and accepted writings" and "disputed works"
- Eusebius makes his judgements of book based on his knowledge of how they were used by Christian writers up to his time.
- Relevant sections are book 3, chapters 3, 24, 25
- "The writings that bear the name of Peter"
 - "One epistle... called the first, is acknowledged as genuine... an undisputed work. But we have learned that his extant second Epistle does not belong to the canon; yet, as it has appeared profitable to many, it has been used with the other Scriptures."
 - "The so-called Acts of Peter... and the Gospel... and the Preaching and the Apocalypse, as they are called, we know have not been universally accepted"
- "Paul's fourteen epistles are well known and undisputed."
 - "...some have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews... on the ground that it was not written by Paul."
 - "In regard to the so-called Acts of Paul, I have not found them among the undisputed writings."
- "the undisputed writings of [John]"
 - "his gospel... must be acknowledged as genuine... put... after the other three gospels"
 - "the former of his epistles has been accepted without dispute... But the other two are disputed."
 - "In regard to Revelation, the opinions of most men are still divided. But at the proper time this question likewise shall be decided from the testimony of the ancients."
- The Shepherd of Hermas
 - "...this too has been disputed by some, and on their account cannot be place among the acknowledged books; while by others it is considered quite indispensable, especially to those who need instruction in the elements of the faith... it has been publicly read in churches, and... some of the most ancient writers used it"

- "...the writings of the New Testament which have been already mentioned...
 - "...the holy quaternion of the Gospels;
 - "...the Acts of the Apostles.
 - "...the epistles of Paul;
 - "...the extant former epistle of John [1 John],
 - "...the epistle of Peter [1 Peter]...
 - "... the Apocalypse of John [Revelation]..."
- "...the disputed writings, which are nevertheless recognized by many...
 - "...the so-called epistle of James
 - "and that of Jude,
 - "also the second epistle of Peter,
 - "and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist or to another person of the same name."
- "Among the rejected writings...
 - "...the Acts of Paul,
 - "...the so-called Shepherd (of Hermas),
 - "...the Apocalypse of Peter,
 - "...the epistle of Barnabas,
 - "...the Teachings of the Apostles (Didache);
 - "...the Apocalypse of John (Revelation), if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject, but which others class with the accepted books."
 - "...the Gospel according to the Hebrews"
- "...those that are cited by the heretics under the name of the apostles...
 - "...the Gospels of Peter, of Thomas, of Matthias, or of any others besides them
 - "...the Acts of Andrew and John and the other apostles
 - "which no one belonging to the succession of ecclesiastical writers has deemed worthy of mention in his writings. And further, the character of the style is at variance with apostolic usage, and both the thoughts and the purpose of the things that are related in them are so completely out of accord with true orthodoxy that they clearly show themselves to be the fictions of heretics. Wherefore they are not to be placed even among the rejected writings, but are all of them to be cast aside as absurd and impious."

What were the Criteria for acceptance?

- Notice in the quotes we have mentioned:
 - Most of the books of the New Testament as we know it were accepted as such from the earliest times.
 - The same few books recur often as "disputed" books on which opinions differ.
 - The choice of books is not random or extrinsic, but based on an assessment of the books.
 - Were they really written by the apostles or their close associates?
 - Have the books been used and recognised by the churches since the time of the apostles?
 - Is the teaching contained in the books in accord with the rest of the scriptures and the faith that has been handed down?

Athanasius' Easter letter (letter 39, AD 367)

- Considered the earliest record of the 27-book list we now know.
- Again, Athanasius is not dictating what he thinks the books should be, but calling to remembrance what he understands the church to have recognised.
- But the debates were not all settled, and the discussion rumbled on for centuries to come.
- "it seemed good to me... to set before you the books included in the Canon, and handed down, and accredited as Divine...
- "the [books] of the New Testament
 - "...the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
 - "...the Acts of the Apostles
 - "...Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz.
 - of James, one;
 - of Peter, two;
 - of John, three;
 - ...one of Jude.
 - "...fourteen Epistles of Paul
 - "...to the Romans
 - "...two to the Corinthians
 - "...to the Galatians
 - "...to the Ephesians;
 - "...to the Philippians;
 - "...to the Colossians;
 - "...two to the Thessalonians,
 - "...to the Hebrews

- "...two to Timothy
- "...one to Titus
- "...to Philemon.
- "...the Revelation of John"

Protestants and the NT Canon

- The uncertainties around the "disputed" books have raged on throughout the history of the Church.
- Martin Luther marked Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation as "disputed" books and he expressed his own rejection of the book of James as being apostolic.
- But his views were exceptional and were not widely embraced.

Modern disputes about authorship

- While some books have been the subject of debate since the earliest days of the Church, many bible critics today reject traditional apostolic authorship of some or all of the traditionally "undisputed" New Testament books.
- The reasons given for this are not rooted in historical testimony, but on modern analysis of style, vocabulary and theology. They are often based on unfair and sceptical presuppositions about the new testament and they stand in bold opposition to the strong early testimony (and internal evidence) that we have.

A Final Comment

- John 16:12-15
 - While these words are spoken primarily to the apostles, they have an application for all Christians.
 - Believers possess the Spirit of God, and we rely ultimately on the spirit working believers in the church to help us recognise the truth which he has inspired in the new testament.