

# How the New Testament Canon was Formed

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## Introduction

“How was the New Testament formed?” This is the most commonly asked question asked of me when I speak on university campuses. In fact, when I survey my students in my Church History class I typically give them a list of 12-15 topics asking for their highest interests. How the New Testament came into existence almost always gets the most votes. This is a critical question because the church has always believed that the documents found in the New Testament are “inspired” writings and the most important source documents for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (and Christian doctrine).

As a young man I was told that the early church fathers used a set of criteria in their decisions regarding the formation of the New Testament canon. Something like this:

- the author must be an apostle or the close associate of an apostle
- the document cannot contradict other “inspired” writings in doctrine
- the document must share the overall “feel” and “character” of other inspired writings
- it must have been cited by early Christian writers, AND
- it must be accepted by the majority of church bishops

Although these criteria sound reasonable, one cannot find such a clearly described methodology in the patristic writings, nor in any council canon (rule) prior to the late fourth century. Scholars have assumed these guidelines from various bits of information (and evidence) scattered throughout the earliest Christian writings.

Many early writings were accepted as “inspired” by some church fathers, yet did not meet one or more of these conditions. Some of the documents that made it into the New Testament fail in one or more of these conditions – for example, *The Revelation* of John had little support in the Eastern church even into the late fourth century.

I was told many times that the New Testament canon was established at a church council. Although the exact list of New Testament documents was confirmed at the third Synod of Carthage (397 AD), this was a relatively small regional council and by this time *most* of the 27 New Testament documents had already been agreed upon by *most* of the church.

### **A Natural Delivery**

The New Testament was **NOT** dropped from heaven.

The New Testament was **NOT** delivered by an angel.

The New Testament was **NOT** found in a farmer's field.

The New Testament was **NOT** suddenly “discovered” in a clay jar with 27 “books” intact like the Dea Sea Scrolls or the Nag Hammadi texts.

The New Testament canon developed, or evolved, over the course of the first 250-300 years of Christian history. If the New Testament had been delivered by an angel, or unearthed as a complete unit it would not be as believable. Part of the historical validity of the New Testament comes from the fact that we **can** trace its development. The fact that this development is not as precise nor as clean as we might like makes it far more historically reliable...and thus, more believable.

### **Oral Tradition and the Words of Jesus**

The words of Jesus were recognized as inspired very soon after the resurrection, yet it was 2-3 decades before his words were circulated in written form. Even after the gospels had been written, it then took nearly 150-200 more years to be circulated around the Roman empire. The evidence shows that for the first 50 years the gospel spread by word of mouth mostly through the apostles and the 500+ eyewitnesses who had seen Jesus and followed Him. The *sayings* of Jesus would have been repeated over and over again among His followers. We have one clear example of a *saying* (oral tradition) when Paul is addressing the Ephesian elders in Luke's *Acts of the Apostles*:

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*

This citation is especially interesting because it does not appear in any of the gospels - not even in Luke's gospel. This is an *agrapha* (the Greek word "unwritten"). It does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament, yet was credited by Luke to be a *saying* of Jesus. This, and a few other statements in the Pauline letters give witness to the *sayings* of Jesus being transmitted in an oral tradition.

Some Christian scholars disagree with the theory that the *sayings* of Jesus were initially transmitted in an oral tradition. The concern is this would threaten the integrity of His message, and thus threaten the validity of the gospel tradition. But the task for the historian is to present the evidence as objectively as possible, always acknowledging that we are working with theories of events that happened 2,000 years ago for which we do not have ALL the evidence.

### **Literacy Rate**

One of the most important factors in the development of the New Testament canon was the literacy rate in the first century. Only 2-3% of the Roman population was literate. While in the major cities (like Rome, Corinth, Alexandria and Jerusalem) the literacy rate may have been 10-15%, in the rural areas it would have been closer to 1%. Most people could read the simple signs in the marketplace: "three oranges for a semi," but they could not read a document or write. Oral tradition was extremely important in the ancient world. Telling stories was how most people were taught...and for the first several decades the gospel was propagated mainly through the verbal witness of illiterate Christians.

Probably as early as 40AD oral traditions that carried the words of Jesus began to be put into writing. We know that early Aramaic sources were

behind the earliest written gospel text. This was probably done to protect the integrity of his message. The Nag Hammadi texts seem to shed light on this phase of the gospel development. The Nag Hammadi Library is a collection of thirteen ancient books, containing over fifty texts, discovered in the Egyptian desert in 1945. These books were sealed in a large clay jar and found by some peasant farmers. The story of this discovery is very interesting and fascinating.

Within the Nag Hammadi texts is a *Gospel of Thomas*. This gospel is basically a collection of “sayings” and stories, not written with any recognizable chronological or thematic order. Some of the sayings parallel sayings found in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) - Saying 9, for example is the Parable of the Sower. Yet others are not only different, but bizarre. One example will serve to make the point:

Jesus said, “This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will pass away. The dead are not alive, and the living will not die. In the days when you consumed what is dead, you made it what is alive. When you come to dwell in the light, what will you do? On the day when you were one you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?” *Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 11

It is likely that early Christian leaders began to hear odd sayings like this one attributed to Jesus and determined that an authoritative set of *sayings* needed to be recorded.

Most scholars believe that Mark’s gospel was the first of the four New Testament gospels written, followed by *Matthew* and *Luke*. The dates given vary widely from the early 60’s (for *Mark*) into the 80’s (for *Luke*). The difficulty with an earlier dating comes from the fact that the first Christian writer, the apostle Paul, does not clearly quote any of the four gospels. He does, however, refer to some of the earliest oral traditions, like the words of Jesus at the Last Supper (1 *Cor* 11:23-25). Clear citations do not begin to appear until the last 20 years of the first century

in the *Didache* (some scholars want to date this document into the early second century). Even some liberal scholars would not suggest a second century date for the synoptic gospels, thus the lack of quotations are attributed to a slow pace for copying and circulating these documents. Papyrus does not become widely and commonly used outside the Egyptian region until the second century.

The earliest non-New Testament Christian documents (*Didache*, *Barnabas*, *1 Clement*, and *The Shepherd of Hermas*) cite the Old Testament as “scripture” and only make allusions to New Testament texts. The letters of Ignatius of Antioch have several allusions to what becomes our NT, yet no clear quotations.

*An allusion is 2-5 words used close together that either match an NT text or form the basic thought of an NT text without citing what the text is or without any acknowledgement that a reference is being made to a text.*

Again, the exception is the *Didache* (dated cir. 70-85 AD) which appears to quote from an early version of *Matthew*.

In the 140's Marcion (who was deemed a heretic) constructed his own biblical canon which included most of Paul's letters in edited form, along with an edition of Luke's gospel. Marcion rejected the other gospels as having been tainted by the Jews. This list by Marcion is the first known listing of what is called a New Testament canon and helped to push the early church to develop an authoritative list of inspired writings.

Why do we think the copying and transmission of texts was slow when Marcion was able to come up with NT texts? This is evidence that texts were beginning to be copied, but this was the capital of the Empire and a place with a higher literacy rate.

Second century church father Justin Martyr (cir. 100-165 AD) does not cite any New Testament writing by name, but he designates several gospel citations with “it is recorded,” or the “memoirs of the apostles.” He does refer to the gospels:

For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, “This do ye in remembrance of Me...” *First Apology* 66

Around 170-175 AD Tatian, a disciple of Justin, created a harmony of the four orthodox gospels known as the Diatessaron. This text was accepted in some circles, even being used to replace the four gospels, but this success was short lived. What this harmony reveals, however, is that the church was beginning to recognize *only* four gospels.

The four gospels are confirmed by Irenaeus of Lyons in his work *Against the Heresies*:

From this it is clear that the Word, the artificer of all things, being manifested to men gave us the gospel, fourfold in form but held together by one Spirit. *Against Heresies* III,11.8

Irenaeus also quotes from, or alludes to, almost all the documents that become the orthodox New Testament. These citations are mostly from Pauline works (25+ occurrences from each of these: *Romans*, *1 Corinthians*, *Galatians* and *Ephesians*). His Pauline citations/allusions include all three “Pastoral” epistles (*1 / 2 Timothy* and *Titus*). The other general New Testament letters get scant recognition and a few are totally absent (*Philemon*, *2 Peter*, *3 John*, and *Jude*). He also refers to a few non-New Testament documents as “inspired” (*1 Clement* and *The Shepherd of Hermas*).

## **The New Testament in the Second and Third Centuries**

Archeological excavations have shown that sometime early in the second century there was a dramatic increase in the use of papyrus. The makers of papyrus figured out some techniques that allowed them to manufacture far more papyrus, which drove the cost of the material down. These archeologists found ancient garbage dumps with thousands of papyrus scraps. Amazingly, while prior to this era papyrus was scarce and expensive, hundreds of scraps were found that were used for grocery lists, small notes to a family member or other more mundane purposes.

By the time we come to the end of the second century and look at the citations of Clement of Alexandria (195-202 AD) and Tertullian (205-225 AD), we find numerous references from almost every New Testament document. The New Testament writings that are excluded by these two men are very similar to that of Irenaeus, but Clement includes many writings as “scripture” that did not get final acceptance (*The Shepherd of Hermas*, *Barnabas* and three to four “gospels” that are semi-Gnostic). One can take the citations from Clement and Tertullian and reconstruct the entire New Testament excluding the 3 or 4 small epistles which they neglect (like *Philemon*, *2* and *3 John* and *Jude*).

Citations from church fathers becomes a very important factor moving forward as church leaders would ask, “Did Clement and Tertullian cite from this writing?” These are the first prolific Christian writers; they are highly educated and live in large cities that would have a library and a philosophical and/or ecclesiastical school. From this point forward we find an increasing number of fathers writing greater numbers of treatises, filled with ever-increasing numbers of biblical citations.

## **The Muratorian Canon**

Sometime around 1738 Italian historian Ludovico Antonio Muratori discovered a Latin document fragment that is the oldest list of the New



Testament writings. This document is known as the Muratorian Canon. The beginning and ending of the manuscript is missing. Scholars have determined it is a poor translation of a second century Greek manuscript. Many scholars consider the original Greek manuscript to have been written around 170-200 AD. The listing of “inspired” documents includes the following:

- *Matthew* and *Mark* (we assume these were named in the beginning of the fragment which is missing):
- the writer mentions “four gospels” then names, *Luke* and *John*
- *Acts*
- all 13 Pauline letters (including the Pastoral epistles)
- *1* and *2 John* is assumed: the writer only names “two letters of John” - --
- *Jude* and
- the *Revelation of John*

This list does not include *Hebrews*, *1* and *2 Peter*, or *3 John*.

It also names a few documents that do NOT appear in the orthodox New Testament (*Wisdom of Solomon*, *the Apocalypse of Peter*, and *The Shepherd of Hermas*).

By the end of the second century most of the 27 documents in the New Testament canon had already gained widespread acceptance, especially the four gospels and the Pauline writings. It is critical to understand why only four gospels were accepted. These early fathers were very familiar with other gospels that were floating around: Marcion’s gospel of Luke, various “Gnostic” gospels (*The Gospel of the Egyptians*, *The Gospel of Philip*, and other gospels that were not well accepted (*The Gospel of Truth* and *The Gospel of Mary*). Bishops and other leaders wanted to make it clear that these “other” gospels were NOT accepted as “orthodox” for a very important reason – the Gnostics.

## **The Effect of Gnosticism**

Gnosticism was at its zenith during the second century, especially in Egypt. The various Gnostic texts were rejected by the orthodox. Most of these writings were rejected because they had too many bizarre passages and thus were not able to develop and keep a large audience. [The reader might find my paper interesting: *A Brief Introduction to Gnostic Texts* can be found on the website: [www.churchhistory101.com](http://www.churchhistory101.com)]

One important factor for any document to be affirmed as “orthodox” and “inspired” was how much acceptance it received among the bishops (and thus the churches) in the various regions. This acceptance is typically reflected by if, and how often, the church fathers cited from the particular document.

The proliferation of Gnostic texts forced church leaders to address these texts and to explain why the church rejected them. To illustrate, we will look briefly at the bizarre nature of some texts found in some of these writings. But before we get into bizarre Gnostic passages it is important to understand that many ancient texts have some strange passages, including the New Testament. One must be ready to admit this before launching an attack against strange Gnostic writings. For our purpose just two examples will be enough,

“I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left.” ....“Where, Lord?” they asked. He replied, “Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.” *Luke 17:34-37*

AND

Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered. *Matthew 21:18-19*

I know there are many explanations for these passages - I have read 2-3 explanations for both of these texts, and none truly convince or satisfy me. My point is that we must admit to some strange passages in our NT documents that cannot be easily explained. I could list others. And if you read the early fathers you will find many strange passages as well.

Scholars can offer some explanation for the strange Gnostic passages, but even with the proper historical context many of these passages are just...bizarre. The critical difference between the New Testament gospels and the Gnostic gospels is this:

*The basic message contained in the New Testament is powerful because it is profound – taking the complicated and making it simple to understand. Overall Gnostic texts are just not as easy to grasp.*

The *Gospel of Thomas* is a good work to cite for this purpose – it does contain passages very similar to New Testament passages. Many scholars that criticize early Christianity like to use *Thomas*.

Here are two strange texts:

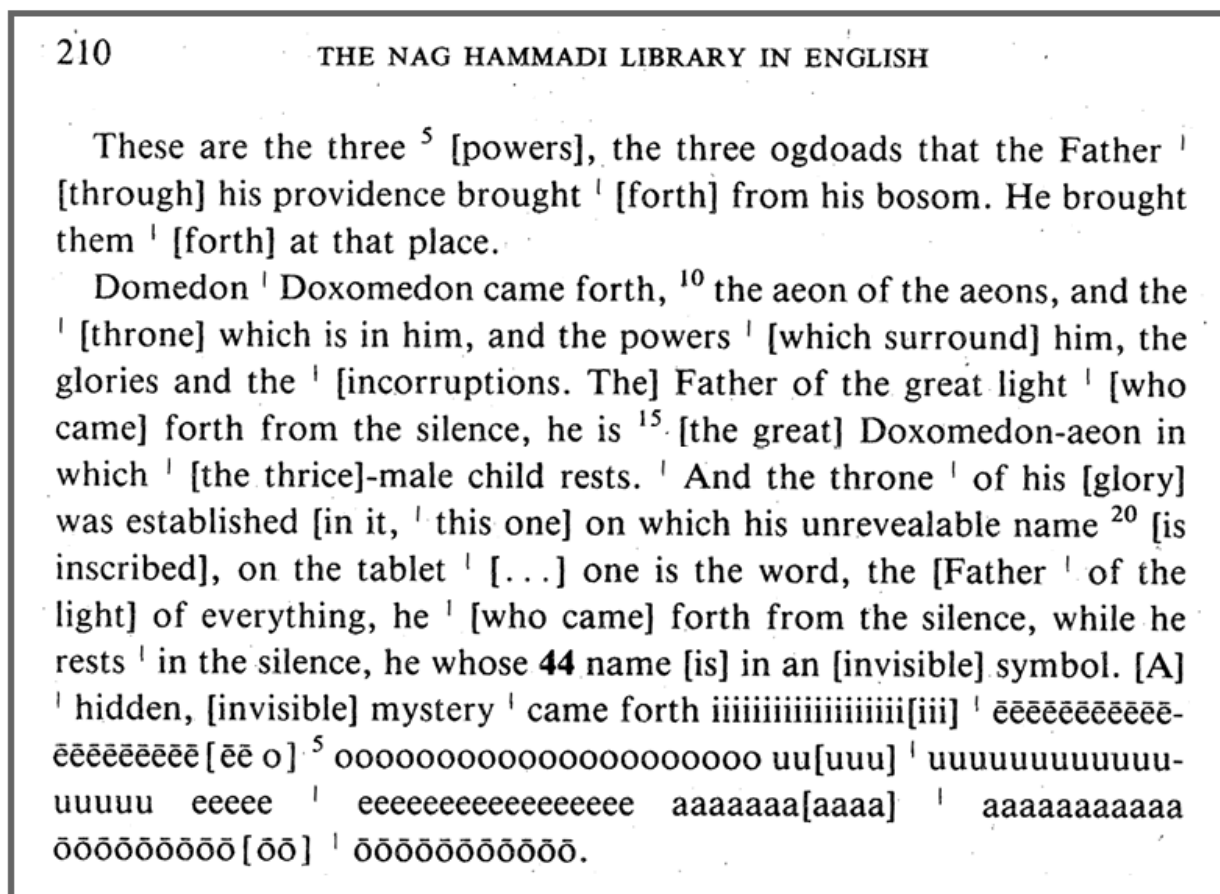
Jesus said, “Blessed is the lion which the man shall eat, and the lion become man; and cursed is the man whom the lion shall eat, and the lion become man.” Saying 7

Simon Peter said to them: “Let Mary go forth from among us, for women are not worthy of the life.” Jesus said: “Behold, I shall lead her, that I may make her male, in order that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who makes herself male shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. Saying 114

These two sayings clearly illustrate why the *Gospel of Thomas* was not accepted in the early church. Many scholars who attack the integrity of the New Testament find it easy to criticize the male-orientation and

domination of the early church. These scholars will use various passages from *Thomas* and other extra-biblical texts, yet typically they will avoid texts like Saying 114.

The *Gospel to the Egyptians* is another Gnostic document with perhaps some of the most bizarre passages faced by the early church. This is such a strange document that it is difficult for a modern audience to even consider. The text contains long stretches of vowels meant to be sounded out while reading, probably like secret code or a form of mystical chanting. Below is a small excerpt from *Gospel to the Egyptians*.



This is a photograph of the text taken with a cell phone. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, "The Gospel to the Egyptians," Robinson, James M., (New York 1977), p.210. This is the *Gospel to the Egyptians* 43.4 - 44.9.

[Brackets indicate holes and degradations in the manuscript where the translators have postulated the contents. The vertical lines using a small | indicate the end of a line. The bold number indicates the overall "page" of the codex. - R.A. Baker]

While this might be THE most bizarre text in the Gnostic genre, the point here is that Gnostic writings contain many bizarre passages. The ratio of “normal” to “bizarre” is far different from the orthodox New Testament writings. In addition, the degree of bizarre is far more acute in these Gnostic writings. The church leaders of the second and third centuries were forced by the circulation of these strange Gnostic writings to label accepted writings as “orthodox” and these other writings as “unorthodox.”

### **The NT Canon in the Third and Fourth Centuries**

By the third century there is a noticeable increase in citations from the “inspired” writings that eventually become the New Testament. At the same time, there are far less citations in the church fathers from works that do not make it into the New Testament. A few of the most prolific third century writers are Tertullian (already mentioned), Hippolytus of Rome, Origen of Alexandria and Cyprian of Carthage. Origen is the first church father to write commentaries on biblical books.

The fourth century brings an “explosion” of Christian writings. Lactantius, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory Thaumaturgus, the Cappadocian Fathers: (Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend, Gregory Nazianzen), John Chrysostom, Jerome, Rufinus, and the great Augustine of Hippo (Confessions was written around 396-97 AD). Many of these fathers wrote commentaries and we have hundreds of their sermons. All of these writers illustrate how the New Testament had become far more settled with thousands...and thousands of citations from the 27 “orthodox” writings and fewer citations outside that list.

### **The Official Canon**

Many people think the New Testament writings were agreed upon at the Council of Nicea. There were 20 canons (church rules) voted on at Nicea.

None of these canons dealt with sacred writings.

*The first historical reference listing the exact 27 writings now found in the orthodox New Testament is in the Easter Letter of Athanasius in 367 AD.*

In this letter Athanasius states that these are the only recognized writings *to be read in a church service*. The first time a church council ruled on the list of “inspired” writings allowed to be read in church was at the Synod of Hippo in 393 AD. No document survived from this council – we only know of this decision because it was referenced at the third Synod of Carthage in 397 AD.

Even this historical reference from Carthage, Canon 24, does not “list” every single document. For example, it reads, “the gospels, four books...” The only reason for this list is to confirm which writings are “sacred” and should be read in a church service. There is no comment as to why and how this list was agreed upon.

### **The Apocrypha**

In a study of the New Testament canon some comment must be made regarding the set of documents known as “The Apocrypha.” This is a set of documents written mostly during the period “between” the Old Testament period and the birth of Jesus, what we might call the beginning of the New Testament period. Some of these documents were highly regarded by some of the NT writers. There are some NT allusions to apocryphal texts:

- *Jude* cites the *Book of Enoch*
- the writer of *Hebrews* alludes to *2 Maccabees* and *Jubilees*
- Paul alludes to *2 Maccabees* in *1 Corinthians* 15

Protestants need to know that some of the books in what we call the Apocrypha ARE included in the canon of scripture for other segments of

the Christian Church. The Catholic Church accepts all of these documents. I am fairly sure the various branches of the Orthodox Church accept all the works in The Apocrypha as well several other early Christian writings (like *Didache* and *1 Enoch*). The Ethiopian Orthodox and the Coptic Church also accept a few other books including *1 Enoch*. The Apocrypha is in the canon, just not the Protestant one.

The Apocrypha was NOT in the original listings of the books of the Bible. These writings were never in the Hebrew OT, but were included in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek version of the OT. Jerome included these books in the Latin Vulgate. He placed them between the Old and New Testaments around 405AD. It appears from some of his comments in the prefaces of a few books that Jerome did not think the Apocrypha writings belonged in the OT canon, but he did quote some of the apocryphal writings as “inspired.” Some of the early fathers did not want these documents to be accorded the same respect as the “official” texts. The bishops at the Council of Hippo in 393 did affirm numerous (but not all) the writings in the Apocrypha.

In fact, in the Easter Letter of Athanasius in 367 where we have the first exact listing of the 27 NT documents he also lists several writings of the Apocrypha. He then says this,

But for greater exactness I add this also, writing of necessity; that there are other books besides these not indeed included in the Canon, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness. The *Wisdom of Solomon*, and the *Wisdom of Sirach*, and *Esther*, and *Judith*, and *Tobit*, and that which is called the *Teaching of the Apostles*, and the *Shepherd* [of Hermas]. But the former, my brethren, are included in the Canon, the latter being [merely] read... *Epist* 39.7

What you see is a lack of uniform thought. This was fairly common in the early church.

## **Conclusion**

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. Like almost everything in Christian history, the process was not neat and tidy. The collection of writings that became the New Testament gradually gained acceptance in most of the regions of early Christianity and all other documents slowly faded into the category of good Christian reading.

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