

The History of the Bible: The Making of the New Testament Canon

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This article describes the compilation of the New Testament and will look into the basic facts as what books it contains, when were they written, who were their authors, how they were copied and transmitted down through the ages, and lastly how they were collected together into a canon of scripture.

The New Testament contains twenty-seven separate books arranged in four groups, according to genre. It begins with the gospels, including four accounts of the life, ministry, death and assumed resurrection of Jesus. Next is the book of Acts, a historical account of the life of the Christian Church and its missionary efforts after the resurrection of Jesus. The third group contains twenty-one Epistles, which are the actual letters written by Christian leaders, most prominently the apostle Paul to Christian communities and individuals, dealing with the problem of faith and church administration. The New Testament ends with an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world as we know it, the Revelation of John.

Contrary to the general belief that the gospels were the earliest books of the New Testament, in fact it was the Epistles of Paul, which were written in the 50's AD, some 20-25 years after Jesus was put on the cross and about 20-25 years before the gospels were first written. Of the twenty-one letters included in the epistles, thirteen letters are believed to be written by Paul and the rest by other Christian leaders. Out of the thirteen, seven letters are undisputed Pauline letters but there is doubt about six. Included among the disputed letters are letters to his followers named Timothy and Titus, These letters are most likely written by a second or third generation follower of Paul because the vocabulary used in these letters is non-Pauline and most importantly, the church situation mentioned in these letters does not correspond well with that in Paul's days but more with the situation prevalent in the first and second century.

The New Testament consists of four gospels named after their alleged authors as Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. The first gospel written was the Gospel of Mark in 65-70 AD probably written a decade after the Pauline letters, the next were the Gospels of Mathew and Luke written 80-85 AD and lastly the Gospel of John was written in 90-95 AD. Even though the gospels go under the name of authors mentioned above but in fact, they were written anonymously. These authors' titles were included in the English bible in later additions and were not original to the gospels themselves. The gospel narrations are always written in the third person. The earliest gospels were written in Greek and the writers seems to be well educated, literate, Greek-speaking Christians, in contrast to the apostles of Jesus, who were uneducated, lower class, illiterate, Aramaic-

speaking peasants. The bottom line is that we don't know the identity of the real authors of the gospels and it seems probable that none of the gospels were actually written by any of Jesus' closest followers.

The gospels are not eyewitness accounts of what Jesus said and did, they appear to be based on oral traditions that had been in circulation about Jesus for the decades between his crucifixion and the time the gospels were written. Believers in Christ were converting others to the faith, by telling them stories about what Jesus said and did; these stories were, therefore, in circulation for many years, and were told in different languages and in different countries. Because these stories were in oral circulation for a long time before they were finally written in the gospels, they were modified during this process of oral transmission and resulted in discrepancies that one finds between the same stories told by different authors. Among the many discrepancies are the following examples: did Jesus cleanse the temple at the beginning or end of his ministry, where did Jesus die, did Jesus ever preach about himself, was he willing to do miracles as a sign of his identity, and the birth of Jesus? At the same time, the gospels in some places seem remarkably alike in their written accounts describing the same stories, using the same words to the extent it seemed that their author might have copied it from the same written source, and for that reason, the gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke are also called synoptic gospels.

The way the books were written, distributed, copied, and reproduced in the time of Jesus was significantly different from today's time. There were no printing presses, photocopy machines or electronic transfer of information. For the books to be distributed they had to be reproduced and they could only be reproduced by hand, one word, one letter, at a time. It was a pains-taking and a slow process and prone to copying errors. Anyone copying a book by hand will make mistakes, this means that in the ancient world, where there was more than one copy of a book, there was no guarantee that the multiple copies would be alike in all their details, odds were that they would, in fact, be different from one another, unless very elaborate steps were taken to guarantee accuracy, which were not taken for the New Testament. There is no original surviving manuscripts of any of the books included in the New Testament, what we have are the copies, the vast majority of them produced centuries after the original from copies that were also centuries removed from the originals and that had themselves been made from earlier copies. The earliest complete books of the New Testament in any surviving manuscript are from about the end of the third century.

Besides the books in the New Testament, there were many other Christian books written at about the same time as these were not included in the New Testament, this raises the question, why these twenty-seven books came to be privileged as the sacred scripture when the others were not. Among the prominent Christian books not included in the New Testament are the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Apocalypse of Peter and many

others. Debates over which books to be included lasted for centuries until 367 AD, some three hundred years after most of these books had been written, it was finally accepted in the time of Alexandrian Bishop Athanasius that these twenty-seven books were finally compiled as the New Testament Canon.

In conclusion, there are many uncertainties about the actual authors, who were most likely not the closest followers of Jesus and the time period the books were written. There are doubts about the information contained in these books based on oral traditions and due to the fact that these books were transmitted and reproduced by manual copying without any surviving original text. Many other similar, early Christian books were not included in the New Testament Canon raising doubts about the authenticity, legitimacy and accuracy of the New Testament. It is hard to differentiate between what is factual and what might be included as a result of human errors and interventions. Looking at the New Testament, as it is today, no one can even imagine what the original version of the New Testament would have been.