

The Bible: After All the Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still the Book for Me? (Part 3)

The Church did not create the Canon but came to recognize, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the church.[1. Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance*, 287] [Bruce Metzger]

Read the Part One Introduction [Here](#).

Read Part Two on the Old Testament Canon [Here](#).

PART 3: THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

The debate on the Old Testament canon is quite tame on the popular scholarship level when compared to the New. There are stacks of books out there, easily purchased on Amazon, that explain things like how there were really more than four Gospels, how some of the Bible books are forged, how we cannot know for sure what the original New Testament documents contained and a host of other issues on why we cannot trust our New Testament[2. See *The Five Gospels* by the Jesus Seminar; *Pseudepigrapha and Canon* by David Meade; and most of what Bart Ehrman has written]. It goes way beyond Dan Brown. They are books written by people who are very educated in New Testament themes. Today we at REO will defend the canon of the

New Testament. I will discuss why we have exactly 27 books instead of 26 or 28, and why the writings that some say are equal to the New Testament writings are not in our New Testament.

In With the New (While Keeping the Old)...

To begin with, I want to start with why we have a New Testament. Why write these 27 books? I think a key to knowing which books belong in the New Testament is found in why the books were written.

1. Because the covenant changed.

The New Testament does not merely continue the story of God's work through his people; it introduces Jesus, God himself, our savior and how we connect to God presently. The change in covenant[3. This is a better word for the two parts of the Bible and our word for "testament" comes from it. Yet "covenant" communicates a relational aspect that "testament" does not.] from Abraham (circumcision) and Moses (Law) to Jesus (grace through faith) is the biggest change in Christian history. If the work of God through Moses, Abraham, David and the prophets was worth writing down, what Jesus did would be far more[4. Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books*, 207].

Because he is greater, and what his life, death and resurrection accomplished is the most important message God has ever given. So much so that the Old Testament really is about him, if you study it correctly. The life of Jesus necessitated new Scripture[5. Michael Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus*, 275].

2. Because there is advantage in having written documents over oral tradition.

What the apostles of Christ taught verbally was of utmost

importance. As they began to die off, having a written record of their teachings become necessary[6. Ibid, 273]. Also, even if you have eyewitnesses telling stories, having an organized account of the stories would be more beneficial in key ways. For example, writings back then could be changed because of copyists (see next essay) but were less likely to be altered over time than oral stories[7. F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 119]. Also, having 28 chapters of information in one place is something that is impossible to accomplish through storytelling.

3. Because heresies arose and infiltrated the church.

Not all of the New Testament is storytelling, however. Much of it is straight doctrine. Due to the rise of several false teachings within the church, the need to have organized written doctrine became clear. Gnosticism, which will be talked about again below, was a belief in a special knowledge that God only gave to certain people[8. Metzger, 75-76]. It was quite different than the teachings of Jesus, according to the canonical Gospels, and the teachings of his apostles. Docetism, the belief that Jesus was not really a human being, also began to challenge the orthodox belief in Jesus as fully God and man[9. Ibid, 77]. Many false beliefs and teachers cropped up and the church combated them with formal writings.

4. Because persecution of the church necessitated having books that were clearly defined as their Scripture.

The church was persecuted from Jesus' time on, especially in the bloody war on the church by Diocletian from 303-311 A.D. This persecution meant the church had to hand over their Scriptures to authorities [10. Komoszewski, Sawyer and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 159]. The church at that point wanted to be absolutely sure which books were worth being persecuted over[11. Bruce, 268].

What were the criteria?

Keep in mind that there is no singular point in history where we can definitively say an individual or group sat down, discussed what books were canon and which weren't, what the criteria was and hammered out our current New Testament. It just didn't happen that way. As Bruce Metzger says, there is no way to know at exactly what point God's people determined that a specific book was now Scripture[12. Metzger, 260]. It happened so gradually and over time, with so many churches and leaders being involved, that (just as with the Old Testament) no one can take credit for it. And so the credit goes to God.

Yet, while there was no official list of criteria recorded by the early church, there are reasonable things we can conclude that they used to determine what were authoritative documents and what were not.

1. Apostolic Authorship or Influence[13. Kruger, 182; See also Metzger, 251-54]

With one anonymous exception (the book of Hebrews, which is dealt with below), the 27 books of the New Testament are attributed to an apostle or, with the exceptions of Mark and Luke/Acts, were written by a close companion of an apostle.

Acts 2:46 says the early church listened to the apostles' teaching in a list of their practices and this is understood as what they would have considered "Bible study." The apostles were Jesus's students and their knowledge and calling qualified them to teach truth, and later produce Scripture. It was standard for the early church fathers to appeal to "The Lord and the Apostles" as authoritative in matters of faith and practice[14. Metzger, 6].

It needs to be known by modern Christianity that the four Gospels are technically anonymous—you will not find any name of authorship attached to any of the books anywhere—and that even some of Evangelical Christianity's best scholars do not assume that in every case the four men that receive credit for the writing of the four Gospels actually wrote them[15. See

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 108-114]. This is not a problem, to me anyway, and hope your faith in Christianity is not placed in the fact that we have to know with 100% certainty that Matthew wrote the Gospel attributed to him.

Regardless, most of the people I have read do not doubt the authors are the four men that bear their names and they were attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John very early in Christian history, in the 2nd century. The reason they named them clearly at this point will be discussed below. But know that they did not pick the four names at random. These were the men that were widely considered to be the authors. The fact that Mark is the name on his Gospel instead of Peter, where he almost certainly got his material, is a testimony to the genuineness of trying to name the real authors[16. Kostenberger, Bock and Chatraw, *Truth Matters*, 55]. In other words, if the early fathers attempted to deceive by using big names as the Gospel authors, they would have called Mark's gospel by Peter's name.

Again, Mark and Luke were accepted because of their associations with Peter and Paul, respectively[17. Bruce, 161]. Mark features Peter's name at the beginning and end of his book, forming what is called an *inclusio*[18. Kruger, 185] and you can even see parallels between Peter's words in Acts 10:36-41 and phrases in Mark's Gospel[19. Bird, 225].

In Luke's case you can see that his material matches the content of Mark and Matthew well (meaning it is orthodox material) and his investigation was thorough, honest and well organized. The people he investigated are the early apostles and followers of Jesus (Luke 1:4), based on how his research lines up with the rest of the New Testament. That is what is important—getting the material from the apostles, who had authority. For some time I was consternated by the fact that not all scholars believe that Matthew wrote the first Gospel, but Dr. James Leonard encouraged me by saying that even if

Matthew didn't write "Matthew" someone like him did. It has all the earmarks of an apostle as far as intimate knowledge of the life and teachings of Jesus.

2. *Early dating*[21. Bruce, 256]

This will be a big deal in the sections below on the books that did not make it in, but it is important to know that all four of the canonical Gospels are dated, at the latest, from 65 A.D. (Mark) to 95 A.D (John) and early estimates are 5-10 years earlier than that[20. Paul Wegner, *Journey From Texts to Translation*, 135]. Most scholars, but not nearly all, believe Mark was first and we will discuss why this in in our next essay. Regardless, the dates for the Gospels have to be early to correspond to the previous criteria of apostolic origins. Again, the apostles dying out is part of the reason they were written[21. *In Defense of the Bible*, Cowan and Wilder, eds., 406]. The rest of the New Testament was written between 50 and 100 A.D., with Revelation being the last book.

3. *Widespread acceptance*[22. Metzger, 251-54]

Being read and broadly accepted as authoritative content in churches all over the known Christian world made it more likely that the work would end up in our New Testament. The canon developed by broad attestation, not the opinions of a small group.

4. *Orthodox Content*[23. Bruce, 256 and Metzger, 251]

Did it match what the church knew from things like oral tradition of Jesus and knowledge of the Old Testament, to be the truth about God (specifically about Jesus) and how he wants us to live? Quoting from the Old Testament was important to Jesus, the sermons in Acts[24. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content*, 311], and nearly all New Testament books.

This is a huge reason Hebrews was accepted in spite of being

anonymous[25. Bruce, 258]. Much like our four anonymous Gospels, it bears the image of someone who knew correct doctrine. Speculation of authorship ranges from Paul to Apollos to Priscilla. But the book is an incredible letter of understanding the supremacy of Christ and also the Old Testament Scriptures and how these two things collided in history.

Our 27 books of the New Testament bear a remarkable consistency in who Jesus was and in basic doctrine.

The Timeline of Acceptance

There is internal biblical evidence (2 Peter 3:15-16) that some of Paul's writings (we don't know which ones or how many) were considered Scripture from extremely early on, as early as the writing of the New Testament epistles, around A.D. 50-70[26. Metzger, *The New Testament*, 311]. Paul in 1 Timothy 5:18 cites the words of Jesus, calling them "Scripture"[27. Kostenberger, 48], showing how early his sayings were elevated to canon.

The four Gospels (John being accepted a little later than the other three) and the writings of Paul were all widely accepted very early on in church history as Scripture, "astonishingly early" according to Barton[28. Kruger, 224]. In the late first and early second centuries, church fathers Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp all testified to the authority of parts of the Gospels and quoted from anywhere six to 16 of the New Testament books in their writings[29. Bruce, 120-122]. Justin Martyr in the early to mid-first century approved our Gospels [30. Kruger, 183] and was aware of 12-13 New Testament books being authoritative[31. Wegner, 141]. Irenius in the mid-second century quotes from over 20 New Testament books[32. Ibid.]. Near the end of the second century, we have the Muristonian canon with 20 books[33. Komoszewksi, 122]. And by

the end of the second century, we can safely say that 21-22 books of our current New Testament had widespread acceptance in the known Christian church[34. Metzger, 314].

So you can see its gradual yet consistent growth with time. It is true that the canon developed slightly differently in the East and West halves of the church and that there were disagreements, but since God did not send us the canon list via angel, this is to be expected[35. Kruger, 199-200].

Reasons for late Acceptance for a few books

Just as with the Old Testament, several books in the New were later in being fully embraced by early Christianity. 1 Peter and 2 Peter have very different Greek, 2 Peter's being very rough compared to 1 Peter. This caused some concern about whether either or both were written by Peter[36. *In Defense of the Bible*, 411]. It is possible the difference in the two lies in Peter using a scribe in 1 Peter with better Greek (he mentions Silvanus in 5:12)[37. *Ibid.*]

Hebrews was questioned for a while because it is anonymous but as previously mentioned, was accepted based on content[38. *Ibid*, 410]. James was questioned due to its Jewish flavor[39. *Ibid.*]. Revelation was questioned on its odd content and its support from Montanists, a heretical group who placed value on experiences, visions and dreams (if you read Revelation it is easy to understand why)[40. *Ibid*, 412].

Slowly but surely these books were eventually accepted in the church based on the criteria above and the canon formed over the next two centuries. By 367 A.D we have the first list of the 27 books we know today from Athanasius[41. Metzger, *The Canon of the NT*, 140]. This does not mean the canon debate had ended, just that by this point you can see how nearly unanimous the church was and how close it was to having the canon we have today.

Extracanonical Gospels and the "Lost Christianities"

This is one of the major hot-button issues of popular anti-Christianity scholarship. The allegation, to say it simply (and I hope not too simplistically), is that there were competing views on Jesus, who he was, what Christianity was supposed to be, and that the form we have in the New Testament “won” and stamped out the losers[42. See especially *Lost Christianities* by Bart Ehrman]. These alleged “Lost Christianities” have their own writings that contradict the current New Testament canon and give us a different picture of what Christianity should have been. Books like the Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Mary, The Letter of Barnabas, The Letter of Ptolemy, The Gospel of Peter and others have been used as evidence that there were many version of our faith, which casts dispersion on whether ours is the right one.

Why aren't these books accepted into our canon? For the opposite reasons as above:

1. *They are late and not written by apostles.*

Let us be very clear that although these works often have “big” names (including apostles’ names) attached to them, they were not written by the people whose names they bear. This is partly why our Gospels are named. The church had no issue with them being technically anonymous (it would have been self-aggrandizing for Mark or Luke especially to put their names on their works[43. Bird, 255]) until false Gospels used early church leaders’ names—falsely—as their titles.

None of these works are dated by most scholars before 140-160 A.D[42. Craig Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels*, 56]. For example, the Gospel of Thomas has too much of the New Testament in it for it to be as early as our Gospels. It quotes or alludes to over half of the NT books, including Revelation (written last), meaning it would have to have been written after all of them[43. Ibid, 67-68]. It also knows eastern and Syrian traditions of Christianity that were not around until the middle of the second

century[44. Ibid, 68]. Similar things can be said for all of these works and if you would like more information please consult the Craig Evans book from the citations below.

2. *They are not orthodox in their teachings.*

Gnosticism, while perhaps developing early enough to be referenced in the New Testament books (Col. 2:8, 18; 2 Tim. 3:7), clearly butted heads with orthodox Christianity in the second century when these books were likely written[45. Metzger, 76]. Gnosticism is all over these books, to varying levels[46. Evans, 64-65] (the Gospel of Thomas has been thoroughly argued as not being gnostic, but it at minimum has shades of it according to most conservative scholars) and that does not coincide with the Jesus of the canonical Gospels. Thomas, even if not gnostic, still does not mesh with the canonical Gospels as far as orthodox content. Kostenberger says of Thomas, "If Thomas does represent authentic, original Christianity then it has left very little historical evidence to that fact." [47. Kostenberger and Kruger, *Heresy and Orthodoxy*, 166].

I think Bird seals this issue by saying it this way, contra Ehrman: "The exclusion of other Gospels was not the result of a victory of the orthodox. It was rather based on an objective claim as to who more properly transmitted the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. In the end, the reason "other" Gospels lost out is that they simply failed to convince the majority of their antiquity and authenticity as stories of Jesus." [48. Bird, 294]

Even if...

I have zero doubt about the canon of the whole Bible. If the church did get anything wrong, it would be a couple of minor books, like Esther or 2 Peter. I firmly believe they belong, but even if they did not, nothing about my faith changes. My

faith is in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, not in the church's decision on every single one of 66 books. That cannot be forgotten in this debate.

Find Part Four of this series [HERE](#).