

How did we get the Bible?

In our last lesson, we looked at the New Testament Manuscripts and found that there are more than 5,000 manuscripts in the original Greek language as well as thousands of versions in other languages. The manuscript evidence is monumental.



The Development of the New Testament Canon

The New Testament canon has developed around the apostles. Of the 27 New Testament books, the Apostle John wrote five: The Gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation. The Apostle Peter wrote 1 Peter and 2 Peter. He also provided information and guidance to John Mark for the Gospel of Mark. The Apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew.

The Apostle Paul wrote at least thirteen of the twenty-seven New Testament books: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Titus, and Philemon. Paul was also a traveling companion of Luke who Paul identifies as a co-labourer (Philemon 1:24). Luke penned the Gospel of Luke and Acts. The book of Hebrews is of unknown authorship, though some attribute it to Paul, Apollos, or Barnabas.

James and Jude, brothers of Jesus also each wrote a book which is known by their names. Galatians 1:19 even refers to James as an apostle.

The greatest attestation that a book belonged in the New Testament canon comes from the apostles themselves. In **2 Peter 3:15-16**, Peter stated, *“And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.”* ESV

- 1. What do you see in 2 Peter 3:15-16 that cause us to conclude that Paul’s writings should be considered canonical?**
- 2. Who wrote 2 Peter and what authority would he have in determining what should be a part of Scripture?**
- 3. How does Ephesians 2:19-20 affect what we believe to be canonical?**
- 4. In 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7. What is significant about this?**
- 5. What does John 14:26 have to do with the New Testament canon?**

The New Testament authors (mostly apostles) viewed each others writings as Scripture. Very quickly early Christians came to accept them as well.

It is easy to understand why it took a number of years for the entire body of New Testament Scripture to be almost universally accepted by the churches: 1) The New Testament books were originally written in various places, by different authors, to a number of churches and individuals. 2) The churches were highly scattered and persecuted. 3) It took time for the autographs to be copied and distributed. 4) No one scroll could contain all the New Testament.

As the New Testament writings began to be copied and circulated they gained acceptance as Scripture with early church leaders. **Ignatius of Antioch**, who died in A.D. 110, wrote seven letters and in them quoted from eight New Testament books. **Polycarp of Smyrna**, a disciple of John who was martyred in Rome in A.D. 155, quoted from seventeen of the New Testament books in his *The Letter to the Philippians*.

The **Muratorian Canon** (A.D. 150) is the oldest documented evidence of a body of books identified as a New Testament Canon. It was found in very poor condition, but lists all New Testament books except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 1 John. Because the document is damaged it may have originally contained all or some of these books.

The heretic **Marcion** in the second century developed his own canon accepting only Paul's writings. He edited Paul's writings and removed whatever he thought was not Paul's teachings.

Justin Martyr who lived in the mid-second century wrote about the gospels and the writings of the apostles quoting directly from five of the New Testament books.

Before the close of the first century, **Clement of Rome** quoted from or referred to over half of the New Testament books and referred to them as Scripture. By A.D. 180, **Irenaeus** of Lyons quoted over a thousand passages from the books of the New Testament calling them Scripture given by the Holy Spirit.

Origen in the third century named all 27 New Testament books, but said that some disputed Hebrews, James, 2 and 3 John, and Jude.

Eusebius in the fourth century named all New Testament books, but added that a minority suspected James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude.

By A.D. 367 **Athanasius** identified the 27 books we have in our New Testaments and used no other books in the same way.

The early translations into Syriac, Old Latin, and Coptic include most New Testament books by the second century. In Syriac all books are found except 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. Old Latin lacks only Hebrews, James, and 2 Peter. Coptic versions found in Egypt included all 27 books. The Catholic Council of Hippo in A.D. 393 and the Third Council of Carthage in A.D. 397 accepted all twenty-seven books as the canon of the New Testament. It was God who established the canon for the New Testament through those writers he inspired. This canon has been almost universally accepted by Christians for centuries. We can be confident that we have the whole, complete, and inspired Word of God.

The Canon of Scripture. F.F. Bruce. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988

How We Got the Bible. Neil R. Lightfoot. Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1986.