

# The History of the Bible

# CANONIZATION - NEW TESTAMENT

## Specific New Testament Challenges

### 1. Language

The New Testament was written in a common language, Koine Greek or, literally, "Common Greek." Unlike Old Testament Hebrew, Koine Greek was a multi-national language.

### 2. Geography

The New Testament covered a large area. Books were not collected into a single clearinghouse, but spread throughout independent churches in Israel, Syria, Asia Minor and into Europe.

### 3. Popularity

Christianity was embraced by a variety of people. Widespread interest in this "new" faith, combined with growing literacy rates, caused a large amount of non-inspired writings to be penned.

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## The Need For Canonization

In the book "From God To Us," Norm Geisler and William Nix argue for three main forces God used to encourage making an official recognition of New Testament Canon:

- ➔ **The Ecclesiastical Cause:** Churches needed to be able to follow the apostolic command to share inspired Scripture with one another. (1 Timothy 4:13, Revelation 1:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:27, Colossians 4:16)
- ➔ **The Theological Cause:** Since all Scripture is inspired and profitable for doctrine (2 Timothy 3:16-17), there was a need to define which documents constituted inspired Scripture.
- ➔ **The Political Cause:** Almost every Roman emperor in the first 300 years of Christianity openly persecuted Christians. For example, Emperor Diocletian (292-304 AD) issued orders for churches to be destroyed and the Scriptures to be burned.

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## Criteria for Evaluating Canonicity:

### Apostolicity:

Was it written by an apostle or someone closely associated with an apostle?

### Orthodoxy:

Does it line up with the teaching of Jesus and the apostles?

### Catholicity:

(Universality)  
Is the document widespread? And is it recognized as authentic to the target audience?

## Timeline of Canonization Events

**Pre-100 AD: The Canon is Closed**  
The final book is Revelation dated to about 95 AD.

**140 AD: Marcion of Sinope Debates the 'Canon.'** Marcion was a heretic who advanced an alternative canon, but that tells us there was an accepted collection of books he opposed.

**170 AD: Tatian of Assyria Harmonizes the Gospels.** Tatian created a document called the Diatessaron (literally "Through the Four Gospels") choosing only Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

**170-175 AD: Irenaeus Affirms the Four Gospels.** He wrote that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the only Gospels accepted by the churches at that time.

**170-190 AD: Muratorian Fragment.** Rediscovered in the mid-1600s, it suggests a list of New Testament books, leaving out only Hebrews, James, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> Peter and 3<sup>rd</sup> John.

**200 AD: Church Fathers.** By this time, the writings of early church fathers like Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, etc. quote or allude to all 27 New Testament books.

**325 AD: The Council of Nicaea.** Thanks to Dan Brown's fictional work, "The Da Vinci Code," this council's importance is exaggerated. It made no record of deciding New Testament Canon.

**367 AD Athanasius of Alexandria.** He records the first known mention of the settled 27-book New Testament canon.

# What About The 'Lost Books?'

They aren't lost. They're just not Scripture. Some, like The Shepherd of Hermas, may be worthwhile for devotional reading. But the rise of the Greek language and the rapid spread of Christianity fueled a writing frenzy of religious books. By the 9<sup>th</sup> Century there's a list of about 280 non-canonical books, and more have been "rediscovered" since then. They fall into several categories:

## Fictionalized Gospels

### **Example: *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas***

It is probably very old, written in the second century, but not only enough to have been written by Thomas. It gives a Gnostic view of fictional miracles during the childhood of Jesus. Some of the miracles are just odd, like stretching a piece of wood to help Joseph with an important carpentry project or, when a water jar breaks, carrying water in a cloth bag. Others are downright heretical, such as killing a neighbor boy with a curse and then blinding his parents. Everyone avoids this petulant child out of "fear of being cursed and maimed for life."

## Pseudo-Epistles

### **Example: *The Letters of Paul and Seneca*.**

This is a collection of 14 letters supposed written between the Apostle Paul and the Roman philosopher Seneca. Seneca is a real person. He was the tutor of the Emperor Nero. So, he would have been alive at the same time as Paul. And, Paul is known to have seen converts to Christianity even in Caesar's own household. However, these letters appear to be pseudopigraphical (not written by who they say they are) and were written in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. The "letters" are very short, about a paragraph or two each. Can you imagine Paul writing a letter that's like three sentences? And in five of his six letters he is supposed to have written, he says nothing about Jesus whatsoever?!

## Supposed Acts

### **Example: *The Acts of Thomas***

This is also written about 200 years too late to be Thomas or anyone who actually saw Thomas. On the positive side, it suggests the Apostle Thomas traveled to India – which is very likely historically speaking. It seems to borrow from Old Testament stories – and then completely make up other parts. Like, Thomas didn't want to go to India so, much like Joseph in the Old Testament, Jesus sells Thomas to a merchant and then appears in visions as Thomas' identical twin brother. Another example is that donkeys can talk (like Balaam's story from the Old Testament) but then the talking donkeys start performing exorcisms.

## Inauthentic 'Revelations'

### **Example: *The Apocalypse of Peter*.**

Remember, Revelation is the word for Apocalypse. This document was written, probably around 150 AD – but its hard to say since we don't have a complete manuscript of it anywhere. It is referred to by early Christian writers, but often with some level of suspicion about its authenticity. It seems to have been widespread, but obviously wasn't treated with the care of Scripture since the bits of copies that exist are wildly different. It draws on Greek Mythology for visions of Hell and probably served as inspiration for Dante's Inferno.