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# The Origins of the New Testament



Written by Robert C. Jones  
Acworth, Georgia

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# Christian Theology and History Adult Sunday School Courses

Robert Jones

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I've always been a strong believer in adult Sunday School classes and Bible studies in our churches. And many churches have quality, Biblically-based adult-focused programs. Unfortunately, just as many churches tend to downplay adult education, focusing on children's education (not a bad thing in itself), or focusing on the needs of the "unchurched", where topics such as church history and theology are often purposely ignored.

Yet there is a strong need for adult education focused on both the Bible and the basic tenets and history of the Faith. Among the reasons:

- Not all adults come from a strong childhood background in the church – adult Sunday School classes/Bible studies may be their first serious introduction to what Christianity is all about
- Christianity (and especially Evangelical Christianity) is under constant attack from the media and popular culture (movies, music, etc.). We need to give fellow Christians the tools to defend the Faith against attack (or to provide a "ready defense" as Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15)
- Even adult Christians that have a strong Biblical background often know little about the origins and history of their Faith

To better meet the needs of adult Christians (both those mature in their Faith, and those just starting out in the "School of Christ"), I've written a series of courses that focus on the history of the Christian Church (including the Jewish roots), as well as the development of doctrine in the Church. The topics represented in these courses are intended to both further the participant's walk in the Faith, as well as serve as a starting point for Christian apologetics.

While the primary purpose of these courses is for use in churches, they also may be useful for High School and College projects, especially the courses focused primarily on historical aspects.

One note: these courses are primarily written from an Evangelical Protestant view-point (I come from a Reformed Church background), but I hope I've given ample time to other points of view throughout the various courses.

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robertcjones@mindspring.com  
www.sundayschoolcourses.com

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## Introduction

This purpose of this booklet is to examine the origins of the New Testament, including who wrote it and when, as well as the process by which the books that make up our modern day New Testament were deemed "canonical", or authoritative.

"...For it is not to be accounted of no consequence, that, from the first publication of Scripture, so many ages have uniformly concurred in yielding obedience to it, and that, notwithstanding of the many extraordinary attempts which Satan and the whole world have made to oppress and overthrow it, or completely efface it from the memory of men, it has flourished like the palm tree and continued invincible." (John Calvin, "Christian Institutes", p. 113/114)

In my experience as a Christian (first, as a Schwenkfelder, later as a Presbyterian), I have noted with some dismay that the subject of how the 27 books that make up the Protestant and Roman Catholic New Testament became canonical is often vaguely addressed by the Church. Generally, the hazy answer is that a group of bishops convened a council in the fourth century (usually incorrectly attributed to the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D.), and selected the books that we now have in our New Testament.

While this hazy outline contains some elements of truth (there *were* fourth century councils on the topic, at Hippo and Carthage), it can give the false impression that the books of the canon were somewhat arbitrarily selected by an arbitrary group of church leaders 300-400 years after they were written. One might excuse the skeptic for questioning the validity of such a methodology for such an important (and lasting) decision.

The reality is somewhat different. The various councils of the fourth century did indeed vote on a New Testament canon, but the process was far from arbitrary. Rather, the learned bishops merely put their stamp of approval on a corpus of works that had been in constant use in the Christian Church since the first century, and that were quoted from liberally by the earliest church fathers (the "Ante-Nicene", or pre-Council of Nicaea church fathers). While there were some controversies and compromises between the Eastern and Western churches in terms of the final canon (Hebrews was popular in the Eastern Church, the Apocalypse in the Western), no books were chosen that weren't already in common use in either the former or the latter (and the great majority were in use in both).

In addition, I will discuss the mysterious books that "almost made it" into the canon, but were rejected in the final cut. Books such as the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Revelation of Peter all appeared on various proposed canonical lists (or were referenced by Early Church Fathers) throughout the first three centuries of the church. While it was eventually decided that they were not of apostolic origin, and therefore should not be contained in the canon, they were still viewed by the early church fathers as useful to those "who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness". Even with that recommendation, these books are not only not used in the church today, but have practically disappeared from public view.

Finally, I will discuss some of the major New Testament events since the creation of the canon in the late fourth century (with an emphasis on the creation of English-language translations).

Hopefully, this booklet will help elucidate how the New Testament became the book we as Christians, cherish today.

## New Testament quiz

1. At least one of the four Gospels lists the author within the text (T/F)
2. The modern day New Testament canon was decided upon by a group of bishops at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. (T/F)
3. Martin Luther was especially enamoured of the Book of James (T/F)
4. There was great debate regarding whether there should be more than four Gospels in the canon, at the fourth century councils (T/F)
5. The Gospel of Thomas was known, and rejected, by the Church Fathers (T/F)
6. The oldest extant piece of any part of the New Testament is from the Gospel of John, dating to approximately 125 A.D. (T/F)
7. One book of the New Testament that was universally agreed upon for inclusion into the canon was the Book of Hebrews (T/F)
8. The one-time existence of a Lost Gospel of Q is a proven historical fact (T/F)

### Glossary

**Bible** - from the Greek word *biblia*, meaning "books"

**Canon** - from the Semitic word for "reed"; in Greek, it became to mean a standard measure or rule (*kanon*); as pertaining to the Bible, it is the list of books considered authoritative by the Early Church Fathers

**Gospel** - from the Greek *evangelion*, meaning "good news"

**Koine** - the common Greek used to write most of the New Testament

**Vulgate** - the common (or "vulgar") Latin used in Jerome's translation of the Bible

## The origins of the New Testament

The New Testament, of course, is not a single book, but rather a collection of books (gospels, letters, an apocalypse) written over a period of several decades in the latter part of the first century. The primary purpose of the books that were later called the "New" Testament (to distinguish them from the "Old" Jewish scriptures) was to record and pass on the gospel ("good news") of Jesus Christ.

### The Gospels

The word "gospel" comes from the Greek word *evangelion*, meaning "good news". (Other words in common usage that come from the same root include evangelical and evangelist.) Gospels are not meant to be histories - they were not written as a "Life and Times of Jesus Christ", but rather to convince people that Christ was both the promised Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures, and, more importantly, the very Son of God. John 20:31 records:

"But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31, NIV)

However, John, who wrote the longest of the four Gospels, goes on to point out that no attempt has been made to record everything that Jesus said and did:

"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book." (John 20:30, NIV)

"Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." (John 21:25, NIV)

Sometimes people question why the Gospels were written so long after the death and resurrection of Christ. Assuming that Christ died around 30 A.D., even early datings of Mark (before 50 A.D.) would still put the first written Gospel 15 or more years after the death and resurrection of Christ. Why so long? Two possible answers follow:

- The apostles and the original disciples spread the word throughout the Mediterranean (and perhaps beyond) primarily through word of mouth. It was not viewed that there was any reason to write the message down, until the apostles and disciples (those that had actually seen Jesus) started to die off.
- The apostles and disciples probably held the view that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent, and thus felt no immediate need to record the word that they were spreading for posterity. As decades stretched on, it became apparent that the Second Coming was not imminent, and more care was taken to make a record of the origins of the faith for future generations.

The first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are referred to as the "synoptic" Gospels, because they have a great deal of common material. J. Phillip Hyatt in his "Heritage of Biblical Faith" notes:

"Of the 661 verses in Mark, Matthew has about 600 in substance or actual wording, and Luke has about 350. Altogether, only 31 verses of Mark fail to appear also in Matthew and Luke. On the other hand, Matthew and Luke have between 200 and 250 verses in common that are not found in Mark, consisting chiefly of sayings of Jesus."

Given the above set of statistics, many modern Biblical scholars assume that Mark is the oldest Gospel, and that it formed the basis for Matthew and Luke. The additional portions of Matthew and Luke not contained in Mark are viewed to be from yet a fourth source, mysteriously designated as "Q" (German for *quelle*, or "source".) Some scholars are so convinced that there must have been a "sayings" source for Matthew and Luke that they sometimes refer to the five Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and "Q". However, it should be noted that there is not a single scrap of evidence that "Q" ever existed - it is not referred to by any of the Early Church Fathers, nor is there any historical or archaeological evidence of its existence. It should be noted also, that the Early Church Fathers identified Matthew (and Luke) as the first Gospels to be written (see section on "The Early Church Fathers" below).

"Try to imagine flying to a non-existent island on an airplane that has not yet been invented. Even if this impossible trip were to take place during the thirteenth month of the year, it would not be as fantastic as the tale, recently christened as scientific certainty by some New Testament scholars, concerning the 'Lost Gospel' of Q". (*Is There a Gospel of Q?*, Eta Linnemann, Bible Review, August, 1995)

## Who wrote the Gospels?

Unfortunately, the Gospels themselves are silent on the question of authorship. Our views as to the identities of the four evangelists come from the Early Church Fathers (one, Bishop Papias, from as early as 110 A.D.)! The Early Church Fathers are clear as to the apostolic origin of the four Gospels - Matthew and John writing first hand accounts, and John Mark (Acts 12:12, Acts 12:25, Acts 15:37, 1 Peter 5:13) and Luke the Physician (Col 4:14, 2 Tim 4:11, Philemon 1:24) recording the words of Peter and Paul (respectively). The next chapter ("Creation of the New Testament canon") will inves-



tigate the views of the Church Fathers on the topic of the Gospels in some detail. (Photo: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John<sup>1</sup>)

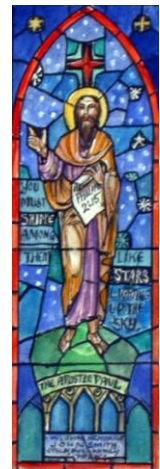


Medieval depictions of the four evangelists often show them with a Bible in their hand - however, the original copies of the Gospels would have been written on papyri.

### ***The letters***

The majority of the New Testament is comprised of letters written by various figures that knew Jesus, including Paul (because of the Road to Damascus experience), Peter, John, James, and Jude (the last two, brothers of Jesus). Most of these letters were written to address specific problems in specific churches.

At least 25% of the New Testament is made up of letters written by Paul of Tarsus, an early persecutor of Christians, but later the greatest of all Christian missionaries, and one of the greatest theologians. Paul's letters are among the oldest Christian documents still in existence - they were probably all written between 49 - 66 A.D. (Graphic to right: the Apostle Paul<sup>2</sup>)



Paul's letters are proclaimed authoritative by none other than Peter himself:

"He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, **as they do the other Scriptures**, to their own destruction." (II Pet 3:16, NIV)

In general, there was never any question in the Early Church regarding the authentic Pauline-authorship of the letters attributed to him (except for Hebrews). As to the non-Pauline (or "catholic") epistles, attributed to James, Jude, John, and Peter, controversies as to their actual authorship and authority would exist almost up to the time that the canon was fixed. This will be discussed in more detail in the chapter entitled "Creation of the New Testament canon".

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<sup>1</sup> Library of Congress LAMB, no. 698 (AAA size) [P&P]

<sup>2</sup> Library of Congress LAMB, no. 790 (AA size) [P&P]



## ***The Apocalypse***

The final book of the New Testament, Revelation, is written in the style and tradition of Jewish apocalyptic works, such as Daniel, Enoch, or II Esdras. It is traditionally ascribed to John the Apostle. It was, perhaps, the most controversial of all of the books finally accepted into the canon.

## ***Writings by Jesus?***

We are not aware of any extant writings by the focal point of the New Testament - Jesus Christ. Intriguingly, though, the New Testament does record an instant of Christ writing something - unfortunately, we are not told what it is:

"They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. **But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.** When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." **Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.**" (John 8:6-8, NIV)

Thus, while the New Testament contains the recorded words of Jesus, it contains no written works by Christ himself.

## ***Dating of the New Testament***

When was the New Testament written? By tradition, it has long been assumed that the New Testament was completed by the end of the first century - in other words, within living memory of people whom actually knew Jesus of Nazareth. During the late 19th century a form of Biblical "scholarship" arose in Germany which greatly questioned a first century authorship of the New Testament, especially targeting the Gospels. In this German view, the Gospels were really a product of a much later Christian Church, written perhaps centuries after the lives of the principals involved in the narratives.

A special target of these German scholars was the Gospel of John, which was assumed to have been written in the late second or even third century. By the turn of the century, though, (and continuing to this day), archaeological discoveries have unearthed manuscripts much older than deemed possible by the German scholars. Perhaps the most definitive nail in the coffin of this school of late dating of the New Testament was the discovery in 1920 by Bernard Pyne Grenfell in a shop in Cairo of a fragment (now referred to as the Rylands Papyrus) of the Gospel of John that dates back to approximately 125 A.D. The fragment contains the famous words "What is truth?" (John 18:38), an appropriate question to ask Biblical "scholars" who impugn the veracity of the New Testament, without evidence. It should be noted, however, that many modern Biblical scholars still insist on late dating for the books of the New Testament, blithely ignoring the archaeological findings of the past 100 years.

"In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century A.D. (very probably sometime between about A.D. 50 and 75." - Biblical Archaeologist William Foxwell Albright (Christianity Today, 1/18/63)

Book	Author	Date	Possible reason for inclusion in the canon:
Matthew	Matthew the Apostle	< 70 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
Mark	John Mark	55 A.D.	Recorded the teach-

Book	Author	Date	Possible reason for inclusion in the canon:
			ings of Apostle Peter
Luke	Luke the physician	59 - 63 A.D.	Recorded the teachings of Apostle Paul
John	John the Apostle	85 - 93 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
Acts	Luke the physician	63 A.D.	Contemporary of both Peter and Paul
Romans	Paul	57 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
1 Corinthians	Paul	55 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
2 Corinthians	Paul	55 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
Galatians	Paul	50 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
Ephesians	Paul	60 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
Philippians	Paul	61 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
Colossians	Paul	60 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
I Thess.	Paul	51 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
II Thess.	Paul	51-52 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
I Timothy	Paul (some modern scholars question Pauline authorship)	64 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
II Timothy	Paul (some modern scholars question Pauline authorship)	66 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
Titus	Paul	64 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
Philemon	Paul	60 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
Hebrews	unknown (possibly Paul, Apollos, Clement or Barnabas)	< 70 A.D.	Possible apostolic authorship - generally accepted as authoritative by the ECF
James	James, brother of Jesus	48 - 50 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
I Peter	Peter	64 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
II Peter	Peter (some scholars feel this was written by a follower of Peter)	66 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
I John	John the Apostle	90 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
II John	John the Apostle (some scholars feel this was written by "John the Elder")	90 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
III John	John the Apostle (see note for II John)	90 A.D.	Apostolic authorship
Jude	Jude, brother of	65 A.D.	Brother of Jesus

Book	Author	Date	Possible reason for inclusion in the canon:
	Jesus		
Revelation of John	John the Apostle (see note for II John)	95 A.D.	Apostolic authorship

In general, dates are taken from the New International Version

## Creation of the New Testament canon

This section will trace the creation of the New Testament canon as it developed throughout the first three centuries after Christ. Before beginning this tracing, let us first take a look at the possible criteria for inclusion in the New Testament (there is no extant list of criteria).

### *Criteria for inclusion in the canon*

Let's say you are a fourth century Christian bishop. Within your lifetime, Christianity has gone from being an underground religion, to being the official religion of the Roman Empire. Amazingly, the emperor of that empire has accepted Christianity. Things are looking quite rosy indeed, for this upstart religion.

But wait, there are also problems. Because Christianity has been underground for so many years, branches of The Church in different parts of the world have developed different traditions, and, in some cases, different theologies. And some people are even promulgating a pseudo-version of Christianity that varies significantly from the traditional teachings of the Church. How to bring the various traditions together into one, united faith, worthy of an empire? How to combat the new heresies that seem to be springing up and spreading like wildfire?

An obvious way to deal with both problems would be to refer to the Holy Scriptures, which, after all, contain the revealed word of God. But wait - what scriptures are considered Holy? Amazingly, even though it is the fourth century (300 years after the time of Christ), there is no definitive list of authoritative Christian texts. So, first things first - create a canon (a list of authoritative texts) of books for the New Testament.

But how to choose the books to be included? By the fourth century, there are literally dozens of gospels, epistles, histories ("acts"), and apocalypses to choose from. Which ones should be considered for inclusion in the new canon? How to decide?

Well, one criterion could be ancient authorship - certainly no later than the end of the first century. So that leaves out writings of the Early Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus, Origen, or Tertullian (although, of course, their writings should still have an exalted place in the interpretative and historical panoply of the church).

However, there were many writings from the first century that were written by people that never met Christ, and that varied wildly in their theological view from the theology of the Early Church Fathers. There must be some way to weed those (gnostic) writings out from the real writings of the Faith. So, another criteria for inclusion in this new canon would be apostolic authorship (either directly, or indirectly, through someone recording the words of an apostle).

But even now, there are still difficulties - loose ends that heretical preachers will take advantage of to the detriment of the Church. For example, how does one define an "apostle"? Just the original 12 (minus Judas, plus Matthias)? But gasp, what about Paul, who was not one of the twelve, or James, the brother of Jesus, and head of the original Jerusalem church? What about Silas and Barnabas, the faithful companions of Paul? And what about those that were the second generation, flowing like tributaries from the Pauline theological river, such as Clement (an early Bishop of Rome), or Papias? So, another cut is needed - the authors must have known Christ personally (or recorded the words of someone that knew Christ personally). So, Paul, James, and Jude were in (Paul, because of the Road to Damascus experience), but Silas, Barnabas, Clement, and Papias were out.

Well, you are almost there. The criteria is almost set, with one small problem - many of the writings that could fit the criteria you've established are unclear as to their authorship. For example, none of the Gospels identify their author. And there are gospels that claim to have been written by apostles, but are clearly fraudulent. So one more criteria must be established - the writings for inclusion in the new canon must have been in general use and acceptance by the Early Church Fathers down to your own day. So now, our list of criteria is coming into focus:

- Ancient authorship...
- By people that personally knew Jesus...
- That have been in common use, and common acceptance within the Church since the time of the Early Church Fathers

But even with these criteria, there will still be some controversy. While there is a corpus of books accepted by all of the Church Fathers, in both the Eastern and Western branches of the church (the Four Gospels, most of Paul's letters), there are other works accepted by some, but not all (II John, III John, II Peter, Revelation of John, Revelation of Peter, Acts of Paul, etc.) Well, since the goal is to solidify the church, perhaps some compromise will be needed. And your job begins...

The tale of our fictional fourth century bishop actually fits two important churchmen in the fourth century - Eusebius, and Athanasius. It is because of the work of these two men, and many others, that we have a New Testament canon today.

Date	Event
c. 45-95 A.D.	Books of the New Testament written
2nd century	<i>Codex</i> (modern form factor) of books developed
c. 110 A.D.	Papias refers to the Gospels of Mark & Matthew
c. 125 A.D.	Earliest extant fragment of any part of the New Testament copied (John 18:38)
c. 140 A.D.	Gnostic Marcion attempts first canonical list
144 A.D.	Marcion excommunicated
c. 150 A.D.	Justin Martyr refers to Christians gathering together and "the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as time permits"
c. 160 A.D.	Tatian compiles a "harmony" of the four gospels, called the "Diatessaron"
c. 180 A.D.	Christian prisoners in Scilla, Libya, refer to "the books, and letters of a just man, one Paul" as their

Date	Event
	defense
c. 180 A.D.	Ireneaus confirms four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John
c. 200 A.D.	Muratorian Canon compiled
324 A.D.	Constantine becomes undisputed emperor of the Roman Empire
325 A.D.	Council of Nicea; Eusebius writes his Church History
c. 332 A.D.	Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea is ordered by Constantine to create 50 volumes "on prepared parchment" of the Holy Scriptures
c. 325 - 350 A.D.	<i>Codex Vaticanus</i> created; contains the complete New Testament as we have it today
c. 350 A.D.	<i>Codex Sinaiticus</i> (now in the British Museum) written; contains most of modern day New Testament, plus the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Letter of Barnabas
367 A.D.	Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, writes his Paschal letter, listing the modern day New Testament canon
393 A.D.	Council of Hippo affirms modern day canon
397 A.D.	Council of Carthage affirms modern day canon
c. 400 A.D.	Jerome (A.D. 346-420) translates Bible into common Latin (the "Vulgate"), using the list of Athanasius

### ***The Early Church Fathers***

While (as we shall see) it was the fourth century church fathers who created the official New Testament canon (Eusebius, Athanasius, Jerome, etc.), it was the Early Church Fathers of the first, second, and third centuries that laid the groundwork for the fourth century canon. By reading the works of the early (i.e. pre-Nicene Council) fathers, one can get a pretty good picture of which works they considered authoritative by the number of times they quoted from them. And, conversely, which works they did not consider authoritative, because they either did not reference them, or specifically called them into question (Gospel of Truth, Gospel of Thomas, etc.)

It has been estimated by several Biblical scholars (Bruce Metzger and Sir David Dalrymple among them) that the whole New Testament can be reconstructed from references from the Early Church Fathers in the second and third centuries. The following astonishing table, from Josh McDowell's "Evidence That Demands a Verdict" (p. 52), shows 36,289 New Testament references from just seven Early Church Fathers:

Writer	Gospels	Acts	Pauline Epistles	General Epistles	Revelation	Total
Justin Martyr	268	10	43	6	3	330
Irenaeus	1,038	194	499	23	65	1,819
Clement Alex.	1,017	44	1,127	207	11	2,406

Origen	9,231	349	7,778	399	165	17,922
Tertul- lian	3,822	502	2,609	120	205	7,258
Hippoly- tus	734	42	387	27	188	1,378
Eusebius	3,258	211	1,592	88	27	5,176
<b>Totals</b>	<b>19,368</b>	<b>1,352</b>	<b>14,035</b>	<b>870</b>	<b>664</b>	<b>36,289</b>

Another valuable clue passed down from the early church was which works were read in worship services. For example, Justin Martyr (c. 150 A.D.) refers to the reading of the "memoirs of the Apostles" (assumedly, the Gospels) during Sunday worship services:

"And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the **memoirs of the apostles** or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things." (Justin Martyr, "First Apology", Chapter 67)

We will now take a look at four Early Church Fathers, and their views on authoritative (and non-authoritative) books - Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.

### **Papias (c. 70-155 A.D.)**

Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, made one of the earliest extant references (c. 110 A.D.) to the Gospels in a fragment of his writing preserved by Eusebius in his "Ecclesiastical History":

"Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered. It was not, however, in exact order that he related the sayings or deeds of Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who accommodated his instructions to the necessities [of his hearers], but with no intention of giving a regular narrative of the Lord's sayings. Wherefore Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For of one thing he took especial care, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements...Matthew put together the oracles [of the Lord] in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as best he could." (Eusebius, "Ecclesiastical History", Book 3, Chapter 39)

Eusebius goes on to state, "...and the same writer [Papias] uses testimonies from the first Epistle of John and from that of Peter likewise."

### **Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyons from 177-202 A.D.)**

In his extant works (primarily, "Against Heresies"), Irenaeus quotes from 22 books as authoritative - the Four Gospels, Acts, Paul's Letters (except for Hebrews), 1 John, 1 Peter, Revelation, possibly James, and the Shepherd of Hermas. It is estimated that Irenaeus quoted the canonical New Testament books over 1,800 times in his writings.

By the time of the writing of "Against Heresies", the four Gospels that were later to become the foundation of the canon (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) were already so widely accepted as the sole authoritative Gospels, that Irenaeus could wax philosophically on the topic with the following famous passage:

"It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the 'pillar and ground' of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is

fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh. From which fact, it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sitteth upon the cherubim, and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit. (Irenaeus, "Against Heresies", Book 3, Chapter 11)

Irenaeus also reveals the tradition that was handed down to him regarding authorship of the Gospels:

"Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia." (Irenaeus, Book 3, Chapter 1)

### **Origen (185-253 A.D.)**

Origen is probably the all-time champion in terms of quoting books that would later make up the New Testament canon, quoting them over 18,000 times!!! The bulk of his references are from the four Gospels, and Paul's letters.

As to other New Testament works, Origen confirms the apostolic authorship of the Revelation of John, but casts some doubt as to whether II Peter was really written by Peter, and as to whether II John and III John were written by the apostle. As to the Gospel of Hebrews, Origen says "But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows" (and who says the Early Church Fathers didn't have a sense of humor!) He postulates that it could have been Paul, Clement of Rome, or Luke the physician.

"And Peter... has left one acknowledged epistle; perhaps also a second, but this is doubtful...John, who has left us one Gospel...also the Apocalypse...He has left also an epistle of very few lines; perhaps also a second and third; but not all consider them genuine, and together they do not contain hundred lines." (Eusebius, Book 6, Chapter 25)

[Regarding Hebrews:] "If I gave my opinion, I should say that the thoughts are those of the apostle, but the diction and phraseology are those of some one who remembered the apostolic teachings, and wrote down at his leisure what had been said by his teacher...**But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows.** The statement of some who have gone before us is that Clement, bishop of the Romans, wrote the epistle, and of others that Luke, the author of the Gospel and the Acts, wrote it." (Eusebius, Book 6, Chapter 25)

### **Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-212 A.D.)**

Clement of Alexandria quotes from the canonical New Testament books over 2,400 times in his works. The following passage from the "Ecclesiastical History" of Eusebius records the view of Clement as to when the Gospels were written, and by whom:

"Again, in the same books, Clement gives the tradition of the earliest presbyters, as to the order of the Gospels, in the following manner: The Gospels containing the genealogies, he says, were written first. The Gospel according to Marks [sic] had this occasion. As Peter had preached the Word publicly at Rome, and declared the Gospel by the Spirit, many who were present requested that Mark, who had followed him for a long time and remembered his sayings, should write them out. And having composed the Gospel he gave it to those who had requested it. When Peter learned of this, he neither directly forbade nor encouraged it. But, last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being

urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel. This is the account of Clement." (Eusebius, Book 6, Chapter 14)

Clement also "makes use...of testimonies from the disputed Scriptures, the so-called Wisdom of Solomon...and the Epistle to the Hebrews, and those of Barnabas, and Clement and Jude." (Eusebius, Book 6, Chapter 13) Clement also quotes from the Revelation of Peter. Clement viewed that Hebrews was written by Paul in Hebrew, but translated to Greek by Luke. Eusebius continues:

"To sum up briefly, he has given in the Hypotyposes abridged accounts of all canonical Scripture, not omitting the disputed books, — I refer to Jude and the other Catholic epistles, and Barnabas and the so-called Apocalypse of Peter. He says that the Epistle to the Hebrews is the work of Paul, and that it was written to the Hebrews in the Hebrew language; but that Luke translated it carefully and published it for the Greeks, and hence the same style of expression is found in this epistle and in the Acts." (Eusebius, Book 6, Chapter 14)

## ***Forming the canon***

### **Marcion - the first attempt at a canon**

While the books that now comprise the New Testament were in widespread use from the first century, it actually took quite a while to turn them into an official "canon". The first attempt at creating an official list of books for inclusion in the New Testament was by a Gnostic ship owner named Marcion (c. 85 - c. 160 A.D.). As a Gnostic, Marcion believed that there were two Gods in the universe - the God depicted in the Old Testament, and the God represented by Jesus in the New Testament. To accommodate these (and other) Gnostic beliefs, Marcion created a list of books that he considered authoritative, based on his theological views. These included a condensed version of the Gospel of Luke (lacking the Nativity and Resurrection scenes), and 10 of Paul's letters.

While the Gnostic theology of Marcion was roundly condemned by the Early Church Fathers, his list was the first known attempt at defining a New Testament canon, and it prodded the Early Church Fathers to give greater consideration to those books that should be considered authoritative.

<b>Marcion (c.140)</b>	<b>Irenaeus (c. 180)</b>	<b>Murator Canon (c. 200)</b>	<b>Eusebius (c. 325)</b>	<b>Athanasius (367 A.D.)</b>
	Matthew	(Matthew)	Matthew	Matthew
	Mark	(Mark)	Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke	Luke	Luke	Luke
	John	John	John	John
	Acts	Acts	Acts	Acts
Romans	Romans	Romans	Romans	Romans
I Cor.	I Cor.	I Cor.	I Cor.	I Cor.
II Cor.	II Cor.	II Cor.	II Cor.	II Cor.
Gal.	Galatians	Galatians	Galatians	Galatians
Ephesians (Laodiceans)	Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians
Philippians	Philippians	Philippians	Philippians	Philippians
Colossians	Colossians	Colossians	Colossians	Colossians
I Thess.	I Thess.	I Thess.	I Thess.	I Thess.



<b>Marcion (c.140)</b>	<b>Irenaeus (c. 180)</b>	<b>Murator Canon (c. 200)</b>	<b>Eusebius (c. 325)</b>	<b>Athanasius (367 A.D.)</b>
II Thess.	II Thess.	II Thess.	II Thess.	II Thess.
	I Timothy	I Timothy	I Timothy	I Timothy
	II Timothy	II Timothy	II Timothy	II Timothy
	Titus	Titus	Titus	Titus
Philemon				Philemon
				Hebrews
	James [?]			James
	I Peter		I Peter	I Peter
				II Peter
	I John	I John	I John	I John
		II John		II John
				III John
		Jude		Jude
	Revelation of John	Revelation of John	Revelation of John [?]	Revelation of John
	Shepherd of Hermas	Wisdom of Solomon (Apocry- pha)		
		Revelation of Peter		

From "How the Books of the New Testament Were Chosen", by Roy W. Hoover (Bible Review, April 1993)

### **Murator Canon (c. 200 A.D.)**

One of the first known attempts by the Early Church Fathers to define a canon (and to refute the list postulated by Marcion) was in a fragmentary list (85 lines) dated to c. 200 A.D., named (after its 18th century discoverer, Lodovico Muratori) the Muratori Canon. The Muratori Canon is remarkably similar to our modern day New Testament, lacking only Philemon, Hebrews, James, I Peter, II Peter, and III John. The Muratori Canon also adds (curiously) the Old Testament Apocryphal book "Wisdom of Solomon", as well as the "Revelation of Peter" (see chapter entitled "Books that almost made the New Testament").

### **Eusebius (c. 260 - c. 340 A.D.) and his Ecclesiastical History**

Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, at the request of Emperor Constantine, wrote a church history around the time of the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.). In the preface, he identifies that this is the first Church history ever attempted:

"It is my purpose to write an account of the successions of the holy apostles, as well as of the times which have elapsed from the days of our Savior to our own; and to relate the many important events which are said to have occurred in the history of the Church; and to mention those who have governed and presided over the Church in the most prominent parishes, and those who in each generation have proclaimed the divine word either orally or in writing...This work seems to me of especial importance because I know of no ecclesiastical writer who has devoted himself to this subject; and I hope that it will appear most useful to those who are fond of historical research." (Eusebius, Book 1, Chapter 1)

Eusebius reports the tradition regarding the authorship of the Gospels at the time of the Council of Nicea:

"Matthew and John have left us written memorials, and they, tradition says, were led to write only under the pressure of necessity. For Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to other peoples, committed his Gospel to writing in his native tongue, and thus compensated those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence. And when Mark and Luke had already published their Gospels, they say that John, who had employed all his time in proclaiming the Gospel orally, finally proceeded to write for the following reason. The three Gospels already mentioned having come into the hands of all and into his own too, they say that he accepted them and bore witness to their truthfulness; but that there was lacking in them an account of the deeds done by Christ at the beginning of his ministry." (Eusebius, Book 3, Chapter 24)

In the course of his 400 page work, Eusebius grants the reader several glimpses as to which writings of the New Testament are "accepted", "disputed", and "rejected" at the time of the Council of Nicea. (Note that Eusebius lists the Revelation of John under both the "accepted" and "rejected" columns!)

Eusebius also includes a final category, reserved for the writings of heretics - "absurd and impious". It is important to note that Eusebius goes to great pains to draw a distinction between "rejected" books that "although not canonical but disputed, are yet at the same time known to most ecclesiastical writers" (Shepherd of Hermas, Epistle of Barnabas, Revelation of Peter), and heretical books in the "absurd and impious" category (Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Peter, etc.)

#### Accepted

"SINCE we are dealing with this subject it is proper to sum up the writings of the New Testament which have been already mentioned. First then must be put the holy quaternion of the Gospels; following them the Acts of the Apostles. After this must be reckoned the epistles of Paul; next in order the extant former epistle of John, and likewise the epistle of Peter, must be maintained. After them is to be placed, if it really seem proper, the Apocalypse of John, concerning which we shall give the different opinions at the proper time. These then belong among the accepted writings." (Eusebius, Book 3, Chapter 25)

#### Disputed/Rejected

"But of the writings of John, not only his Gospel, but also the former of his epistles, has been accepted without dispute both now and in ancient times. But the other two are disputed. In regard to the Apocalypse, the opinions of most men are still divided. But at the proper time this question likewise shall be decided from the testimony of the ancients." (Eusebius, Book 3, Chapter 24)

"Among the disputed writings, which are nevertheless recognized by many, are extant the so-called epistle of James and that of Jude, also the second epistle of Peter, and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist or to another person of the same name. Among the rejected writings must be reckoned also the Acts of Paul, and the so-called Shepherd, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to these the extant epistle of Barnabas, and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles [the Didache]; and besides, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject, but which others class with the accepted books. And among these some have placed also the Gospel according to the Hebrews, with which those of the Hebrews that have accepted Christ are especially delighted. And all these may be reckoned among the disputed books. But we have nevertheless felt compelled to give a catalogue of these also, distinguishing those works which according to ecclesiastical tradition are true and genuine and commonly accepted, from those others which, although not canonical but disputed, are yet at the same time known to most ecclesiastical writers." (Eusebius, Book 3, Chapter 25)

"These things are recorded in regard to James, who is said to be the author of the first of the so-called catholic epistles. But it is to be observed that it is disputed; at least, not many of the ancients have mentioned it, as is the case likewise with the epistle that bears the name of Jude, which is also one of the seven so-called catholic epistles. Nevertheless we know that these also, with the rest, have been read publicly in very many churches." (Eusebius, Book 2, Chapter 23)

### Absurd and Impious

"...we have felt compelled to give this catalogue in order that we might be able to know both these works and those that are cited by the heretics under the name of the apostles, including, for instance, such books as the **Gospels** of Peter, of **Thomas**, of Matthias, or of any others besides them, and the Acts of Andrew and John and the other apostles, which no one belonging to the succession of ecclesiastical writers has deemed worthy of mention in his writings. And further, the character of the style is at variance with apostolic usage, and both the thoughts and the purpose of the things that are related in them are so completely out of accord with true orthodoxy that they clearly show themselves to be the fictions of heretics. **Wherefore they are not to be placed even among the rejected writings, but are all of them to be cast aside as absurd and impious.**" (Eusebius, Book 3, Chapter 25)

Eusebius may have had an even greater effect on the creation of the canon than his list of accepted/disputed/rejected books. Eusebius records in his "Life of Constantine" that (in c. 332 A.D.), Constantine ordered the preparation of 50 Bibles "most necessary for the instruction of the Church":

"VICTOR CONSTANTINUS, MAXIMUS AUGUSTUS, to Eusebius.

...I have thought it expedient to instruct your Prudence to **order fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures**, the provision and use of which you know to be most needful for the instruction of the Church, to **be written on prepared parchment** in a legible manner, and in a convenient, portable form, by professional transcribers thoroughly practiced in their art. The catholicus of the diocese has also received instructions by letter from our Clemency to be careful to furnish all things necessary for the preparation of such copies; and it will be for you to take special care that they be completed with as little delay as possible. You have authority also, in virtue of this letter, to use two of the public carriages for their conveyance, by which arrangement the copies when fairly written will most easily be forwarded **for my personal inspection**; and one of the deacons of your church may be intrusted with this service, who, on his arrival here, shall experience my liberality. God preserve you, beloved brother!". (Eusebius, "The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine", Book 4, Chapter 36)

While no known copies of these Bibles exist (although John Romer postulates that the *Codex Sinaiticus* could be one of the 50), it forced Eusebius into deciding upon which books to include in the official "sacred Scriptures" for use by the Church. While we do not know what books were therein contained, we can probably assume that his own list of accepted, disputed, and rejected books was used as a guide for inclusion.



From Codex Sinaiticus<sup>3</sup>

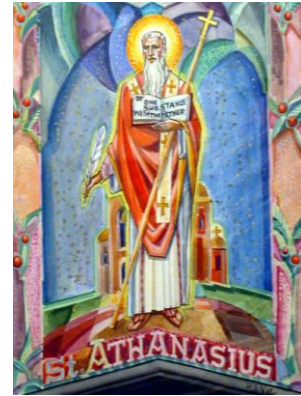
<sup>3</sup> Library of Congress LC-DIG-matpc-02054

## Athanasius (c. 296-373 A.D.)

Athanasius served as the Bishop of Alexandria for 45 years. In 367 A.D. "the thirty-ninth Letter of Holy Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, on the Paschal festival" was written. It contains the New Testament canon as we know it today, in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches:

"...it seemed good to me also, having been urged thereto by true brethren, and having learned from the beginning, to set before you the books included in the Canon, and handed down, and accredited as Divine; to the end that any one who has fallen into error may condemn those who have led him astray; and that he who has continued steadfast in purity may again rejoice, having these things brought to his remembrance."

"Again it is not tedious to speak of the [books] of the New Testament. These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John." (Athanasius, "Festal Letter 39") (Graphic: St Athanasius<sup>4</sup>)



"These are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these." (Athanasius, "Festal Letter 39")

Athanasius goes on to describe several other books which, while not canonical, should be read by those "who wish for instruction in the word of godliness". These books include parts of the Old Testament Apocrypha, the second century Didache ("The Teaching of the Apostles"), and the Shepherd of Hermas:

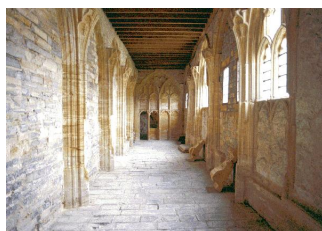
"...that there are other books besides these not indeed included in the Canon, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness. The Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Sirach, and Esther, and Judith, and Tobit, and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd..." (Athanasius, "Festal Letter 39")

## The Councils of Hippo and Carthage

The list of the canonical books of the New Testament, published by Athanasius in 367 A.D., was officially adopted by three later councils, including the Council of Hippo in 393 A.D., and the Councils of Carthage in 397 A.D. and 419 A.D.

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<sup>4</sup> Library of Congress LAMB, no. 1497 (B size) [P&P]



For a thousand years before the invention of the printing press, the primary environment for the production of Bibles was the monastery. The photo above shows the south cloister walk of Mulchelney Abbey in England. Cloister walks often contained individual carrels for monks to copy and illustrate manuscripts. Notice the excellent light source in this cloister walk. Photo by Robert Jones.

## ***Other voices***

While the New Testament canon as we know it was set by the end of the fourth century, not everyone since then has totally agreed with its contents. Among the dissenters:

- St. Jerome (c. 342-420 A.D.) translated the Bible into common Latin (the "Vulgate"), a translation used by the Roman Catholic Church for the next 1500 years. In a letter from 414 A.D., Jerome suggested that the Epistle of Barnabas should be included in the canon, since Barnabas was a companion of Paul, and an apostle. (Drawing: St. Jerome<sup>5</sup>)
- The modern Syrian Church's canon (called the Peshitta) dates from the 5th century, and lacks II Peter, II & III John, Jude, and Revelation
- A number of the Protestant Reformers, including Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli questioned the validity of some of the books of the New Testament canon. Martin Luther, in his preface to the German New Testament in 1522, established a criterion for the canon based on books that "revealed Christ." He referred to the Book of James as "a right strawy epistle", and he wasn't too enamoured with Revelation, Hebrews or Jude, either!



Dr. Martin Luther<sup>6</sup>

## **Important developments after the creation of the canon**

Once the canon had been established in the fourth century, the main events in the life of the New Testament centered on new translations, and a new method of reproduction - the printing press.

<sup>5</sup> Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-18723

<sup>6</sup> Library of Congress LC-DIG-pga-02205

- **c. 650 A.D.** - Cowherd Caedmon writes Anglo-Saxon paraphrases of Bible stories told to him by monks of Whitby Abbey
- **c. 735 A.D.** - The Venerable Bede translates the Gospel of John into Anglo-Saxon
- **871/899 A.D.** - King Alfred of England translates the 10 Commandments and parts of the Psalms into Anglo-Saxon
- **1380-1382** - John Wycliffe (the "Morningstar of the Reformation") and his associates translate the whole Bible into English (from Jerome's Vulgate)
- **1455** - First printed Bible (Jerome's Vulgate) from Johann Gutenberg
- **1516** - Erasmus publishes his Greek New Testament
- **1522** - Luther publishes the New Testament in German, using Erasmus's Greek New Testament as his source. Over 100,000 copies of his New Testament were sold in his lifetime.
- **1526** - William Tyndale publishes the first printed New Testament translation in English, which is also the first English New Testament from the Greek (Wycliffe's version was from the Vulgate). Tyndale's purpose in his translation was to make the Bible available and accessible to everyone. Tyndale was once quoted making the following statement to a cleric:

"If God spares my life, ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more about the scripture than thou dost."

Tyndale's translation would form the basis of almost all other English translations for the next 400 years. His translation brought new words to the English language (longsuffering, peacemaker, scapegoat, beautiful), and used words and phrases that tended to undermine the traditional authority of the Roman Catholic Church, such as "congregation" instead of "church", "elders" instead of "priests", and "repentance" instead of "penance".

- **1535/37** - Miles Coverdale publishes first complete printed Bible in English, maintaining much of Tyndale's translation
- **1538/39** - "The Great Bible" - the first "authorized" (by King Henry VIII) English translation
- **1546** - Jerome's Vulgate declared to be the authoritative translation of the Bible by the (Roman Catholic) Council of Trent
- **1560** - The Geneva Bible is published, the work of William Whittingham, the brother-in-law and follower of John Calvin. It contains openly Protestant notes, many influenced or possibly even written by John Calvin.

The Geneva Bible is sometimes also known as the "Breeches Bible" because of its translation of Genesis 3:7, where Adam and Eve "sewed figge tree leaves together, and made themselves breeches". It also introduced such well known phrases as putting away "childish things", and looking at something "through a glass darkly". (Engraving of John Calvin from "The History of Protestantism" by J.A. Wylie (Ages Software, 1997))



- **1568** - Bishops Bible - a translation by English Bishops, led by the Archbishop of Canterbury; a revision of the Great Bible
- **1582** - Rheims/Douai - a Roman Catholic translation of Jerome's Vulgate into English; states that man cannot serve both "God and Baal, Christ and Calvin, Masse and Communion, the Catholike Church and Heretical Conventicles". Like Tyndale's translation, new words came into the language as a result of this translation, such as victim, allegory, acquisition, and adulterate.
- **1607/11** - King James Version - King James I appoints 54 men to make a new translation; based primarily on Tyndale (some estimate up to 90%), the Bishop's Bible, the Douai, and the Geneva Bible

"Truly (good Christian Reader) wee never thought from the beginning, that we should neede to make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one...but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principall good one." (from the preface to the original KJV)

- **1755** - John Wesley publishes his translation of the New Testament
- **1833** - Noah Webster (of dictionary fame!) publishes a new translation of the whole Bible
- **1870** - The Church of England forms a committee of 54 to revise the King James Version, allowing use of early source manuscripts (such as the fourth century *Codex Sinaiticus*), found since the KJV was created
- **1881** - English Revised Version of the New Testament published; 3,000,000 sold in first year
- **1885** - An inexpensively printed version of the King James Bible sells a million copies on its first day of sale
- **1901** - American Standard Version published (incorporating rejected changes suggested by American scholars who worked on the English Revised Version)
- **1946** - Revised Standard Version is published by the International Council of Religious Education, an organization made up of 40 Protestant denominations in the U.S. and Canada. This translation made use of contemporary American English, but was still based on the Tyndale/KJV tradition.
- **1966** - Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible published - originally meant as a study Bible (the updated New Jerusalem Bible was published in 1985)
- **1970** - Roman Catholic New American Bible published
- **1970** - New English Bible published, sponsored by denominations in England and Scotland. A clean break from the Tyndale/King James tradition.
- **1973** - New International Version of the New Testament is published by the International Bible Society, comprised of a number of Evangelical denominations, including "Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Brethren, Christian Reformed, Church of Christ, Evangelical Free, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Wesleyan and other churches".
- **1990** - New Revised Standard Version - An update of the Revised Standard Version, incorporating advances in Biblical scholarship such as the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- **1993** - By the end of 1993, the entire Bible had been translated into 329 languages, and at least one book into 2,009 languages (American Bible Society)

## Books that almost made the New Testament

Several other books were on various canonical lists leading up to the fourth century, or were quoted from as authoritative by various Early Church Fathers. These books are almost unheard of today, but they were well known in the centuries leading up to fourth century councils.

### *Revelation of Peter*

As noted above, the Muratori Canon (c. 200 A.D.) lists the Revelation of Peter among the canonical books. Line 69 of the Muratori Canon indicates, in reference to the Revelation of Peter, "that some among us would not have [it] read in church." It was also quoted from by several of the Early Church Fathers, include Clement of Alexandria.

The Revelation of Peter was lost until 1886 when a French archaeological mission found fragments of it in Egypt. Most scholars view that the Revelation of Peter was written in the second century, thus, it could not have been written by Peter. However, it does seem to have some stylistic similarities with II Peter.



The extant fragments of the Revelation of Peter start out with the apostles asking Christ to:

"...show us one of our brethren, the righteous who are gone forth out of the world, in order that we might see of what manner of form they are, and having taken courage, might also encourage the men who hear us."

After a visit from two angels, of whom Christ says "these are your brethren the righteous, whose forms ye desired to see", the apostles are shown the dwelling place of the righteous:

"And the Lord showed me a very great country outside of this world, exceeding bright with light, and the air there lighted with the rays of the sun, and the earth itself blooming with unfading flowers and full of spices and plants, fair-flowering and incorruptible and bearing blessed fruit...And the dwellers in that place were clad in the raiment of shining angels and their raiment was like unto their country; and angels hovered about them there."

After this encounter, the tone of the Revelation of Peter turns decidedly darker, as the abode of the un-righteous is described in almost painful detail:

"And over against that place I saw another, squalid, and it was the place of punishment; and those who were punished there and the punishing angels had their raiment dark like the air of the place. And there were certain there hanging by the tongue: and these were the blasphemers of the way of righteousness; and under them lay fire, burning and punishing them. And there was a great lake, full of flaming mire, in which were certain men that pervert righteousness, and tormenting angels afflicted them".

The fragment later ends in mid-description of hell, and in mid-sentence:

"And others again near them, women and men, burning and turning themselves and roasting: and these were they that leaving the way of God [end of fragment]"

While the Revelation of Peter is not canonical, I think that any sane person would want to avoid the hell described therein at any cost!

### ***Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians***

The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians was widely read in ancient churches, and was referred to by various Early Church Fathers, including Origen, and Eusebius, who is quoted below:

"THERE is extant an epistle of this Clement which is acknowledged to be genuine and is of considerable length and of remarkable merit. He wrote it in the name of the church of Rome to the church of Corinth, when a sedition had arisen in the latter church. We know that this epistle also has been publicly used in a great many churches both in former times and in our own." (Eusebius, Book 3, Chapter 16)

The Epistle of Clement is also contained in the late 4th century *Codex Alexandrinus*.

While no author is claimed in the text, it is generally viewed that Clement, Bishop of Rome, was the author. This may be the Clement referred to by Paul in Philippians 4:3. A late first century date seems to be reasonable for this letter.

Its failure to make the canonical cut in the fourth century is probably because it fails the test of being written by someone who actually knew Jesus, rather than lack of confidence that it was really written by Clement of Rome, one of the earliest Church Fathers.



The focus of the lengthy letter is apparent divisions that had appeared in the Corinthian church, eerily reminiscent of the divisions that Paul had written about to the church at Corinth in his first letter. We are never told exactly what the nature of the division was, but evidently some of the church elders had been removed from their office:

"But we see how you have put out some, who lived reputably among you, from the ministry, which by their innocence they had adorned...Your schism has perverted many: it has caused diffidence in many, and grief among us all. And yet your sedition continues still."

Clement talks about the fact that many great church leaders have been persecuted because of the envy of others. He uses Peter and Paul as examples:

"Let us set before our eyes the holy Apostles; Peter by unjust envy underwent not one or two, but many sufferings; till at last being martyred, he went to the place of glory that was due unto him. For the same cause did Paul in like manner receive the reward of his patience. Seven times he was in bonds; he was whipped, was stoned; he preached both in the East and in the West; leaving behind him the glorious report of his faith: And so having taught the whole world righteousness, and for that end traveled even to the utmost bounds of the West; he at last suffered martyrdom by the command of the governors, And departed out of the world, and went to his holy place; being become a most eminent pattern of patience unto all ages."

Clement later reminds the Corinthians of the Apostolic foundation of the major Christian churches:

"The Apostles have preached to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ from God...And thus preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first fruits of their conversion to be bishops and ministers over such as should afterwards believe, having first proved them by the Spirit...So likewise our Apostles knew by our Lord Jesus Christ, that there should contentions arise, upon account of the ministry. And therefore having a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed persons, as we have before said, and then gave direction, how, when they should die, other chosen and approved men should succeed in their ministry."

Perhaps the most remarkable fact about Clement's letter is the number of different books that he quotes from, that would later make up the New Testament canon - and this at the end of the first century! According to translator Archbishop Wake, Clement quotes from Acts, I Timothy, Titus, I & II Peter, John, James, Luke, Romans, Hebrews, I Corinthians, I Thessalonians, and Ephesians. At one point, Clement actually refers to Paul's earlier letter to the Corinthians:

"Take the epistle of the blessed Paul the Apostle into your hands; What was it that he wrote to you at his first preaching the Gospel among you? Verily he did by the spirit admonish you concerning himself, and Cephas, and Apollos, because that even then ye had begun to fall into parties and factions among yourselves."

An ancient and remarkable affirmation that the books in the New Testament were in use from the earliest days of the Church.

### ***Epistle of Barnabas***

The Epistle of Barnabas was deemed scripture by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Jerome. Eusebius branded it "rejected" in his Ecclesiastical History, but not heretical. It is contained in the 4th century *Codex Sinaiticus*.

The Early Church Fathers that viewed this letter as scripture appeared to believe that Barnabas, the fellow-missionary of Paul, wrote it. Some later scholars view that it was written by a follower of Barnabas, perhaps at the end of the first century/beginning of the second. The letter itself contains no authorship attribution. As to the date, we can say for sure that it was written after 70 A.D., because the fall of Jerusalem was recorded:

"Moreover, I will also tell you concerning the temple, how the wretched [Jews], wandering in error, trusted not in God Himself, but in the temple, as being the house of God...**For through their going to war, it was destroyed by their enemies**; and now: they, as the servants of their enemies, shall rebuild it."

If it really was written by the Apostle Barnabas (see Acts 14:14), it probably would have had the best chance out of all of the books that "almost made" it into the canon. However, it still would have failed the test of being written by someone that actually heard the words of Christ (or who recorded the words of someone who knew Christ).

The first major theme of the Epistle of Barnabas concerns demonstrating that the messianic prophecies in the Old Testament did indeed refer to Jesus. Christ is prefigured in the Jewish scapegoat, in Abraham, in Moses, and in Joshua (curiously, though, not Melchizedek). Both the cross and Christian baptism are prefigured in the Old Testament. Regarding the meaning of Christian baptism:

"...we indeed descend into the water full of sins and defilement, but come up, bearing fruit in our heart, having the fear [of God] and trust in Jesus in our spirit..."

The second major theme of the Letter of Barnabas is the path to salvation:

"As far as was possible, and could be done with perspicuity, I cherish the hope that, according to my desire, I have omitted none of those things at present [demanding consideration], which bear upon your salvation."

"There are two ways of doctrine and authority, the one of light, and the other of darkness. But there is a great difference between these two ways. For over one are stationed the light-bringing angels of God, but over the other the angels of Satan. And He indeed (i.e., God) is Lord for ever and ever, but he (i.e., Satan) is prince of the time of iniquity."

"It is well, therefore, that he who has learned the judgments of the Lord, as many as have been written, should walk in them. For he who keepeth these shall be glorified in the kingdom of God; but he who chooseth other things shall be destroyed with his works. On this account there will be a resurrection, on this account a retribution...For the day is at hand on which all things shall perish with the evil [one]. The Lord is near, and His reward."

After the canon was fixed in the fourth century, the Letter of Barnabas faded into obscurity.

### ***The Shepherd (Pastor) of Hermas***

The Shepherd of Hermas was one of the most popular books of the Early Church, especially in the East. It was considered scripture by Irenaeus, and probably Origen. Both Eusebius and Athanasius viewed that it was not authoritative enough to make the canon, but (in the words of Athanasius), it was "ap-

pointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness". It is contained in the fourth century *Codex Sinaiticus*.



There are several views as to authorship. One early view is that it was written by the Hermas mentioned by Paul (see Romans 16:14). Another view is that it was written by the second century prophet Hermas (c. 140 A.D.), who was the brother of Pius, the Bishop of Rome. Most scholars date it to the second century. Whether or not it was written by the "original" Hermas, it fails the test of having been written by someone who actually heard the words of Jesus (or who recorded the words of someone who actually heard the words of Jesus).

The work is a long tract on morality, with apocalyptic overtones. The protagonist, Hermas, receives a series of visions. The first vision is from a young woman of whom he once had impure thoughts. Next, there are a series of visions from an old woman who is later identified as 1) "the church of God" and 2) "an old woman, because she was the first of all creation, and the world was made for her." She lectures him on not being strict enough with his wife and sons, as well as on the virtues of Faith, Abstinence, Simplicity, Innocence, Modesty, Discipline, and Charity (all "equal virtues"). Finally, the subject of the title appears - the Shepherd of Hermas:

"After I had been praying at home, and had sat down on my couch, there entered a man of glorious aspect, dressed like a shepherd, with a white goat's skin, a wallet on his shoulders, and a rod in his hand, and saluted me. I returned his salutation. And straightway he sat down beside me, and said to me, 'I have been sent by a most venerable angel to dwell with you the remaining days of your life.' (Vision V, or the Introduction to the Commands, in some translations)

Later, the shepherd refers to himself as "most holy angel" (in other translations - "the most holy messenger"):

"'I should like, sir,' said I, 'to know the power of anger, that I may guard myself against it.' And he said, 'If you do not guard yourself against it, you and your house lose all hope of salvation...For I am with you, and all will depart from it who repent with their whole heart. For I will be with them, and I will save them all. For all are justified by the most holy angel.'"

The shepherd then gives Hermas a series of commands, including exhorting him to believe that there is only one God, to give to the poor, to have all his speech be true, to keep himself chaste, etc. Finally, there is a long section comprised of "similitudes" (allegories).

The similitudes teach both moral and theological lessons. Two moral lessons that are underscored time and time again are purity in body and thought, and avoiding apostasy, which is several times declared an unforgivable sin:

"'Listen,' he said: 'they whose branches were found withered and moth-eaten are the apostates and traitors of the Church, who have blasphemed the Lord in their sins, and have, moreover, been ashamed of the name of the Lord by which they were called. These, therefore, at the end were lost unto God. And you see that not a single one of them repented, although they heard the words which I spake to them, which I enjoined upon you. From such life departed.'" (Similitude VIII, Chap. 6)

The allegories include a tree and branches, a shepherd and his sheep, and the building of a gate and tower. Regarding the gate and tower:

"First of all, sir,' I said, 'explain this to me: What is the meaning of the rock and the gate?' 'This rock,' he answered, 'and this gate are the Son of God.' 'How, sir?' I said; 'the rock is old, and the gate is new.' 'Listen,' he said, 'and understand, O ignorant man. The Son of God is older than all His creatures, so that He was a fellow-councilor with the Father in His work of creation: for this reason is He old.' 'And why is the gate new, sir?' I said. 'Because,' he answered, 'He became manifest in the last days of the dispensation: for this reason the gate was made new, that they who are to be saved by it might enter into the kingdom of God.'" (Similitude IV, Chapter 12)

The shepherd continues explaining the meaning of the single gate into the tower:

"In like manner,' he continued, 'no one shall enter into the kingdom of God unless he receive His holy name. For if you desire to enter into a city, and that city is surrounded by a wall, and has but one gate, can you enter into that city save through the gate which it has?' 'Why, how can it be otherwise, sir?' I said. 'If, then, you cannot enter into the city except through its gate, so, in like manner, a man cannot otherwise enter into the kingdom of God than by the name of His beloved Son.'" (Similitude IX, Chapter 12)

Later in Similitude IX, the shepherd reveals the true meaning of baptism:

"...before a man bears the name of the Son of God he is dead; but when he receives the seal he lays aside his deadness, and obtains life. The seal, then, is the water: they descend into the water dead, and they arise alive." (Similitude IX, Chapter 16)

## Who is the shepherd?

The shepherd is never outright revealed as the Son of God, but there are many clues throughout that would point in that direction. In the last similitude, an angel, speaking to Hermas regarding the shepherd, says:

"To him alone throughout the whole world is the power of repentance assigned. Does he seem to you to be powerful? And all who follow out his commands shall have life, and great honor with the Lord...But those who do not keep his commandments, flee from his life, and despise him. But he has his own honor with the Lord. All, therefore, who shall despise him, and not follow his commands, deliver themselves to death, and every one of them will be guilty of his own blood." (Similitude X, Chapters 1 & 2)

## Other books not deemed canonical

- Acts and Martyrdom of St. Matthew the Apostle
- Acts and Martyrdom of the Holy Apostle Andrew
- Acts of Andrew and Matthias
- Acts of Paul and Thecla
- Acts of Peter and Andrew
- Acts of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian
- Acts of the Holy Apostle Thaddaeus
- Acts of the Holy Apostle Thomas
- Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul
- Consummation of Thomas the Apostle
- Martyrdom of the Holy and Glorious Apostle Bartholomew
- Revelation of Esdras
- Revelation of Moses
- Revelation of Paul
- The Acts of Barnabas

- The Acts of Philip
- The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior
- The Avenging of the Savior
- The Book of John Concerning The Falling Asleep of Mary
- The Death of Pilate
- The Giving Up of Pontius Pilate
- The Gospel of Nicodemus
- The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew
- The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary
- The Gospel of Thomas
- The History of Joseph the Carpenter
- The Letter of Pontius Pilate
- The Narrative of Joseph
- The Passing of Mary
- The Protevangelium of James
- The Report of Pilate Concerning Our Lord Jesus Christ
- The Report of Pontius Pilate
- The Story of Perpetua

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Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews	John Calvin	Ages Software	96/97
Christian History: How We Got Our Bible		Christian History Magazine, Issue 43	1994
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<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Date</b>
The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine	Eusebius; trans. by A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D.	Ages Software	1997

### About the Author

Robert C. Jones grew up in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. He made his living as a hotel lounge band leader/musician from 1974-1981. In 1981, he moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area, where he received a B.S. in Computer Science at DeVry Institute of Technology. Since 1984, Robert has worked for Hewlett-Packard as a computer consultant.

Robert is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church. He has written and taught numerous adult Sunday School courses (see front inside cover). He has also been active in choir ministries over the years, and has taught the *Disciples* Bible Study five times.

Robert is also President of the Kennesaw Historical Society, for whom he has written several books, including "The Law Heard 'Round the World - An Examination of the Kennesaw Gun Law and Its Effects on the Community", "Retracing the Route of the General - Following in the Footsteps of the Andrews Raid", and "Kennesaw (Big Shanty) in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century". A new book, "Images of America: Kennesaw", was published by Arcadia in 2006.

Robert has also written several books on ghost towns in the Southwest, including in Death Valley, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Mojave National Preserve.

In 2005, Robert co-authored a business-oriented book entitled "Working Virtually: The Challenges of Virtual Teams". His co-authors were Lise Pace and Rob Oyung.

His interests include the Civil War, Medieval Monasteries, American railroads, ghost towns, hiking in Death Valley and the Mojave, and Biblical Archaeology.

Robert is available as a guest speaker on Christian history and theology topics in the Atlanta Metro area, and North Georgia. See <http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com/speaker.htm> for more information.



robertcjones@mindspring.com  
<http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com/>

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