

THE BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The NT Canon

Here the basic criterion was divine inspiration and the main test for this was ‘apostolicity’. For the church was built upon the foundation of the apostles. This does not necessarily mean apostolic authorship, but extended to apostolic association or approval.

This apostolic authority derives from a commission from God to the apostles. Thus, for example Paul defends the authority of his teaching on the basis of his commission from the Lord. The importance of this authority was well recognised by the early church, so that Ignatius wrote “I do not wish to command you as Peter and Paul; they were apostles.”

The early church had a great need to establish a ‘canon’ of approved books because of the prevalence of heresy. Some heretics such as Marcion even tried to establish their own competing canon. The status of most of our current NT as authoritative was established cAD130 and most NT books (and no others not in our current canon) were recognised as canonical by the end of the second century AD in the Muratorian Canon. The first canon comprising all the 27 books currently included in the NT was published by Athanasius in AD 367 in a festal letter to the churches. Shortly after Athanasius, Jerome and Augustine also circulated their own lists.

This 27 book canon of the NT was confirmed by the Synod of Hippo in AD 393. This did not confer on these books any authority which they did not already possess – it merely confirmed that authority. Since that time there has not been any serious questioning of the canon of 27 books. The list was closed by the council of Carthage in AD397.

However, it’s very important to realise that all the 27 books of the NT canon were being circulated amongst the early churches and were being read and digested by them before the end of the first century AD. Also the vast majority of the 27 books of the NT canon were quoted by early church Fathers such as Irenaeus who quoted from 23 of the 27 books around AD 170. It’s just that the precise contents of the NT canon were not determined until later.

There were various Pseudepigraphal books (literally books of false authorship, although the word has come to mean books outside the canonical boundaries) such as:

Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabus
Epistle to the Corinthians
Apocalypse of Peter
The Gospel of Truth
The Gospel According to the Hebrews
The Gospel of the Egyptians
The Gospel of St Thomas
The Gospel of Peter
The Gospel of Philip
Second Epistle of Clement
The Acts of Paul and Thecla
Epistle to the Laodiceans
Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians
The Seven Epistles of Ignatius

but these never enjoyed more than temporary or local recognition and no major church council voted to include any of them in the NT.

The complete NT canon of 27 books divided into its appropriate categories is as follows:

The Gospels	History	The Pauline Epistles	The General Epistles	Prophecy
Mathew Mark Luke John	Acts	Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy ? Hebrews Titus Philemon	James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude	Revelation

Dates and places of Canonical Books

Mark	50-59	Possibly Rome
Luke	60-62	Probably Rome, but Achaia, Ephesus Caesarea possible
Matthew	62-63	Probably Palestine
John	possibly 65-70 likely 85-90	Probably Ephesus
Acts	63-64	
Galatians	48-49 (could be as late as 57)	Antioch before Jerusalem council (Acts 15) The church was suffering from Judaisers who wanted to impose Jewish law and practises like circumcision. They argued that Paul was not an authentic apostle.
I Thessalonians	51	Corinth Paul had left abruptly so converts had little support in the face of persecution.
II Thessalonians	51-52	? Corinth More encouragement following the first letter
I Corinthians	55	end 3yr stay Ephesus Paul had been informed about factions in the church (3 people had come from there to Paul in Ephesus), there were moral irregularities – the church was gifted but immature.
II Corinthians	55-56	Macedonia The church had now been infiltrated by false teachers challenging Paul’s integrity and authority. Paul asks them to remember his personal life among them.
Romans	57	3 rd missionary jny Corinth Written for the church in Rome, basic gospel, best theological summary.
Ephesians	60-61	1 st imprisonment Rome Unusual for it doesn’t address any specific heresy or sin – expands knowledge of God and his purpose and how we fulfil them.
Colossians	60	1 st imprisonment Rome

	Mainly written to oppose heresies from false teachers – clearly about the person and nature of Christ	
Philemon	60	1 st imprisonment Rome
	Paul writes on behalf of this slave to ask that his master accept him as a Christian brother.	
Philippians	61	1 st imprisonment Rome
	Mainly written to thank them for their gift to him in Rome. He reports on himself and encourages them to stand firm under persecution and regardless of circumstances.	
Titus	63-65	Corinth
	Give instructions to Titus and warn about false teachers and inform about future plans.	
I Timothy	62-66	?
	During his 4 th missionary journey, Paul instructed Timothy to care for the church at Ephesus. When he realised he might not return he wrote this letter to give further instructions. They were struggling with Gnosticism and Judaism.	
II Timothy	67	Final Rome imprisonment under Nero
	Paul was lonely and wanted to reinforce Timothy and write to the Ephesian church through him.	
Hebrews	64-68	
James	45-50	
I Peter	60-62	Possibly with help from Silas
II Peter	65-68	Before he was martyred in AD68
I, II and III John	85-90	After the gospel of John
Jude	65-80	
Revelation	81-95 probably c95	

Reliability of the New Testament

Here we are speaking not of the inspired nature or canonicity of the NT, but of its historical and textual reliability. Clearly this should be measured in the same way and using the same standards as for other ancient literature. According to C Sanders in *Introduction to Research in English Literary History* there are three tests: (i) the bibliographical test, (ii) the internal evidence test and (iii) the external evidence test.

The Bibliographical Test

This really just means an examination of the textual transmission of the documents which have reached us. That is, because we normally do not have the original documents, how reliable are the copies we have. Here the tests are the number of manuscripts in existence, the variance between these different manuscripts and the time interval between the originals and existent copies.

The NT manuscripts were the most frequently copied and widely circulated books of antiquity. Thus, there is lots of manuscript evidence. All in all, there are 5,366 partial or complete copies in Greek dating from between the second to the fifteenth centuries AD, more than 10,000 Latin vulgate manuscripts and more than 9,300 other early manuscript versions. That makes a total of approximately 25,000 manuscripts of all or part of the NT in existence today.

No other document from antiquity even begins to approach these standards. Homer's Iliad is second with 643 surviving manuscripts and the first complete manuscript here dates from the thirteenth century. If you doubt the textual reliability of the NT then you must throw away all ancient literature as unreliable because no other ancient documents are remotely as well attested as the NT. Sir Frederick Kenyon who was the director and principal librarian to the British Museum stated:

Besides number, the manuscripts of the New Testament differ from those of the classical authors In no other case is the interval of time between the composition of the book and the date of the earliest existent manuscripts so short as that in the New Testament. The books of the New Testament were written in the latter part of the first century; the earliest extant manuscripts (trifling scraps excepted) are of the fourth century – say from 250 to 300 years later. This may sound a considerable interval, but it is nothing to that which parts most of the classical authors from their earliest manuscripts. We believe that we have in all essentials an accurate text of the seven extant plays of Sophocles; yet the earliest substantial manuscript upon which it is based was written more than 1,400 years after the poet's death.

And he also further stated:

The interval between the dates of original composition and the earliest existent evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.

The following table gives some idea of the superiority of the confirmation offered by the NT manuscripts when compared to other documents from ancient times.

AUTHOR	BOOK	DATE WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPIES	TIME GAP	NO. OF COPIES
Homer	Iliad	800 BC	c 400 BC	c 400 yrs	643
Herodotus	History	480-425 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,350 yrs	8
Thucydides	History	460-400 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,300 yrs	8
Plato		400 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,300 yrs	7
Demosthenes		300 BC	c 1,100 AD	c 1,400 yrs	200
Caesar	Gallic Wars	100-44 BC	c 900 AD	c 1,000 yrs	10
Livy	History of Rome	59 BC – 17 AD	4 th cent. (partial) mostly 11th cent.	c 400 yrs c 1,000 yrs	1 partial 19
Tacitus	Annals	100 AD	c 1,100 AD	c 1,000 yrs	20
Pliny Secundus	Natural History	61-113 AD	c 850 AD	c 750 yrs	7
New Testament		50-100 AD	c 114 (fragment) c 200 (books) c 250 (most of NT) c 325 (complete)	c 50 yrs c 100 yrs c 150 yrs c 225 yrs	5,366

Furthermore, there is very good agreement between the texts of the various manuscripts, so that there is little doubt that we have the correct wordings in almost all cases. Dockery, Mathews and Sloane write:

For most of the biblical text, a single reading has been transmitted. Elimination of scribal errors and intentional changes leaves only a small percentage of the text about which any questions occur.

They conclude:

Although there are certain differences in many of the New Testament manuscripts, not one fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading.

Some of the important early NT manuscripts are:

John Rylands MS (AD 117 - 138) – a portion of the gospel of John found in Egypt

Bodmer Papyrus II (AD 180 –250) – most of John’s gospel

Chester Beatty Papyri (AD 200 - 250) – major portions of the NT

Codex Vaticanus (AD 325 –350) – nearly all of the Bible, written in small delicate uncials on fine vellum. This document was not known until 1475 and for the next four hundred years scholars were prohibited from studying it.

Codex Sinaiticus (AD 340) – which contains over half of the Old Testament and almost all of the New Testament. This was discovered in a monastery at Mount Sinai by a German scholar Count VonTischendorf in 1859. Again this is written in uncials on vellum.

All in all there are some 88 known papyri manuscripts of portions of the New Testament, of which the foregoing are merely the most important representatives. The papyri witness to the text is invaluable, ranging chronologically from the very threshold of the second century within a generation of the original autographs and including the content of most of the New Testament. All are extant from within the first two hundred years after the New Testament itself was written. During that intervening 200 year period the original manuscripts were copied and recopied, but we have many quotations from the early church fathers which testify to the wide circulation of a number of manuscripts of all the important NT books during that intervening period.

The Test of Internal Evidence

In order to be convincing a document should be internally self consistent. Many have alleged that the Bible is not internally consistent and contains contradictions, but as Dr G Archer writes in his *Encyclopaedia of Bible Difficulties* “As I have dealt with one apparent discrepancy after another and studied the alleged contradictions between the biblical record and the evidence of linguistics, archaeology or science, my confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture has been repeatedly verified and strengthened by the discovery that almost every problem in Scripture that has ever been discovered by man, from ancient times until now, has been dealt with in a completely satisfactory manner by the biblical text itself – or else by objective archaeological information.” We must not jump to the conclusion that what has not yet been explained is inherently inexplicable. No scientist would give up so easily. Thus, it was once thought that Moses could not have written the first five books of the bible because writing did not exist in his time – we now know that writing existed 2,000 years before

Moses. Further historians used to say that the bible had invented the Hittite people, because they were unknown to historians. Then we discovered a Hittite library in Turkey!

Furthermore, most of the NT writers wrote as eyewitnesses or from firsthand information. This is claimed over and over again:

Luke 1:1-3

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,”

2 Peter 1:16

“ We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty.”

1 John 1:3

“ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

Acts 2:22

“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.”

Nor could these writers easily make false claims about such derivation. Many modern scholars now consider that all the books of the NT were written prior to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and thus the events which they were writing about were within the lifetimes of others also involved. Certainly all Paul’s letters and at least three of the four gospels were written prior to AD 70. So we have every reason to take the claims of the NT authors at face value as eyewitness accounts of what actually happened.

Tests of External Evidence

There is much supporting evidence from other contemporary Christian non-biblical authors and characters.

Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* says “[the apostle John] used to say this also, Mark having been the interpreter of Peter wrote down accurately all that he (Peter) mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ, not, however, in order

Igantius Bishop of Antioch, who personally knew all the apostles, was martyred for his faith. *Polycarp* was a disciple of John and again followed his faith to martyrdom.

Perhaps even more importantly, there is much confirmation from contemporary non-Christian sources.

Tacitus the first century Roman historian refers to the death of Christ and to accounts of Christ’s resurrection.

Josephus the Jewish historian working under Roman authority makes reference to the crucifixion of Christ and also refers to many other details which confirm the historical nature of many of the events of both the NT and the OT. *Josephus* supports the Protestant view of the OT canon as he lists the 39 books of the Protestant OT as being the Jewish canon. *Josephus* refers to James as the brother of Jesus and confirms his martyrdom at the instigation of the Sanhedrin. He also confirms the existence and martyrdom of John the Baptist. In a passage of disputed authenticity (although it appears in all extant texts) *Josephus* also confirms the resurrection of Jesus.

Julius Africanus (quoting *Thallus*) confirms the darkness which came over the earth at the time of the crucifixion.

The Talmud Sanhedrin 43a confirms the crucifixion of Jesus and the intent of the Jewish leaders to kill him.

Lucian of Samosa and *Mara Bar Serapion* also confirm the historicity and execution of Jesus.

Dr Geisler summarises this external source evidence as follows:

Greek, Roman and Jewish sources inform us that:

- (i) Jesus was from Nazareth;
- (ii) He lived a wise and virtuous life;
- (iii) He was crucified in Palestine under Pontius Pilate at Passover time, being considered the Jewish King;
- (iv) He was believed by his disciples to have been raised from the dead three days later;
- (v) Even his enemies acknowledge he performed unusual feats which they call sorcery
- (vi) His small band of disciples multiplied rapidly and spread widely;
- (vii) His disciples denied polytheism, lived moral lives and worshipped Christ as divine.

It is surely significant that we have confirmation of so much of the background to Jesus' life and the development of the early church from a number of secular sources. Archaeology has also confirmed many details of the NT and especially verified the accuracy of Luke as an historian.

Perhaps the most disputed event in the NT is the resurrection of Jesus. Here I find that the change of the attitude and behaviour of the disciples is highly significant. At the arrest of Jesus the disciples fled, but after his resurrection and ascension we find them proclaiming the 'good news' about Jesus fearlessly. They braved arrest (Acts 5:18), flogging (Acts 5:40) and even death (Acts 7:58). What a transformation from the band of men who had cravenly fled at Jesus' arrest and had not even dared to attend His crucifixion. I believe it is also significant that Jesus' brothers became followers and believers after the resurrection.

Thus, I believe that the Gospel accounts and the book of Acts provide us with convincing evidence of the reality of the resurrection.

I conclude that the NT we have in our Bibles today is both a textual reliable transmission of the original accounts written by the apostles shortly after the events they describe and an historically reliable account of the events recorded.